



THE
GERMAN ARMY
IN THE
SPRING OFFENSIVES 1917
ARRAS, AISNE & CHAMPAGNE



JACK SHELDON

The German Army
in the
Spring Offensives
1917

Respectfully dedicated by gracious permission to
HRH The Duke of Kent KG
who at Sandhurst, many years ago,
guided my first footsteps as a soldier.

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The German Army on the Somme 1914 – 1916
The German Army at Passchendaele
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in the
Spring Offensives
1917

Arras, Aisne and Champagne

by
Jack Sheldon



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Introduction

At the turn of the year 1916/17, the Allies had good reason to be confident about the future course of the war. They had inflicted huge casualties on the German army at Verdun and on the Somme; and although their own losses had been heavy and they had come nowhere near to breaking the German army, nevertheless, their greater manpower reserves meant that it was far easier for them than for the Central Powers to replenish worn down formations and create new ones. On the industrial front, despite the fact that the Hindenburg Plan (which was also making great demands on German male manpower) was beginning to get into its stride, the Allies were also pulling ahead in the battle to produce larger and larger quantities of guns, aircraft and munitions. None of the Allied leaders or military commanders was under any illusion about the size and complexity of the task which lay before them, but they were unanimous in their agreement forged at Chantilly in November 1916 to launch a major combined offensive aimed at the shoulders of the giant German salient between the Somme and the Oise. This was intended to be mounted in irresistible force, to break through the German defences swiftly and to eject that army from all the territory it had captured in the west.

For the Germans it was a time of intensive operational analysis and a switch of emphasis towards the Western Front. The situation in the east was still far from decided, but it was clear that the intensity of campaigning had slackened, so that the necessity to maintain co-located headquarters with the Austro-Hungarian high command was less pressing. Kaiser Karl moved his headquarters to Baden bei Wien, between Vienna and Wiener Neustadt, whilst the Germans, retaining the possibility of using Pleß at some future date, physically moved westwards, so as to be nearer the main threat. It was assessed that further attacks were likely in all theatres of operations, including the Isonzo front in Italy, and that the Allies enjoyed a superiority in manpower and materiel of at least sixty percent overall. Importantly, the British, who up until then had lagged well behind the French in heavy artillery, had increased the numbers available at the front from 761 in July 1916 to 1,157 by the turn of the year and would have nearer to 1,500 heavy guns and howitzers available by the end of March 1917. Impressive though this increase was and hard the pounding of the German troops around Arras in early April would be, the French army still had a great many more - some 5,000, which made it possible to allocate an average of approximately forty to every divisional front and a great many more where they were concentrated opposite potential breakthrough points.

At the start of 1917 it was still difficult for German intelligence staffs to be certain where the blows would fall, though every effort was made to collate agents' reports and to monitor railway usage and placement of reserves in order to pick up early

indications. There was also increasing concern that the very layout of the German front line almost invited attack – that the sheer size of the salient to be defended would stretch manpower to the limit and beyond. These considerations were what drove the decision, taken at Cambrai on 5 September 1916, to begin the construction of massive new defensive lines to the rear. Even though at that time there was no immediate pressing need to move to such positions, the very fact of their planned construction along the lines Arras - St Quentin - La Fère - Condé, near Soissons (*Siegfriedstellung* = Hindenburg Line) and Pont à Mousson - Verdun (*Michelstellung*), together with lesser works along other stretches of the front, indicated that sooner or later they would have to be occupied. Priority went to the *Siegfriedstellung* so, while the autumn battles continued to rage along the Western Front, work directed by Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht went ahead from October that year at high speed on a truly colossal building site, which stretched for over 140 kilometres and absorbed the labour of a 65,000 man workforce and immense quantities of raw materials.

It seems clear that at the turn of the year, OHL [Supreme Army Headquarters] still hoped to be able to carry out some offensive of its own and thus avoid adopting a policy of strategic defence in 1917, but staff studies soon indicated that even if four more divisions could be transported west from the Eastern Front, by March 1917 only a total of seventeen divisions could be made available. That effectively ruled out any sort of significant German attack and, as evidence of Allied intentions continued to mount, there was additional concern that with a total of only 129 divisions in the west to counter the 168 at the disposal of the Allies - and those somewhat weaker in manpower - the only feasible solution was to go on the defensive and hope to hold until the recently launched unrestricted submarine warfare, together with the increased production of war materiel under the Hindenburg Plan, began to bear fruit.

Other reasons were adduced at the time to justify the withdrawal, which involved voluntarily yielding more ground than had ever been captured up that point in the war: a carefully timed move would disrupt Allied plans; the forward positions on the Somme were in an appalling state and there would be little or no possibility of improving them before the Allied offensive broke; it would be easier to extract valuable equipment and stores if this was done without enemy pressure; and a scorched earth policy would make it hard for the Allies to close up rapidly on the new German positions. Naturally, there was some truth in all of this, though the deliberate wrecking of the Somme rear areas came close to bringing Crown Prince Rupprecht to the point of resignation, so disgusted was he at what was planned. All that aside, ultimately it was manpower, the overall lack of it and the need to shorten the line in order to thicken up forward defences and create operational reserves, that finally led to the implementation of *Alberich*, the withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line. Significantly, as will be described later, most of the divisions so released by the shortening of the line were rushed south to help counter the anticipated French attacks.

In the meantime Allied plans were beginning to firm up, though there was considerable negotiation, right up to and including the notorious Calais Conference of

26/27 February 1917, which finally led to an agreement that the British army would be placed under the operational control of the new French Commander in Chief, General Nivelle, for the duration of the joint offensive. Then came *Alberich*, which threw the original Allied planning into confusion. Not only that, but the unmistakable preparations for the offensive and appalling French operational security, meant that there was no strategic and hardly any tactical surprise. The German defenders knew more or less precisely what was going to happen before the preliminary bombardments for the British thrusts either side of Arras even began. As a result, when the British army attacked on 9 April 1917, it was certainly not lack of foreknowledge that led to the initial Allied successes astride the Scarpe.

In the wake of *Alberich* it was soon obvious that the French had no intention of attacking near St Quentin, but the build up opposite the Aisne and east of Reims grew visibly week by week. In response, during the days leading up to 16 April 1917 there was decisive and timely German reinforcement on a huge scale. Headquarters First Army, for example, was withdrawn entirely from Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht and moved south, ready to be inserted between Seventh and Third Armies when the precise locations of the French thrusts were identified. A combination of this imaginative command and control of the Aisne/Champagne area and the resolute defence mounted by the ground holding divisions meant in turn that, despite the assembly of an unprecedented weight of men and materiel, the French offensive ran into major difficulties from the outset.

Not only did the French army fail to break through as planned and explicitly, if foolishly, promised, the utter disillusionment and dislocation of expectations this caused led directly to the abrupt sacking of Nivelle, a crisis in morale and widespread mutiny. Indirectly, it forced the British army to go on attacking east of Arras, long after its offensive had run its natural course and suffering in consequence, all the time it lasted, the highest daily rate of casualties of the entire war. Rarely in military history has a campaign mounted with such high expectation of success crashed and burned so swiftly; rarely has a commander's star faded so rapidly. The story of these tumultuous weeks is at root one of overconfidence and underestimation of an opponent. Tens of thousands of soldiers paid an appalling price in death and wounds as a result.

Jack Sheldon
Vercors, France, April 2015.

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As ever, I am grateful to a number of people who have assisted me with the writing of Volume 7 of my continuing series about the old German army in the Great War. Dr Robert Dunlop examined the literature concerning the effects of phosgene gas on its victims and helped me to understand what the German doctors were trying to achieve with their experimental treatment of some of the casualties. Chris Roberts, a leading Australian military historian and expert on the Battle of Bullecourt, kindly read and commented most helpfully on that chapter, though naturally I am fully responsible for the final outcome. Dr Alex Fasse, a good friend in Germany, was once again able to explain one or two obscure passages to me. My friend, co-author and editor, Nigel Cave, was his usual painstaking and helpful self throughout and I am grateful too, for the enthusiastic assistance I received from the team at Pen and Sword Books. I reserve my greatest and most special thanks to my wife, Laurie, who has taken enormous care with the maps and has provided me with strong and loving support throughout the lengthy period of research and preparation of the book.

