

steadily increasing, and would increase still more rapidly when spring returned, this blow must be delivered at the earliest moment that operations became practicable. The point of junction between the British and French armies was naturally selected for the main attack with the intention of separating them and driving the British armies into the restricted area north of the Somme, where they would be hampered by want of room for manœuvre. Forty divisions were brought forward by night marches with the utmost secrecy and held in positions concealed as far as practicable during daylight. Preceded by a short but very heavy bombardment and favoured by dull foggy weather, this attack began on a fifty-mile front extending from Arras to La Fère. The German soldiers had been assured that this would be the last battle and that a decisive victory would certainly bring peace. Emerging in dense masses from the fog which had screened them on leaving their reserve positions they flung themselves upon the British trenches with irresistible fury. They were preceded by a rolling barrage fire leaping forward at ten-minute intervals in which poisonous gas shells were mingled with shrapnel. The troops holding the advance positions were nearly annihilated and the few survivors easily overwhelmed by the rush of their assailants. The German infantry were accompanied with light cannon, portable trench mortars, a great number of machine guns and a few tanks of a cumbrous type. The two lines of defence, which had been so carefully prepared and were deemed practically impregnable, were soon pierced in four places. Both faces of the Cambrai salient were penetrated. The whole of the British Fifth Army was compelled to fall back, fighting desperately on all parts of their line where resistance seemed possible. The pursuit was carried on at first with tremendous energy, and many supporting batteries were taken or driven out of action. The retreating troops lost touch next day with the French on their right, and with the Third Army on their left. After being rallied on a second position several miles in rear, this line was broken and a further disorderly retreat took place. The Third Army had lost some ground on its right in the first attack. It was then obliged to retreat still further in the hope of maintaining contact with the Fifth Army, by whose hurried retreat a gap of eight miles was opened. This gap was hastily filled by an extemporized force of engineers, army service corps men and other details who took their place in the line at this critical moment. Peronne was evacuated on March 23 and Bapaume next day. The French were driven from Roye on March 27, and afterwards withdrew from Noyon, but continued to extend their line to the left in a vain effort to keep contact with the British Fifth Army. General von Hutier continued to press his advantage on the 27th by advancing more than ten miles and reaching Montdidier, an important railway junction. His onslaught had then spent its force and he was unable to gain further ground. To the northward the Germans regained the positions abandoned in 1916, occupying Albert on March 27. They had then advanced within fourteen miles of Amiens which thenceforth became one of their chief objectives. This great disaster convinced the Allies of the necessity of unity in command. Controversies and rivalry ceased for the moment. On March 31 it was