

ASPECTS OF CAMBRAI PART 5 The Remaining Days

By the morning of 21 November 1917 too many tanks had broken down or had been disabled by German gunfire, to enable another attack the same as the previous day. From the 21st to the 7th December 1917 the attacks would be all too similar as those of the Somme or Flanders. Surprise and the weapon which had given success, the tank, were no longer with the British.

The large timbered area of Bourslon Wood which covered the Bapaume/Cambrai road, had to be captured. A brigade of the 62 Division supported by 18 tanks of G. Battalion was given this task. This Brigade was commanded by 25 year old Brigadier Boys Bradford, who was also a Victoria Cross winner. Brig Bradford was one of the remarkable characters of World War 1, regarded as a charismatic leader capable of achieving difficult tasks.

32 Brigade moved off towards Bourslon Wood and, after difficulties, managed to capture Anneux and Anneux Chapel. The Brigade was still short of its objective and the Wood would not be captured for another seven days. A task far too much for the force committed had been given to 32 Brigade.

By now a number of things began to happen, none of which were to assist the British. First the Germans were getting the measure of the Mark IV tank. When attacked the German Infantry would either allow the tanks to go over the first line or would wait, then attack the tanks from the rear. The first method separated the infantry from the tanks and allowed the Germans to attack that arm separately. The second gave the Germans to attack the vulnerable rear of the tank, particularly the fuel tanks of the vehicle. Second the British were becoming disorganised and, as a result, incompetence became the norm. Units were given tasks they had no hope of achieving. Tanks were required to be in places without thought of a time and space appreciation. The battle of Cambrai was becoming Third Ypres all over.

An example of time and space appreciation failure was the attack on Mesnieres. Here a Brigade of 29 Division was supposed to be supported by 16 tanks. However the order to move reached the tanks at the time the infantry were about to leave the start line. The tanks arrived late due to the length of the approach march. The infantry of the Brigade took unnecessary casualties from German machine gun fire. If the attack had been co-ordinated, perhaps the British may have had success without the heavy casualties.

By the night of 21/22 November the Cambrai salient stood out like a pimple on the British front line. General Haig decided there was no other choice but to let the attack proceed. And so what was left of the infantry and tanks continued to attack objectives to clear the way to Cambrai.



On 27 November with snow starting to fall 14 tanks supported the attack by the 2nd Guards Brigade on Bourslon Wood. Through what was now smashed trees and stumps, the Guards advanced and fought. The tanks, where they could provided fire support, but due to the wrecked timber, going was difficult. Finally Bourslon Wood and the outskirts of Fontaine Notre Dame were captured. It was, however, the end. By now there were no reserves of men or tanks to commit to battle.