Author's Note

This book, like the others in the series, draws extensively on work published in Germany during the 1920s and 30s. The loss of the Prussian archives in 1945 makes this inevitable; their authors had full access to material we shall never be able to consult. Of course sources such as regimental histories have to be used with caution and corroborated wherever possible, so as to ensure that the narrative is as close to the truth as is possible one hundred years after the events they describe. With experience it is usually possible to determine if the author is sticking close to the facts or not and to caveat as appropriate.

The battles around Arras involved formations from Canada and Australia, as well as smaller contingents from elsewhere in the British Empire, so on this occasion it is not only Scots, Irishmen and Welshmen whom German authors referred to collectively as *Engländer*, the same applies to all others who fought as part of the British army of 1917.

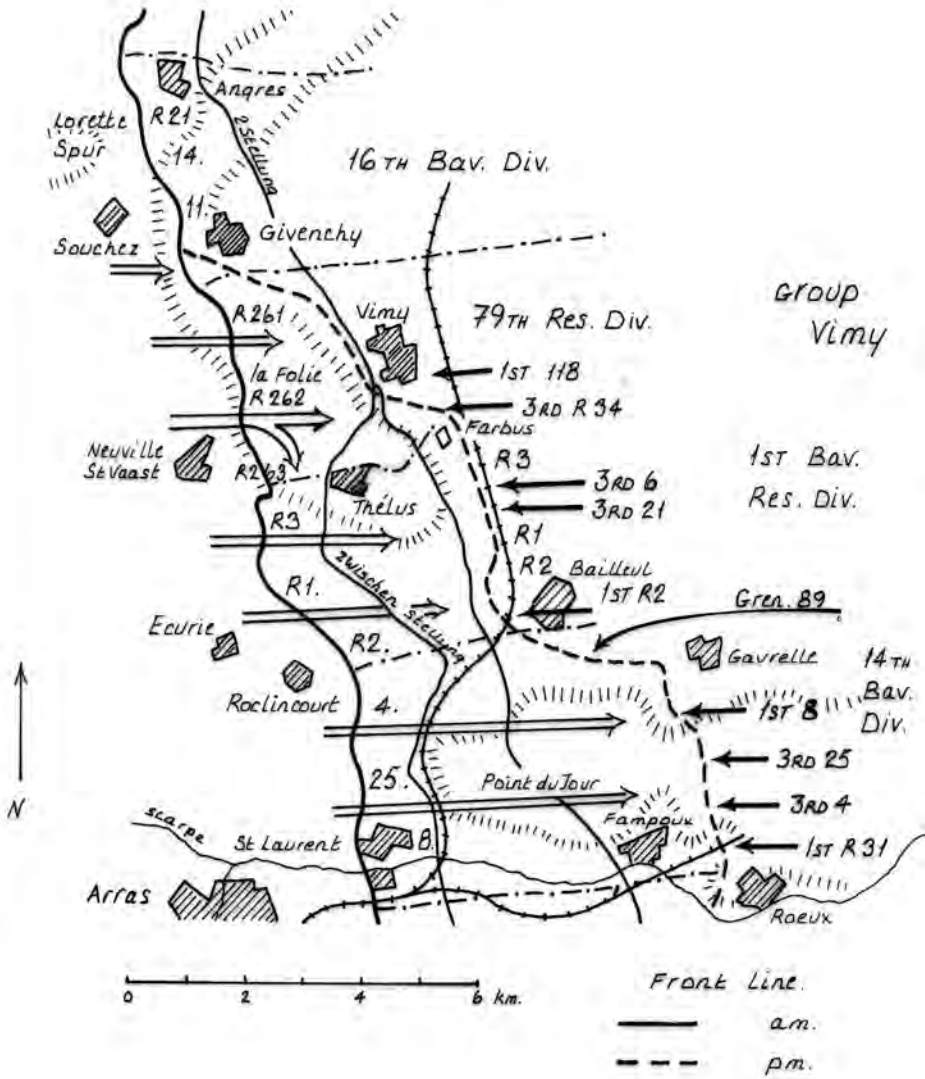
German time, one hour ahead of Allied time, is used throughout the book.

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Vimy Ridge 9 April 1917.



CHAPTER 1

Vimy Ridge

In the wake of the unexpected German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the British army had to recalibrate its participation in the forthcoming joint offensive. So, as March turned to April, the British began to mass the formations of their First (initially involving only a much reinforced Canadian Corps) and Third Armies, north and south of Arras, ready to assault the German Sixth Army. The main effort was to be on the left flank of a front running from Souchez in the north to Quéant in the south, with particular emphasis on the capture of Vimy Ridge (which was entrusted to the Canadian Corps) and operations astride of the Scarpe in the direction of Cambrai. In parallel, a bombardment of hitherto unheard of intensity began to come down all along the attack frontage. In the skies above the battlefields, British and German aircraft fought hard for air superiority and, despite the ensuing heavy cost to the Royal Flying Corps during so-called 'Bloody April', when between 4 and 8 April 1917 alone the British lost no fewer than seventy five aircraft shot down and a further fifty six aircraft in accidents,¹ the effect of the gunfire was considerably enhanced by aerial observation of the fall of shot.

In all the destructive bombardment lasted for the best part of two weeks and it was calculated later that the weight of explosive delivered during the first week was twice that fired the previous year prior to the battle of the Somme. Bearing in mind that the front was much shorter than had been the case in 1916 and that the fire brought down during the final week before the assault was about six times greater, it is easy to see why the German defenders suffered so much and their ability to defend was so drastically reduced when the blow fell. Long before 9 April, all the forward positions were wrecked and all the identified German batteries were either destroyed or continually drenched with gas. In support of the operational priorities, a huge weight of fire came down along Vimy Ridge between Givenchy and Farbus.

During the early stages of the bombardment it was still possible for reasonably accurate estimates of the shelling to be maintained. 79th Reserve Division, manning the highest part of the ridge, counted between 12,000 and 15,000 shells per day landing in its area. As the bombardment ground on, coming down ever more heavily, it became impossible even to guess at the number of shells involved. Approach routes and depth targets were also included in the overall fire plan so, following the deaths of numerous French inhabitants in the affected area, the entire civil population was evacuated. Once it was clear that the British had begun to prepare the battlefield, Commander I Bavarian

Reserve Corps [Group Vimy], General der Infanterie Karl Ritter von Fasbender, issued his corps concept for battle to his subordinate formations: 79th Reserve Division, 1st Bavarian Reserve Division and 14th Bavarian Infantry Division. This interesting directive provides a clear insight into the way he intended to prepare for and meet the forthcoming offensive.²

“Subject: Preparations for the Defensive Battle

1. In view of the extent of the work necessary on the positions, it is especially important that, within the context of an all-embracing plan, efforts are concentrated on those places that will be tactically the most important in the defensive battle. All other [work] is ruthlessly to be set aside in favour of priority places. The divisions have the necessary oversight. They must ensure that they exert decisive influence on the type and extent of the work on the positions. This must be done on the basis of a division-wide work plan which covers all the individual sectors and lays down precise tasks. The necessary materiel and manpower is then to be provided at the relevant times and places. [The plans must be drawn up] so as to ensure that regimental and divisional boundaries are not treated as dividing walls against tactical cooperation. It is essential that care is taken through the placement of machine guns, so that their mutually supporting fire can be brought to bear from a flank.

2. It is anticipated that, with the exception of the *Siegfried-Ecke* [Siegfried Corner] to the south of the Scarpe, the British attack will be directed all along the front from the Souchez River to the Scarpe. Within this front the enemy is likely to launch particularly heavy attacks against particular localities. Points will be selected for major break-ins where the enemy considers that they offer the best chances for the continuation of the attack in order to achieve the overall aim. The places which the enemy has singled out for damage by means of artillery and mortar fire or raids provide a starting point in this respect. At Verdun and on the Somme the enemy concentrated their attacks against sector boundaries. In view of this, particular attention would seem to be appropriate in the following places:

- The divisional boundary to the right [north] of 79th Reserve Division.
- The positions in the Second Line either side of the junction of *Fischergang* and *Staubwasserweg* [Fischer Alley and Staubwasser Way].
- The positions in the Second Line either side of the junction of *Prinz Arnulf Tunnel* and *Prinz Arnulf Weg*.
- The positions in the Second Line either side of the junction of *Grenadierweg* [Grenadier Way] and the *Völkertunnel*.
- The positions either side of the road Neuville St Vaast – Thélus (Divisional boundary).
- The positions in the First line either side of the forward limit of *Grävenitzweg*.

