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War Diaries

Canal-du-Nord and Cambrai

September 27-October 11, 1918

A Matter of Spirit



[The Canal-du-Nord and Cambrai September 27-October 11, 1918](#)



[Canadians entering the Square in Cambrai, October 1918.](#)



[Canadian troops constructing a bridge across Canal-du-Nord, September 1918.](#)



[A Canadian soldier enjoying the blackberries he had just gathered in Bournon Wood, October 1918.](#)

"When the attack was launched, the Brigade was already tired after holding the line for several days... harassed by enemy fire, gas, and aeroplane bombing. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the spirit of all ranks ensured success. But for this spirit, the success which ultimately attended our efforts would have been impossible."

Major J.A.G. White, M.-G. A/Brigade-Major, October 1918, Headquarters, 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade. RG 9, series III-D-3, vol. 4891, folio 1709.

The battle towards Cambrai dealt a mortal blow to a weakened, but resistant, enemy in the course of the last 100 days of the Great War. The operation began on September 27, 1918, with a hair-raising rush across a dangerously narrow canal passage. It continued with harrowing counterattacks coming from enemy troops concealed in woods, firing from bridgeheads, and lurking around the corners of myriad small village roads. It ended in triumph on October 11, when the Canadians, exhausted after days of unremitting fighting, finally drove the Germans out of their most important remaining distribution centre, Cambrai. Historians see this triumph as the highly professional execution of a daring and inventive strategy. For many of the soldiers, however, success was the result of a great esprit de corps, of great spirit.

Western Front Objectives: 1918

September 1918. The focus of Allied objectives was to break through that most formidable of German defensive systems, the Hindenburg Line. The risk of encountering the entire German reserve massed against an Allied onslaught was too great. Instead of trying to focus the Allied effort by attacking the enemy at his strongest point, a new strategy was employed to utilise the entire front from the Meuse to the English Channel and attack at different points. Canadian forces were to advance toward Cambrai.

Battleground: Canal-du-Nord and Cambrai

Cambrai is situated in the Nord-Pas de Calais region in northern France. It is surrounded by an elaborate system of canals providing links to the Steeple and Scheldt rivers to the northeast and drainage of marshy lands. West of Cambrai lies the Canal-du-Nord, whose construction at the outbreak of war had been left incomplete, a serious obstacle to Allied troops advancing from the west. The enemy had flooded the already swampy area and there was only a 4,000-metre southward stretch in which the ground was firm and the Canal-du-Nord (itself 35 metres wide) was dry. If this passage could be crossed, Bourlon Wood and the high ground to the north could be captured. The enemy placed machine-gun posts close to the canal's flanks and other units were locked into natural defences. The main German defences at the Marquion Line were only a mile past the canal. The problem was to quickly move the whole Corps, with heavy artillery, through that narrow defile before the enemy attacked.

The Plan: A Two-Division, Three-Brigade Attack

The Canadian Corps, under General Sir Arthur Currie, was put in charge of operations conceived as a set-piece attack. Because of the extremely narrow divide, at zero hour on September 27, the battlefield presented only two brigades on the left and one on the right, with a creeping artillery barrage and sappers following over hastily-built bridges, pontoons and cork slabs baled with wire netting. One artillery subsection supported each divisional artillery section behind the front line.

Once across the canal, troops would reassemble and the front had to be widened at lightning speed from 2,600 metres to 15,000 metres in order to circle Bourlon Wood, capture the Blue Line and prepare to press forward toward Cambrai. In 12 hours of fighting, the Canadians covered approximately 8,500 metres of ground with the 4th Division's 38th, 87th and 102nd Battalions arriving first and the 1st Division's 1st and 13th Battalions following with greater difficulty. In the following four days of difficult fighting, both divisions, along with reinforcements from the 3rd Division, managed to secure only a limited amount of territory and by October 1, exhausted troops were ordered to rest and reassemble. Operations to capture Cambrai and secure ground northeast of the city resumed on October 8, mainly involving in the 2nd and 3rd Divisions and lasting a total of four days.

The Keys: Artillery, Engineers, Tanks and Communications

If the infantry undertook this delicate mission, it absolutely needed finely-tuned support from other divisional and corps troops. First, groups of artillery field brigades would relay each other in a continuous rolling barrage to support the infantry as it progressed through the Red, Green and Blue Lines, and as it fought a stiff battle onto Cambrai. Second, the engineer brigades were rapidly deployed, often working under machine gun fire to make the canals passable by building vital bridges and pontoons for artillery troops and floating foot bridges over water-tilled portions of the canal. Third, British 7th Battalion tanks were deployed en masse (four tanks per attacking infantry brigade) to fire, crush wires and create smoke screens from their exhaust pipes. Many war diarists note the invaluable service the tanks provided. Finally, without accurate communications to coordinate infantry and artillery advances, the operation's success could at best be limited. For example, if an infantry battalion advanced beyond its objective, but if the support artillery behind it remained without accurate information on its position, the results could be disastrous.

