

The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April - 25 May 1915

In early April 1915, following the northward extension of their lines, British troops returned to the Ypres Salient. The arrival of units of General Smith-Dorrien's Second Army coincided with German plans to seize the high ground around Pilckem and Langemarck, which involved, notoriously, the use of poison gas.

In the late afternoon of 22 April a strong German thrust was made against the north of the Salient. This attack was supported by the discharge of chlorine gas in the direction of trenches between Langemarck and the Yser canal, manned by the two remaining French Divisions in the Ypres sector. The alarmed and helpless defenders retreated, leaving a gap of over four miles on the left flank of the nearest British forces – the Canadian Division. During the night Canadian units improvised a series of scattered outposts across the breach and secured a defensive line. Numerous counter-attacks the following day held off further German advances. A renewed German assault at dawn on 24 April, again using gas, against the Canadians was temporarily held, but the attackers surged on beyond St Julien by afternoon. The critical days following saw relentless British counter-attacks in deference to French requests to regain lost ground. The futility of such operations was eventually acknowledged and between 1 and 3 May British forces withdrew to a new line – barely three miles from Ypres. Heavy fighting continued: on 8 May the Germans seized ground on the Frezenberg Ridge, where desperate actions continued to 13 May. 24 May witnessed the largest German gas attack which, despite resolute British defence, secured ground either side of Bellewaarde Lake.

Thirty-three days of incessant fighting saw no decisive German breakthrough, though the British were left holding a much-reduced Salient even more vulnerable to German artillery bombardment.

The Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge, 22 - 23 April 1915

Following the discharge of poisonous gas at 5pm on 22 April, a strong German infantry attack was made against the two French divisions defending the north of the Salient on the five mile front between the Ypres-Poelcapelle road and Steenstraat on the Yser canal. The French quickly withdrew and the advancing Germans rapidly occupied Langemarck and Pilckem and, further west, threatened Steenstraat and Het Sas on the canal.

Although not immediately attacked, 1st Canadian Division, to the right of the French, opposed further German forward movements with artillery and smallarms fire and immediately sent for reserves to shore-up their now undefended left flank; by 7.30pm German attackers were digging-in on newly won ground. As night fell Canadian forces, refusing to 'budge' despite gas and shell fire, improvised an outpost defence system across the open land towards the canal while Second Army Commander appealed for a French counter-attack to restore the situation.

An attack promised for early the following morning was assisted (in anticipation, at midnight) by the successful Canadian seizure of Kitchener's Wood; but the French response never materialised and the Canadians were forced to retire. Throughout the night British reserves were scraped together in anticipation of further German attacks on 23 April. The early morning saw an attempt to dislodge the Germans from Mauser Ridge which failed with many casualties – though a line of sorts was established to within 1,200 yards of the canal. Later, in anticipation and support of the still-promised French counter-thrust, 13th Brigade was ordered to make a general attack towards Pilckem but this assault, when launched at 4.25pm, was a disastrous failure and all forward movement halted by 7pm. By nightfall the commitment of all available reserves helped establish a new front on the exposed flank – but little ground had been regained.

Battle of St Julien, 24 April – 4 May 1915

Impelled by the momentum of unexpected success, German attacks on the much reduced northern sector of the Salient were renewed in the early morning of 24 April. Following an intense bombardment and the release of cloud gas on the exposed apex of the readjusted Allied line, Canadian and British forces withstood repeated enemy

assaults on their positions. The defenders, with only the most makeshift protection against the gas, were steadily driven back and by the afternoon the Germans were past St Julien.

The pattern of fighting established in the previous two days was repeated. A whole series of desperate British counter-attacks, notionally in conjunction with delayed and often ineffective French support sought to dislodge the Germans from their newly won ground. This list of tragic actions included 10th Brigade's attack on Sunday 25 April and two major attacks by the Lahore Division (the first supported by 149th Brigade) on 26 and 27 April. The costly failures of ensuing British counter-attacks moved General Smith-Dorrien to recommend a withdrawal to a more tenable line.

Ever sensitive to criticism, Sir John French replaced Smith-Dorrien and appointed General Plumer as overall commander of British troops in the Salient. Plumer saw the logic of a better defensive line though a move back was postponed following Foch's plea to Sir John French on 28 April not to give ground. The failure of a French counter-attack eastward from the Yser canal-line on 1 May finally convinced the British of the necessity of falling back. Amidst continuing German pressure, including another gas attack on 2 May, the remaining battle-weary British forces were withdrawn from forward positions to take up new defensive lines to the east of Ypres by 3/4 May.

The Battle of Frezenberg Ridge, 8 - 13 May 1915

In the period 4-7 May, much encouraged by the British withdrawal, German Fourth Army Commander moved his artillery forward and grouped three Army Corps opposite the weakened British 28th and 27th Divisions holding the Frezenberg Ridge in readiness for a further attack.

At 5.30am on 8 May a violent German artillery bombardment began on the British lines causing massive destruction – especially to 83rd Brigade in vulnerable trenches on the forward slopes of the Ridge. The subsequent German infantry assault was repelled by the surviving British battalions. A second German thrust on the ridge was held but a third assault at 10am, either side of Frezenberg village, forced the remaining defenders to fall back. The German attack was stopped on the right by 80th Brigade but, to the north, 84th Brigade was almost totally destroyed in the onslaught; by afternoon a two mile gap had been punched in the British line. Tenacious defence, hastily improvised counter-attacks and a crucial night advance of 10th Brigade restored a precarious situation.

9 May saw new German attacks further south on 27th Division astride the Menin road; intense German bombardments accompanied violent assaults which were repeatedly held and, over the next three days, no significant breakthrough was made. A final crisis occurred on 13 May, a day of ceaseless rain and shelling, with a German break-in on 7th Cavalry Brigade's quagmire of a front and enemy bombardments causing temporary evacuations of 4th Division's line; counter-attacks and skilful use of support troops restored the situation – though at heavy cost in lives. Six days of intense fighting yielded German gains of around 1,000 yards of front between Hooge and Mouse Trap Farm but at such high cost in casualties that offensive operations were halted.

The Battle of Bellewaarde Ridge, 24 - 25 May 1915.

At 2.45am on 24 May (Whit Monday), a ferocious German artillery bombardment slammed down on British V Corps front. The clamour of shells, machine-guns and rifle fire was accompanied by a simultaneous discharge of chlorine gas on almost the entire length of the British line. German infantry assaulted in its wake. Although the favourable wind had alerted the British trench garrison to the likelihood of a gas attack the proximity of the opposing trenches and speed of the enemy assault meant many defenders failed to don their respirators quickly enough and large numbers were overcome. But the British defence rallied and the attackers were repelled by smallarms fire – except in the north, where Mouse Trap Farm was immediately overrun, and in the south where (by 10am) German infantry broke into the British line north and south of Bellewaarde Lake. The centre of the line between these gaps held fast all day.

Heroic efforts were made to retrieve the situation at Mouse Trap Farm before it was decided, that evening, to withdraw to a more defensible line. The German break-in around Bellewaarde Lake prompted the commitment of Corps reserve troops – but their arrival took time and the depleted front line battalions had to wait until the early evening before the weakened 84th Brigade was able to attack and turn the enemy out of Witte Poort Farm. Following the belated arrival of 80th Brigade a joint night counter-attack was made after 11pm; this assault, in bright moonlight, was a disaster and both 84th and 80th Brigades suffered heavy casualties. In the early hours of the morning the battle quietened. The following day saw a reduction in shelling and no attempts by the Germans to renew the offensive.