- Positions either side of the track between Roclincourt and Thélus.

3. In addition every effort is to be made, by means of the closest possible observation of enemy digging operations and the placement of their destructive fire, to clarify further the assessment of probable enemy main break-in points.

4. Special measures are to be taken at the probable enemy main break-in points to ensure that any enemy attack can be beaten off or nipped in the bud, or that any enemy who have managed to break in can be prevented from expanding their foothold and can be rapidly ejected by means of a counter-stroke. This can be achieved by:

- Prepared defences. (Constant improvement of the smashed trenches and obstacles; placement of stop lines and obstacles at right angles to the front; company dumps of wire obstacles that can be laid rapidly.)
- Deployment of the garrison. (Distribution of machine guns, light mortars and grenade launchers.)
- Increases in destructive and defensive fire. (Due consideration having been given to the [risk of] loss of our guns.)
- Artillery preparations. (Designed to engage enemy forces and armoured vehicles which have broken in.) The guns of the close support battery are in themselves insufficient for this purpose.

5. *These passive preparatory measures alone are insufficient.*³ Enemy batteries should already be being engaged systematically whenever suitable opportunities present themselves. The necessary ammunition for this is ready and available. All necessary steps are to be taken in order to ensure that the means are available to fire gas as soon as the enemy preparations for the attack commence. We must adapt our response to the gradual transition to battle. This means that we must make it difficult for the enemy to prepare for battle by engaging with planned, heavy, destructive fire their observation points, mortar base plates and approach routes.

In both respects we must do considerably more than has been done so far. More precisely, we must ensure that the medium mortars and, wherever they can be deployed successfully, the heavy howitzers are better exploited and so deliver destructive fire.

6. There is to be:

- sharpest attention to detail, in order to ensure that enemy attack plans are discovered in good time.
- carefully planned and controlled, but ceaseless, digging efforts, in order to maintain and improve the tactically most important parts of our positions.
- systematic engagement of the enemy artillery and destruction of all installations that are particularly valuable to the enemy as they complete their attack preparations.

Signed: von Fasbender

Upon receipt of this directive, the divisions which made up Group Vimy were quick to issue their own complementary orders, because at this local level all the commanders were sure that the opening of the attack was drawing close. The army group commander was not entirely convinced.

*Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria: Diary Entry 26 March 1917*⁴

“Sixth Army has written in its weekly report for 24 March, ‘The reinforcement of the enemy artillery, which has been observed since the end of February, has been confirmed further ... ‘ The reason for the massing of enemy forces either side of Arras is still not completely clear. Possibly the enemy fears an attack and, therefore, has only deployed some of the available divisions in the front line. Whatever the explanation, the deployment is not normal for a major offensive. Because the possession of Vimy Ridge would be of far greater significance than the gaining of ground around Arras, it would seem, despite the greater concentration of force near the latter, that an attack on Vimy Ridge is the more probable. Nevertheless, both possibilities must be borne in mind.”

For several weeks, the Canadians had pursued a policy of aggressive raiding and patrolling against Vimy Ridge. Sometimes these enjoyed success, on other occasions they failed in their aim. Late on 29 March, for example, Reserve Infantry Regiment 263, 79 Reserve Division, captured four men of the Canadian 31st Battalion, 6 Brigade, 2nd Canadian Division during a raid launched astride the Neuville-Thélus road in sector *Arnulf 3*. The objective of the operation had been to capture German prisoners but, the tables turned, subsequent interrogation of these Canadian soldiers yielded very useful intelligence for the defence. On 31 March, an initial report, signed off by Major Lenz, Chief of Staff I Bavarian Reserve Division, was widely distributed:⁵

“From statements by prisoners belonging to 2nd Canadian Division the following points have arisen:

- The mission of the 2nd Canadian Division is to attack to the south of the road Neuville – Thélus – Farbus.
- To its south it appears that 1st Canadian Division has been inserted between it and 51st (Highland) Division
- To the north are located 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions in that order. 5th Canadian Division *may* be a designated reserve.⁶
- The Arras – Souchez front is to be rolled up from south to north. If that succeeds, the cavalry will be released onto the [Douai] Plain ...

“The statements sound probable and fit well with the picture built up by the Corps concerning the direction of the [forthcoming] attack and the main break-in points. Divisional Infantry and Artillery counter-measures would seem to be indicated.”

Interrogation of these prisoners continued the following day. A second report, dated 1 April,⁷ was issued and an additional one on 2 April.⁸ In the 1 April document the interrogators reported:

“Units of [6 Canadian] Brigade conducted attack exercises between 13 and 23 March to the north of Grand Servin. Each day between 8.00 am and 1.00 pm drills were rehearsed and attacks were practised on a training area adapted to resemble the actual terrain of the attack. The target of the attack, which was intended to be launched some time between 26 March and 6 April, was declared to be Thélus and Farbus Wood [modern Bois de Berthonval]. The German trenches were marked out with white tapes and the communication trenches were represented by red flags. The roads Arras - Lille and Neuville – Thélus were marked with yellow flags. Blue flags were used to show the village of Thélus and the wire obstacle was indicated with two wires.

“A small wood near the training area was used for Farbus Wood. Each exercise began with the troops advancing in ‘diamond artillery formation’, then the attack was conducted by the individual companies in three waves against Thélus and Farbus Wood. 27th Battalion had been designated to capture Thélus, whilst the 31st Battalion was intended to move through it and thrust towards Farbus Wood...”⁹

Additional information included in the 2 April report included confirmation that the attack was to be launched between Lens and Arras and that the bombardment was scheduled to last six to ten days. As a further illustration of the value of careful prisoner interrogation, a great deal of information concerning the whereabouts of supply dumps and gun positions was extracted, whilst the precise weight of and methods to be used in the attack on the Thélus - Farbus front were also obtained. The whereabouts of large stacks of ammunition and numerous gun pits was described, as was the fact that twelve out of sixteen companies of 6 Brigade would participate in the attack on Thélus/Farbus, whilst the remainder would be in reserve. The exact tactics to be deployed and the reason behind them were volunteered in detail, as were numerous minor points of general interest. This of course was only one report of many but, in combination, they left the defenders in no doubt at all about what would happen along Vimy Ridge when the barrage lifted. Meanwhile the shelling, interspersed with raiding and patrolling, continued to take a huge toll in casualties. It became increasingly difficult to repair the trench systems, withstand the incessant Canadian operations, or even to keep an accurate account of the shelling. The intensity of the bombardment was simply beyond anything previously experienced.

Despite all these problems, the German defence tried everything possible to prepare and launch a limited assault, code named Operation Munich, in late March or early April. Originally a proposal in mid March by Headquarters VI Reserve Corps and designed to disrupt Allied preparations and improve the German positions in the Givenchy area by capturing the northern end of Zouave Valley, it went through several amendments, was repeatedly postponed and in the end was never launched. Ironically,

in its final form it was to have been mounted on 10 April, though the army group commander, having been convinced of its necessity, certainly hoped that it could have taken place earlier.

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria:
*Diary Entry 3 April 1917*¹⁰

“Because the enemy have driven numerous galleries under the *Gießler Höhe*, clearly with the intention of preceding the attack there with major mine explosions and because we are somewhat behind with our counter-measures (the enemy are able to drive their mine galleries forward horizontally from the foot of the hill, whereas we have to dig down deep to be able to counter their work), it seems to me to be highly desirable that 16th [Bavarian] Division’s Operation Munich be launched as soon as possible. That way, capture of the enemy’s trenches means that we shall be able to destroy the entrances to their galleries. So far it has been postponed because the rain has saturated the ground and made it impassable...”

*Diary Entry 5 April 1917*¹¹

“Because a major enemy offensive against Sixth Army and more particularly against the front from Souchez to Tilloy, is to be launched in only a few days time, it would be a very good thing if Operation Munich could be conducted earlier. That would certainly get the ball rolling.”