Battle Objectives: Red, Green and Blue Lines; Fighting towards Cambrai; Capture of Cambrai

British and Canadian military leaders puzzled long and hard over which course to take through the almost impassable marshland and a system of canals over which the enemy had an almost uninterrupted view from the higher ground beyond. The objective was for the 1st and 4th Divisions to quickly cross the Canal-du-Nord, take Bourlon Wood, and capture surrounding towns, pushing to the northeast. Then the 3rd Division would join them and push to the Cambrai/Douai Road opposite Tilloy. The 3rd and 4th Divisions would seize bridgeheads over the Canal de l'Escaut at Ramillies and Esuars, northeast of Cambrai, after which the 1st Division was to pass through their ranks to capture Abancourt east of the Douai Railway pushing on to Fressies at the Sensée Canal. The 2nd Division would then take its turn for the heart of the operation to capture Cambrai by forcing a passage over the Canal de l'Escaut between Morenchies and Ramillies and establishing a line on high ground behind Escaudoeuvres, "joining hands" with the British positioned there. Combined troops would then cross the canal and establish bridgeheads at Cambrai, clear the city and open the front eastward. Finally, ground northeast of Cambrai on both sides of the Canal de l'Escaut had to be cleared up to Iwuy.

Preparations

For the Canal-du-Nord and Cambrai offensives, the strength of the Canadian Corps, including attached troops, stood at 118,194 men. Of the 98,790 Canadians in this Corps, direct assault troops accounted for less than half of combatants. This meant that a great portion of the Corps was involved in preparations. Engineers, signal troops, transport and labour companies, and medical and veterinary units were all heavily involved in building bridges, relaying vital intelligence, constructing and repairing railway and communication lines, delivering supplies, caring for the wounded and maintaining horses. Under heavy attack not only from shells, but also machine-gun fire, they unflinchingly carried out their work.

The Attack

5:20 a.m. (zero hour) on September 27. An artillery barrage explodes over enemy positions and the 1st Division begins to move swiftly. Crossing the dry bed of the Canal-du-Nord as dawn breaks, the Canadians rapidly secure the Green Line. Passing through their ranks, the 4th Division gains entry into the southern part of Bourlon Village around 9:45 a.m., but not without heavy casualties. By 2:00 p.m., they pass the Blue Line and attain the objective of capturing Bourlon Wood (Blue Line). Pushing on, by the end of the afternoon, while the 15th Infantry Brigade stands firm at the Blue Line, brigades from the 1st and 4th Canadian Division, plus the British 11th Division, clear the enemy's Marchoing trench system. Victory is assured by 8:00 p.m. as the last pocket of enemy resistance is overcome.

Success: 1st Division (Major-General MacDonell) and 4th Division (Major-General Watson),

September 27, 1918

Setback: 1st Division, 3rd Division (Major-General Loomis) and 4th Division, September 28–October 1. The first day's resounding success is mitigated by the setbacks of the ensuing four days. Having brilliantly met the first objective of the battle, the 1st and 4th Divisions prepare to press eastward to Cambrai along with the 3rd Division. They run into unmapped wire and suffer heavy losses in front of the Douai Road, making progress only slowly and painfully to their intermediate objective of seizing bridges over the Canal de l'Escaut and establishing a united front across to the Canal de la Sensée. Before attempting to draw in on Cambrai, exhausted troops are forced to pause and reorganize.

Success: 2nd Division (Major-General Burstall) and 3rd Division, October 8-9. Attacking alone at 1:30 a.m. on October 8, after failing to make contact with British troops, the Canadian 2nd Division crosses a hastily-constructed bridge over the Canal de l'Escaut, successfully attaining the objective of forcing that passage. The 3rd Division establishes a line of posts on the eastern outskirts of Cambrai, and finally, the British move up and join with the 2nd Division northeast of Cambrai, as planned.

Setbacks for the 2nd Division in ending of the battle. In spite of its ultimate success, several incidents plague the 2nd Division as it continues its advance beyond Cambrai. As it begins to clear northeast of the city, it comes under heavy enemy fire and has to dig in. The Canadian Light Horse, also pushing ahead to secure the surrounding areas, falls into machine-gun fire at Iwuy and Naves. This causes heavy casualties to men and horses. Nevertheless, with Cambrai successfully captured and secured, at 5:00 p.m. on October 11, General Currie hands over the commands to the British 22nd Corps. The battle is over. Of the 68,500 men engaged in the conflict, 13,672 or 20 percent were lost in the Canal-du-Nord and Cambrai operations.

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