Whilst work on this continued, staffs in the different headquarters were fully committed preparing to ensure that the forthcoming defensive operations could be conducted effectively. I Bavarian Reserve Corps, for example, issued a typical order on 3 April explaining the changed command arrangements and laying down how the newly arrived minor artillery reinforcements were to be deployed.¹²

“From midday 3 April 1917 the southern Corps of the Army are to be known as ‘Groups’. The various designations are as follows:

VI (VIII) Reserve Corps	Group Souchez
I Bavarian Reserve Corps	Group Vimy
IX Reserve Corps	Group Arras

“...Additional artillery has been placed at the disposal of Group Vimy:

- Field Artillery Regiment 25 (six batteries of field guns). Together with a regimental staff and one artillery battalion of 79th Reserve Division, these guns will be subordinated to 1st Bavarian Reserve Division.

- From Field Artillery Regiment 600 (six batteries of light field howitzers) the regimental staff and one artillery battalion will deploy to 1st Bavarian Reserve Division. One battalion will deploy to 14th Bavarian Infantry Division.
- Once the newly subordinated battalion from Field Artillery Regiment 600 is in position, 1st Bavarian Reserve Division is to release 2nd Battalion Field Artillery Regiment 9 to Group Arras.
- The batteries of these regiments are to be emplaced where they can superimpose their fire on the [most probable] break in points.

“From Foot Artillery Battalion 68 (100 mm guns), the regimental staff and two batteries are allocated to 14th Bavarian Infantry Division and one battery to 1st Bavarian Reserve Division. The 100 mm batteries of the two divisions must exploit their long range and be employed to fire gas shells at the enemy batteries that are outside the range of the howitzers.

“The heavy, low trajectory artillery of 1st Bavarian Reserve Division must be placed so as to be in a position to bring down flanking fire on a possible break in to the east of Souchez; and that of 14th Bavarian Infantry Division to be able both to counter thrusts to the east of Neuville and to bring down harassing fire along the roads leading to Arras.

Signed: von Fasbender

Whilst the higher headquarters were at full stretch adapting deployments, procedures and tactics so as to be ready when the attacks began, the forward troops clung on in their front line positions, attempting to withstand shelling more intense than anything they had previously experienced. One by one the dugouts were smashed, whilst the wet weather, in combination with the sheer scale of the bombardment, rendered all attempts to repair the trenches completely hopeless. The entire forward area was soon reduced to a sea of mud, which made resupply of trench stores, food, drink and even ammunition virtually impossible. Somehow artillery ammunition resupply was maintained, though it took an immense effort by men and horses to achieve it and to ensure that there were sufficient shells dumped on the gun lines in preparation for the forthcoming attacks.

Some idea of the prevailing conditions may be obtained from reports sent to his brigade commander, Generalmajor Lamprecht, on 6 and 8 April by Major Anton Maier, commander Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 3, 1st Bavarian Reserve Division, which was deployed on the Thélus-Farbus Front.

“Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 3, 6 April 1917, 5.30 pm

“The enemy artillery fire and its effects have increased day after day. In none of the First, the Third, the Stop Lines or the *Zwischenstellung* [Intermediate

Position] is it possible to speak of continuous lines of defence. For the most part the trench lines have been flattened, to such an extent that they are simply crater fields. The same is true of the approach routes. Due to crushing and burying of the dugouts, there has been an extraordinary reduction in the ability to provide protected accommodation for the troops.

“Enemy activity has the entire garrison on edge. Raids, both large and small, keep coming in; sometimes with artillery preparation; sometimes without; sometimes here; sometimes there. The usual artillery and mortar fire is often interrupted by repeated, violent and sudden concentrations, often in the strength of drum fire and lasting up to twenty minutes at a time. These concentrations appear to be lifted (by day) when white flares are fired.

“Deploying the battalions on the positions for eight days continuously, as has been the case up to now, cannot be continued in the present circumstances. But a rotation of two days in the front line and two days in support means that the reserve battalion can only have a rest period of two days at a time. This routine cannot be maintained for more than a few weeks. The allocation of a fourth battalion for each sector, as already requested, is urgently sought: [at the latest] at the time of the next relief.”¹³

“Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 3
Subject: Battleworthiness of the Troops

“Following on from my report of 6 April, 5.30 pm, I regard it as my duty to forward the enclosed report by the Regimental Medical Officer, concerning the current state of health, which he prepared for me on his own initiative. The trigger for this was my request for an explanation as to why thirty one men from 12th Company reported sick simultaneously and to make it clear to him that all men, except the most pressing medical cases, were to be directed back to their companies.

“Currently the troops in the sector are deployed as follows:

“Ten companies are manning the position: four companies in *Loën North*, four companies in *Loën South* and two companies in Bois Carré and the Second Position respectively (on high alert). Only two companies are resting. Each battalion has spent eight days manning the sub-sectors. Each company has spent four days in the Forward Position (First and Second Lines) and four days in support (North: Third Line and Stop Line; South: Third Line only). In this context, deployment in support is to be equated with service in the front line, because the Third Line, the Stop Line and the *Zwischenstellung* [Intermediate Position] are constantly under almost the same weight of fire as the First and Second Lines. There is no mortar fire, but this is replaced by large calibre shells from the enemy artillery.

“To this must be added the fact that the companies in support have already

sent several sections to the forward companies, because their average strength (which has sunk to eighty men) is insufficient for the manning of company sub-sectors 350 metres wide.¹⁴ When a battalion is relieved after eight days on the position, two companies move to the dugouts in Bois Carré and the Second Position, both of which are under constant fire. Only two companies are able to move into billets in Fresnoy.

“As a result, each company spends ten days on the positions; under constant fire and without a break. When this is coupled to the need to counter the daily enemy raids, both large and small, by day and night, it amounts to a commitment which leaves anything on the Somme or at Verdun in the shade; not, perhaps, in terms of casualties, but certainly in the demands it makes on the battleworthiness of the troops.”

It is the wording of official reports such as these that brings home the reality of expressions such as ‘softening up the enemy’ or ‘*sturmreif*’, which applied absolutely to the situation in Group Vimy. When the assault was launched the fighting troops of the three regiments of 1st Bavarian Reserve Division had been reduced to an extraordinary degree: Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 1 – 1,360; Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 2 (which had suffered particularly from the effect of raids) – 850 and Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 3 – 1,000.¹⁵

In the 79th Reserve Division sector, which ran along the highest part of the ridge, the situation was similar. In most cases the regiments maintained one or two companies in the front line. One or two companies were placed in support and the remainder were kept back in reserve role. A pre-Easter check revealed that infantry company strengths were down to between fifty and ninety riflemen and there were additional casualties during the final forty eight hours of the bombardment. Because of this, Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 had to deploy elements of its assault pioneer company in a reinforcing role as early as 5 April, its 2nd Battalion having suffered sixty five casualties during the previous two days.¹⁶ In a further attempt to alleviate the problems, all the divisional machine guns, including the six of Machine Gun Sharp Shooter Troop 20, which arrived at the end of March, were arranged in depth positions amongst the craters, forming the backbone of the defence in the absence of sufficient riflemen.¹⁷

The British army was by now present in overwhelming strength. The defenders calculated that up to 140 guns and 50 mortars of various calibres were in action along each kilometre of frontage north of the Scarpe. A Sixth Army report, dated 7 April, stated that, ‘During the past two weeks, fire has been observed coming from 679 different positions’.¹⁸ In effect this meant that more than 400 guns and 150 mortars could bring fire down against 79th Reserve Division, which could only reply with eighty nine guns and a few mortars, some of which were destroyed later in the bombardment. It is clear to see why morale sagged and men felt that they had been abandoned to their fate. Hungry, thirsty and worried about the risk of mine explosions, it can be seen clearly that the offensive when it opened would be launched against a defence well

under strength, comprising men whose nerves were on edge, who were physically exhausted, mentally drained and so sick that the majority of them should have been in bed under medical supervision.

Further proof of the strain of the past few days appears in a report dated 5 April and forwarded to the commander of Group Souchez [VIII Reserve Corps] by Generalmajor Ritter von Möhl, commander 16th Bavarian Infantry Division, in which he described the dire state of the positions between Hill 145 and the *Gießler Höhe* and illustrated its effect by a disciplinary problem which had occurred.¹⁹

“The bombardment, in combination with the weather conditions, has greatly reduced the defensive value of the position. Currently there is no continuity within the First or Second Lines because, in places, the trenches have been flattened. On the left flank of *Döberitz*, forward of the Third Line, [the defences] are reduced to sentry posts in craters. Large numbers of the dugouts have been buried and the approach routes are unusable in places.

“The constant heavy bombardment, the ceaseless high state of alert in a severely shot-up position, protected by only fragments of an obstacle, coupled with the endless work each night on positions which are generally destroyed again the following day, has naturally had a negative effect on the morale of the troops and has led to some isolated incidents...My oral report yesterday was somewhat limited, because I had just been informed about examples of gross insubordination within a regiment, in whose fighting ability I had previously had the highest trust.”

From Möhl’s words, it can be seen that in some cases his men had been driven to the limit of endurance by the bombardment – small wonder, because during each twenty four hour period the 79th Reserve Division divisional sector, for example, was engaged with at least 12,000 shells. On some days the total must have been a good deal higher; then, finally, from 7 April there were no more attempts to keep an accurate tally. ‘The number of enemy shells fired cannot be determined...Mortar fire was broadly comparable to the previous few days’, they reported that day.²⁰ One of the battalion commanders of Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 2, deployed in Sector *Wittelsbach*, later described what this weight of fire meant in practice for the forward defenders.

*Major von Dittelsbach 1st Battalion Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 2*²¹

“The enemy had divided up the battlefield like a chessboard. Strip after strip was ploughed and torn up. The entire defensive works were to be demolished and the nerves of the defenders shredded. As it unfolded it made for dreadful scenes. The explosion of the massive shells ripped great craters out of the earth, sent their contents skywards then, as they fell to ground, once more repeated the process in chaotic confusion. The earth rocked, the air rushed like gusts of wind past the ears: thunderclap after thunderclap.

“In between were the light and medium calibre shells, fired from the front and the flanks to carry out their work all along the line, or to come down as harassing fire on the cold, wrecked slopes where the clouds of gas clung. New monsters crashed down on the front line: torpedo mines, 138 pounders, landing with massive effect; whilst, along the approach routes, the long-barrelled guns brought down hails of fire and claimed victims in the villages.”

It was just the same in Sector *Zollern*, where Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 was deployed in the centre of the 79th Reserve Division front. An unnamed company commander, defending the La Folie area, later produced an extremely graphic account from his perspective.²²

“I exercise command over a crater field more than one kilometre in extent. At my disposal are: four platoons of infantry; one reserve platoon; six machine guns; three light mortars; one telegraph station and five telephone points. To that must be added assault groups, the artillery forward observation officer, reporting points, messengers and flare relay stations to pass on signals and so alert the artillery. We can only move in this crater field during the hours of darkness. During the day my time in my dugout is so full of the need to produce reports and returns, sketches and defence plans that my head is buzzing. If everything goes perfectly, it takes me three hours to tour the sentry posts; if I add in the need to link up with the neighbouring sectors, this rises to six hours.

“I have created five independent mixed defensive teams. The men are magnificent. Every day half of them are buried [by the fire]. Sentry duty is an immense burden. The food is cold; even fetching it involves extraordinary exertion. The men are working until they are nearly dropping from exhaustion. But none of these brave young men are grumbling or complaining. Covered in clay and mud, they can only snatch rests on the freezing cold ground, but their eyes light up at the thought of being able to give the Tommies what for. Mindful of our joint responsibility, they stick it out through the heaviest concentrations of fire. The demands they make are the minimum to sustain life – a shining example to the greedy drones back home. They have just gone thirty six hours with no food, but nobody is cursing about it. The wounded are stoical and are simply grateful for a cigarette that we place in their helpless lips.

“We have now been subjected to ceaseless drum fire for eight days and our casualties are severe. Yesterday the company lost nine men. All we could do was to drag them unconscious out of the trenches under the constant clatter of British [*sic*] machine gun fire. The British [*sic*] pressurise us indefatigably. Yesterday we had two men stabbed to death in their trench at 2.00 pm. Then there is the ceaseless fire: 600 mortar bombs and one hundred shells on the company sector in only twelve hours. We are enduring a second Battle of the Somme here. The battalion is already in an awful state. There has been no warm food for forty eight hours. The men are in a state of collapse. The British major

offensive is about to begin. Here in the Second Line, I am down to only one section of men. I have been waiting since 9.00 pm for warm food for the company.

“The British are simply miles ahead of us in their superiority in mortars, artillery and technology, so we infantry just have to soldier on with no artillery support. But our men are truly outstanding. Because more and more dugouts are being collapsed every day, we shall all soon be forced to move out into the open. My dugout is full of the wounded; the trench outside of the dead. Nobody has come for them. My best men are either dead or wounded...”

“My men are beyond all praise! The company commander expressly ordered the occupation of an essential sentry position that was in such a dangerous place that anybody manning it was certain to be more or less seriously wounded within a very short space of time. Not a man flinched and, sure enough, the dugout adjacent to that of the men waiting to go on duty has gradually filled up with seriously wounded men...”

The artillery fire reduced considerably on 7 April, but it was a temporary lull and it increased again in the face of German counter-battery fire. During the afternoon and evening of Easter Day rates increased to drum fire, which was maintained throughout the following night. It was now obvious that the waiting was over and Vimy Ridge was about to be attacked. In anticipation, the corps commander issued a final rallying call to his men, though how many actually saw it or were motivated by it is a moot point.

“Group Vimy: Corps Order of the Day, Easter Sunday 1917²³

Soldiers!

For days the enemy has been trying to wear you down through an immense weight of artillery fire. The enemy has succeeded in smashing our trenches and obstacles, but has made no impression on the steadfastness of our courageous infantry. Each time raids have been launched against our positions they have been repulsed bloodily and prisoners have been taken.

“Our excellent, strong, artillery has supported the infantry admirably. Each gunner understands that it is his duty and a matter of honour to come self-sacrificially to the aid of the infantry in its hour of need.

“Our airmen and anti-aircraft gunners have all performed brilliantly. During the past week twenty five enemy aircraft have fallen to the guns of the Richthofen Squadron and the anti-aircraft guns have brought down two more. The achievement and maintenance of air superiority is an essential pre-requisite for success.

“In battle and at the cost of huge labour, the engineers, mortar men and pioneer battalions have all played their part in supporting the infantry.

“Soldiers! The day of the decisive assault draws near! It will demand nothing less than a supreme performance from all ranks. Be ready at all times to begin the defence! The British must not be allowed to gain one single foot of ground. Wherever they succeed in breaking in they must ejected without delay.

“Do not forget that here we are facing *the* enemy which actually caused this dreadful war; who alone bears the guilt that it is still continuing.

“You all know what is at stake: Victory and Peace.

Signed: von Fasbender”

The following day, in the wet and cold of an April dawn, with snow flurries in the wind, an extraordinary hurricane of fire broke over the forward positions the length of Vimy Ridge. The earth itself shook. The front line trenches were mainly engaged by field guns and mortars, supported by large numbers of machine guns, but depth targets were hit by medium, heavy and super-heavy guns, and all known battery positions were gassed. The German were soon totally cloaked by dense clouds of smoke and fountains of mud and earth were thrown up everywhere. Yellow flares went up all along the front line as the trench garrisons called for defensive fire; but before there could be a response from those few German guns still able to fire the bombardment suddenly lifted and there was a whole series of explosions as the entrance to the many subways prepared in advance were blown to provide the attacking troops with easy covered access to the German lines.

At once huge masses of Canadian infantry, well fed, equipped and rested, surged forward. Many of the leading wave were lightly equipped with just side arms and grenades, so as to produce an immediate shock effect, then came the follow up waves hard on their heels. Wherever the shelling had snuffed out resistance the front line trenches were quickly overrun. Elsewhere the surviving German infantry began to take a heavy toll of the attackers then, as the fighting became hand to hand, there were desperate struggles with knives and bayonets. South of Thélus there had been close support from tanks moving forward along the roads leading from Arras and the German First and Second Positions were taken rapidly. Although, as will be described later, the longest Allied advance of the day by far was made by the British 34th Division in the sector of 14th Bavarian Infantry Division, the fate of 1st Bavarian Reserve Division, deployed just to the south of 79th Reserve Division in Sectors *Loën*, *Wittelsbach* and *Rupprecht*, was of much greater significance as far as the battle for Vimy Ridge was concerned.

Deployed just to the south of Reserve Infantry Regiment 263, on the northern flank of 1st Bavarian Reserve Division, was Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 3, commanded by Major Anton Maier from a dugout known as *Leipziger Hütte* [Leipzig Cottage], located just south of the present day Bois Carré Cemetery. By the end of the first day of battle, Major Meier was posted missing, so it was Major von Poschinger who later described what happened when the regiment was attacked by 1st Canadian Division.²⁴

“9.4.1917. ...Of the battalions deployed on the position, the 1st Battalion had relieved the 3rd Battalion during the night 7/8 April, whilst 2nd Battalion had already been located forward on the position from 4 April. The uncommitted companies (11th and 12th) were back at Fresnoy in reserve. After extremely heavy artillery and mortar fire came down on the sector during the night 8/9 April, just as it had been for the past few days, destroying almost all of the dugouts of the First Position, at 5.30 am 9 April drum fire started coming down all along the divisional sector.

“From this moment onwards all contact was lost with the front line. After the heaviest imaginable drum fire by artillery and mortars, lasting a quarter of an hour, the enemy infantry began its attack in great waves. Opposite Sub-Sectors L[oën] 3 and L4 the enemy used flamethrowers and, at the moment of the attack, two enemy aircraft were in the air above the position.

“Despite constant demands for defensive fire, the response of our artillery was extremely weak. As a result, the tiny garrison of the First and Second Lines (the companies averaged only a bayonet strength of sixty men) was simply overrun. The main enemy break in point was along the road Neuville – Thélus. It appears that the enemy broke straight through here to the Third Line in the first rush; at least no more reports were received by the regiment from 5th Company, which was deployed there - none of the runners despatched there ever returned.

“In L[oën] South the enemy was checked for a considerable time by small arms fire, but gradually they made progress here too, breaking down the resistance of the weakened companies of 1st Battalion once they had advanced in the neighbouring sectors. At 5.45 am the two companies of 3rd Battalion located in Fresnoy, which had only just been relieved at 2.00 am in Bois Carré and the Second Position by 9th and 10th Companies, were alerted and ordered to move forward with two machine guns to Bois Carré...

“In the meantime the garrison of the *Riegel-Stellung* [Stop Line] (8th Company assisted by survivors from the first three lines) maintained an obstinate resistance, holding up the enemy for approximately three hours. About 10.00 am, after the *Riegel-Stellung* had been completely smashed, the British [*sic*] succeeded in penetrating its northern part, from the Neuville-Thélus road. At the same time the enemy managed to force a way into the centre of Thélus, whose western edge was still being held by elements of 79th Reserve Division.

“Whilst artillery fire came down on the trenches around Bois Carré, at about 10.30 dense skirmishing lines of British [*sic*] soldiers advanced on Thélus East and Bois Carré. Here 9th Company, with about forty riflemen and two machine guns and led by the Regimental Commander, was still holding out. The staff of 2nd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 3 was also here, having been forced to withdraw once the enemy had advanced over the *Riegel-Stellung* towards *Augsburger-Weg* [Augsburg Way].

“Despite suffering heavy casualties from rifle and machine gun fire, the enemy worked their way forward to Bois Carré, [helped by the fact] that resistance had ceased north of the Thélus – Bailleul road. Once the enemy had begun advancing along *Preussen-Weg* [Prussian Way] and were threatening the rear of 9th Company, located between Bois Carré and *Leipziger-Haus* [*sic* - *Hütte*], it was ordered at 11.30 am to withdraw along *Loën-Weg* to the Second Position, in order to avoid being cut off. Once *Leipziger-Haus* had been destroyed by fire, the regimental staff moved their command post to the dugout of an aid post at the southwest corner of Farbus Wood.²⁵ Throughout the morning the Second Position, which was manned by 11th and 12th Companies, was under extremely heavy artillery fire.

“At about 12.45 pm the British [*sic*] launched forward in dense masses from *Preussen-Weg* against the Second Position. Despite obstinate resistance they succeeded in penetrating the left flank of the regiment from *Weisses Haus* [White House] and simultaneously to outflank, then to encircle the right flank of the regiment from the northwest, once Infantry Regiment 261 [*sic* - *Reserve Infantry Regiment 263*] had withdrawn to the railway embankment east of Vimy/Farbus. Those elements of 3rd Battalion (which by now incorporated survivors of the other two battalions) who managed to break clean of the enemy – nobody returned from 10th Company – moved after 1.30 pm to occupy the railway embankment east of Farbus, in extension of the line of Infantry Regiment 261 [*sic*].

Once the Second Position had fallen, the British [*sic*] pushed forward initially only to the eastern edge of Farbus Wood. About 4.00 pm they attempted, using cavalry, to break through to the east. Of a twelve man patrol which rode forward along the road Farbus – Willerval, six were shot by rifle and machine gun fire and two men were captured in Willerval. The remainder escaped. Of another which pushed along the line of the railway embankment towards Bailleul, all, bar two, were shot down.

“Once the full weight of enemy artillery fire began coming down on the railway embankment, this was simply held by security outposts. The line was pulled back seventy metres and everyone began to dig in. Here the remnants of the companies were relieved at 7.30 pm by elements of Infantry Regiments 6 and 21...”

Such were the losses of territory by 1st Bavarian Reserve Division that not only was Major Maier declared missing, Oberstleutnant Brunner of Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 2 was captured.²⁶ Despite all the difficulties, German command and control was reasonably effective throughout the day. The main problem for the defence was the speed of events, which meant that the Canadians remained inside the German decision cycle all day long, making it impossible for them to react before orders were overtaken by events on the ground. In the event, Generalmajor Freiherr von Pechmann,

the divisional commander, issued at least six operation orders during the day (at 8.00 am, 9.00 am, 11.00 am, 11.45 am, 12.00 pm, 3.00 pm and 10.50 pm),²⁷ but nothing effective could be achieved by the defence until after the Canadian attacks, with their limited objectives, had run their course and there was a pause in the fighting.

The 79th Reserve Division deployed north of Thélus had a very similar experience. On the divisional left flank adjoining 1st Bavarian Reserve Division were the battalions of Reserve Infantry Regiment 263, commanded by Oberstleutnant von Behr. Their trenches were all smashed, as were most of their dugouts. The companies had been badly worn down by the shelling, so only relatively few men were able to man the defences. As a result, despite doing their best to withstand the Canadian pressure with hand grenades, they were overwhelmed quite quickly. One of the company commanders, deployed in the Third Line of the First Position in Sector Arnulf North, stood waiting for dawn to break.

*Reserve Lieutenant Bittkau Reserve Infantry Regiment 263*²⁸

“Gradually the first streaks of dawn began to light up the darkness. Light squalls of snow blew across the cratered landscape. There was a striking stillness. Suddenly, between Arras and Lens, came great flashes and wild arcs of light in the sky: signal flares? Mine explosions? All of a sudden, as though at a single word of command, down came drum fire from thousands of large and small calibre muzzles. Shell fire rose to crazy heights. It was impossible to distinguish the firing signatures from the shell bursts. It was just one mass of fire amidst an extraordinary racket.

“It was like the final intake of breath before a race. Nerves were stretched to breaking point as we took in these scenes, which were like a painting of terrible beauty. Standing there for just a few seconds, a shell landed just to my left and a fragment hit my left side at chest height. My nerves took another knock! My heart was like lead, the gorge rose in my throat; blood ran into my mouth, taking my breath away. I was at the end of my strength; ready to faint. Suddenly came a thin shout, seemingly from far off, ‘The British [*sic*]! Get out! Get out!’

“They were coming from the left, through the hollow, heading directly for Bonval Wood. Battle was joined: rifle shots – shouts – hand grenades. Hans Voigt, the drummer, came running up, carrying ammunition and information, whilst down below secret documents were being burned. ‘They are coming from the left – here they are!’ A man was pulled down inside moaning...stomach wound. He lay there completely still. More bawling and shouting. ‘They are right above us!’ Then it was quieter – completely quiet until a strange voice called down [in English], ‘Come out!’

“The light flickered...thoughts ran through my numbed head: what were they going to do? Throw down hand grenades? Smash my skull? No, better to

shoot myself. But the revolver was lying on the table and I could not move. Should I wait for a counter-attack? ...A Tommy came through the tunnel, looked carefully round the corner, a large revolver in his hand. 'Officer?' he asked, then left to fetch his comrades."

From his command post in rear of his forward companies, the commanding officer of its 1st Battalion later described how the attack unfolded in his sector.

Major Meyer 1st Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 263rd

"At 5.30 am on 9 April enemy drum fire, supplemented by machine gun fire, came down. It was impossible to make out the position and in fact it was almost impossible to make out signal flares amidst the clouds of smoke and dirt thrown up by the shells. At 6.30 am heavy small arms fire could be heard and, at that moment, a message was sent by light signal to the rear, 'Heavy enemy attack'. About half an hour later the wounded Muskettier Hagemann happened to pass Battalion Headquarters, reporting that the British [*sic*] had broken into the battalion position from the right and were already occupying the Third Line. According to members of 9th Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 263, the British [*sic*] had overrun the right flank of 1st Bavarian Reserve Division and had then attacked our battalion in great strength from the left and rear.

"Unfortunately Muskettier Hagemann's statements were soon confirmed when the battalion staff spotted that British [*sic*] infantry were already closing in and were mounting a machine gun in the remains of a ruined house. Because there were no reserves of any sort available for a counter-attack, the officers and men of the battalion staff left the indefensible command post and pulled back to the Intermediate Position in order to conduct the subsequent defence as far as possible from there. On the way there two officers and all the other ranks, bar two runners and three signallers, were killed or wounded."

Although the front line was quickly overrun, determined defence by 12th Company and elements of the 10th Company brought the Canadian attack to a temporary halt then, rushing forward from the *Felsenkeller* [a mined dugout and command post of *KTK South* of Sector *Arnulf*], Vizefeldwebel Borchherding led the reserve platoon of 10th Company over the open, cratered landscape to come to the assistance of their heavily pressed comrades. However, despite every effort, the serious thrust by the 1st Canadian Division south of Les Tilleuls began to have an effect on Sector *Arnulf*. Following up, large numbers of Canadian reinforcements advanced from the Arras-Lens road, forced their way against the flanks and rear of the 263rd, rolled them up from the south and then encircled them completely. It soon proved to be impossible to defend the First Position any longer. As a result, the Intermediate Position running from Thélus to Vimy fell as well.

In the nick of time Major Meyer, commanding officer 1st Battalion, together with his staff, succeeded in withdrawing as far as the railway embankment; whilst the regimental commander, Oberstleutnant von Behr, personally led 8th Company and what remained of the assault pioneer company to a blocking position south of Vimy. Here they managed to conduct a successful defence for several hours before Leutnant von Rohrscheidt, commanding 8th Company, was killed along with many of his men. When no more could be achieved, a handful of defenders led by an offizierstellvertreter pulled back and linked up with reinforcements who had arrived at the railway embankment south of the Vimy-Acheville underpass. Summarising the day later, Meyer, whose command post in the *Schwabentunnel* in Sector *Arnulf North* was outflanked early from the south, wrote:

*Major Meyer Commanding Officer 1st Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 263*³⁰

“The regimental commander [Oberstleutnant von Behr] was briefed in person by the battalion commander. Major Meyer then received orders, together with Oberleutnant Heinicke, to take 6th Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 261, ten machine guns of Reserve Infantry Regiment 263, three companies of 2nd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 263 and approximately fifty men of 1st Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 263 (who were back with the heavy baggage) and move to defend the line of the railway embankment to the east of Vimy. The vulnerable point of this position was at Farbus Wood, where the Canadians could close up to the embankment using covered routes. If they were to succeed in crossing the embankment the danger was that its entire length could be enfiladed by machine gun fire and therefore become untenable.

“Temporarily there was a similar danger for the right flank at Vimy Station, but this was removed through the deployment of ‘Detachment von Block’ (1st Battalion Infantry Regiment 118 and elements of Reserve Infantry Regiment 262), which subsequently succeeded in counter-attacking as far as the slopes of the so-called Telegraph Hill. During the afternoon of 9 April, large masses of Canadian soldiers were observed assembling in Farbus village, apparently in order to conduct an assault on the railway embankment. At that the battalion commander directed two machine guns into action at the southern underpass where they could bring enfilade fire down on Farbus Wood. In addition, the deployment of 6th Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 261 and a platoon from 2nd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 263, which had thus far been held back, meant that the left flank could be extended to a point to the south of Farbus Wood. The regimental commander was also requested to make forces available to reinforce and thus improve the security of the threatened left flank.

“A little while later enemy cavalry was observed in the area of Willerval. At approximately the same time two companies (10th and 12th Companies Reserve Infantry Regiment 34) arrived. One company was deployed to

strengthen the left flank, whilst the other company remained concentrated behind the right flank in case the enemy succeeded in breaking through at Vimy. In the meantime the enemy kept the railway embankment and the two flanks in particular under fire by heavy shells and shrapnel. Towards evening Oberstleutnant von Behr arrived once more at the railway embankment in order to direct a counter-attack. This was to sweep round the flank of Detachment von Block, roughly in the area of Petit Vimy, then was to be directed against Telegraph Hill. The troops that had been subordinated to Major Meyer were initially to support his attack by means of machine gun fire, then to undertake a frontal attack. This action was begun, but had to be halted when information arrived that the Bavarians had not succeeded in recapturing Farbus; that it was still in Canadian hands, which meant that the left flank of the attack would have been in acute danger.

“During the night the companies were withdrawn to the railway embankment. They were reinforced by, amongst other units, elements of Reserve Infantry Regiment 224, which had been placed at the disposal of 1st Bavarian Reserve Division, but which had strayed rather too far to the right as they advanced and so had become mixed up with the battle line of Detachment Meyer. To the left, 12th Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 34 was now deployed, with its left flank resting on the road Willerval – Farbus Station. To its south there was a gap of 800 metres for which no troops were available to fill. Also that same night two machine guns were deployed in the area of the windmill at the southwestern exit of Vimy. Their role was to secure the left flank of Detachment von Block, which was located around the Vimy crossroads. During the morning of 10 April, Oberstleutnant von Beyr, to whom Detachment von Block was also subordinated, withdrew on order of brigade to the cross roads about 1,200 metres further to the east. Two newly-arrived companies of Infantry Regiment 64 were deployed in the second line to the east of Farbus in order to improve the security of the railway embankment.

“A short time later 9th Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 34 arrived at the railway embankment. Two of its platoons were used to occupy the southern edge of Vimy and so improve the security of the left flank of Detachment von Block and one platoon was deployed to the north of Vimy Station to secure up to the right. Towards the afternoon a weak enemy force attacked the left flank near to Farbus Wood, but was easily repulsed. During the evening Hauptmann Lütters, commander of 1st Battalion Infantry Regiment 118, who was in telephone contact with Major Meyer but not Hauptmann von Block, told the former that he had been attacked by strong forces and had been forced back into the Second Position. He had suffered about 30% casualties and required reinforcements, small arms ammunition and grenades. Because links to regiment were destroyed, Major Meyer allocated to Hauptmann Lütters 1st Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 262, 10th and 12th Companies Reserve Infantry

Regiment 34 and 3rd Platoon 9th Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 34. This information was passed immediately to brigade and later, when communications were restored, to the regiment. Patrols launched by 3rd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 34 established that the enemy was digging in along the wood edge to the south of Vimy. Weak sallies from this location were beaten off easily. The ground between the villages of Farbus and Vimy was free of enemy troops.”

In Sector *Zollern* Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 was attacked by 3rd Canadian Division. This particular assault was initiated by several massive mine explosions that killed or neutralised many of the front line defenders. Those not directly caught in this way were few in number and could not provide much in the way of organised resistance. As a result the Canadian troops pushed right up to the third line. At that point they were held up by the well aimed fire of the supports, but this phase did not last long. Very soon the attackers were probing forward on either flank and the survivors had to withdraw to the depth positions, bringing with them the information that the First Position was been lost almost in its entirety. At that the commanding officers of 2nd and 3rd Battalions assembled their meagre reserves (7th and 10th Companies) and despatched them forward in a counter-stroke. Shortly afterwards, Major Reschke, commanding the 3rd [Fusilier] Battalion, was himself captured after a hand to hand battle and command devolved on Oberleutnant Freiherr von Richthofen.

Further south, men of 7th and 10th Companies managed to push the attackers back about a hundred metres and then held off several renewed attacks, though Hauptmann Kröber, commander of the 2nd Battalion and his adjutant, Leutnant Uhlhorn, were seriously wounded, Kröber dying a few days later in a field hospital. Having been ordered forward from Drocourt by the regimental commander, Major Freiherr von Richthofen, 9th Company, and the machine gun reserves arrived at about 8.00 am. With their aid and by dint of hard fighting it proved possible to hold the eastern edge of the ridge for the time being. Further assistance arrived when Leutnant Kopka and 2nd Machine Gun Company, Reserve Infantry Regiment 261, having force marched forward from Vimy, were put at the disposal of Reserve Infantry Regiment 262. Kopka, however, was killed later that day, shot through the head.³¹ Throughout the day, the left flank of the regiment was in the air and under constant threat. However, Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 fought hard to retain the position and it was held for a considerable period against everything that the Canadians could throw at it.

To the north of the Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 front was Sector *Fischer*, which was defended that day by Reserve Infantry Regiment 261.

*Feldwebel and Offizierstellvertreter Paul Radschun 3rd Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 261*³²

“Foggy, grey and dull, Easter Monday dawned to an icy wind and squalls of snow. Relief was due to take place that night. Suddenly, in the early dawn,

thousands of British guns opened up as one, pouring their thunderous hail of iron on our positions. For the regiment a bombardment of such violence was totally unprecedented. In all directions an endless, dense series of fountains of clay shot upwards. Rocks were reduced to dark dust and tiles into red dust clouds. There was a constant terrible banging and crashing and, now and again, enormous thunderclaps, which could be heard above everything else, as ammunition dumps blew up. Impassively, but tense, von Goerne's regiment stuck it out in its trenches, completely surrounded by dreadful circles of roaring, blood-red fire, but with hands clutching the butts of the weapons tightly, determined to defend every last foot of ground to the last, in accordance with Prussian tradition.

"Then the British [*sic.*] came. As the fire which had been coming down intensely for hours lifted to the rear, the sentries of Reserve Infantry Regiment 261, peering through the dark blanket of mist and mud, caught sight of dense columns trudging forward through the clinging clay of No Man's Land with their rifles slung around them. At long last! Now it was going to be a matter of a battle with the same weapons; shot for shot, throw for throw. As the enemy came up to the barbed wire, there was a sudden burst of fire as Goerne's Grenadiers opened up on them, strengthened by their tough, firm and knightly soldierly spirit. The machine guns and rifles of the grenadiers crashed constantly. The dense British [*sic.*] columns were broken up and scattered by this determined defensive front. Heaps of khaki-clad bodies began to pile up in front of the trenches. Unfortunately, on the left flank the heavy enemy fire had destroyed almost all the machine guns. Only here did the enemy have it easy. Favoured by the bumps and dips of the craters, they succeeded in breaking through along the boundary with our neighbouring unit and were able to threaten our left flank and rear.

"Hand grenades fell in dreadful numbers among the brown-clad enemy. Finding themselves embroiled in the toughest of defensive battles, the flanking companies began to bleed to death. Only a few men succeeded in breaking out and some survivors fell into the hands of the enemy. But the British [*sic.*] also succeeded in breaking through on the right boundary. Once again there was bitterly hard fighting everywhere. The cracks of the infantry small arms were mixed with the drum beats of the hand grenades and, roaring above it all, was the thunder of the guns. Heroism and faithful duty escalated to titanic heights. Heavily outnumbered, the German grenadiers fought on. The weather conditions, namely the damp and the cold, caused stoppages in the feed mechanisms of the machine guns. Sometimes it was possible to clear them quickly but at other times no amount of blows, shaking or rattling would free the damp belts of these precious weapons and they remained silent, to be replaced by the use of grenades and the bayonet. In the meantime the enemy losses rose steeply, but again and again new brown masses surged forward,

threatening to encircle the regiment, which fought on in a superhuman way. Everywhere the battle had broken down into a dreadful close-quarter battle, man against man.”

It is an extraordinary fact but here in Sector *Fischer* the front line trenches that guarded the direct approaches to Hill 145 were very weakly held. In position in the front line were only 3rd Company (Balla), 1st Company (Wittkop), 11th Company (Wagner) and 9th Company (Neumann) but, despite their lack of numbers, they managed to halt the Canadian attack immediately to their front in No Man’s Land. However there was greater Canadian success in the adjoining Sectors *Zollern* and *Döberitz*. Here thrusts had reached as far as the third line of the First Position and attempts were already being made to neutralise from the rear pockets of defenders who were still in action. Hauptmann Zickner, *KTK* of the northern sub-sector, known as ‘Island Fischer’³³, immediately gave orders for a counter-stroke by 2nd Company (Hoppe) and 4th Company (Ketzlick) from the *Potsdamer Riegel* [Postdam Stop Line]. This was reasonably successful. Other uncommitted subunits, frequently acting on their initiative, rushed to assist more hard pressed elements of the regiment so, despite hard, close range fighting, the overall situation remained essentially the same for most of the day.

Reserve Infantry Regiment 261, an especially tough formation, was proving to be a hard proposition for the attacking 4th Canadian Division; the relative handful of machine gunners and riflemen who had not been caught by the bombardment maintained a torrent of fire, aided by well stocked dumps of ammunition. They fought with total desperation and determination, repeatedly bringing attacks to a bloody standstill out to their front. In fact, as the day wore on, the greatest danger was attack from one or other flank. At one point a determined Canadian effort was launched out of Sector *Zollern*. This threatened the integrity of the 3rd [Fusilier] Battalion, but the problem was spotted in time and *KTK* South, Major von Knobelsdorff, ordered an immediate counter-stroke by his reserves (10th and elements of the 12th Company) Reserve Infantry Regiment 261. There were serious casualties but, for the time being, the enemy thrust from the south was neutralised. Post war one of the participants left this account.

*Feldwebel and Offizierstellvertreter Paul Radschun 3rd Company Reserve Infantry Regiment 261*³⁴

“In the meantime the enemy losses rose steeply, but again new brown masses surged forward, threatening to encircle the regiment, which fought on in a superhuman way. Everywhere the battle had broken down into a dreadful close-quarter battle, man against man. Without being able to help, my company commander, Leutnant Balla, had to look on, whilst his company was reduced to a tiny handful of men. Smoke, noise, wild shouts gradually died away in the

evil, muddy battlefield. It was all over! Honour these heroes, who hoped to cheat death! Through the iron curtain, the fusiliers of the regiment, together with elements of 5th Company and the Infantry Engineer Company, continued to fight on and before this fresh defensive wall, which was inspired by the same spirit as the remainder, the last waves of the British [*sic.*] burnt out and the dreadful storm of steel ebbed away. A circling infantry cooperation pilot was able to make out the message of the signalling panels: 'We are holding the line'. During the morning of the following day came the moment of relief. The regiment lost twenty officers and 860 NCOs and men during this tough battle. It had not yielded. It had defended its appointed place to the last drop of blood; worthy of its fathers; worthy of its parent formation, the Prussian Guard; worthy of the heroic spirit of its beloved commander, who had always taught it to stand firm against the odds in all circumstances.

Leutnant Koschmieder, one of the last of the regimental officers unwounded at that point, was killed during this action as he manned a machine gun; and with him too were numerous other members of the counter-stroke force. The survivors fought on grimly, making use of captured Lewis guns in many cases. If the situation on this flank could be described as 'precariously stable', other threats built up from Sector *Döberitz*, to the north. As a result, elements of 1st Battalion were at full stretch for hours on end, as they attempted with some success to fend off repeated Canadian attacks. Leutnant Klabisch was killed during these battles, but a counter-stroke conducted on Hauptmann Zickner's orders by 2nd and 4th Companies managed to throw the Canadians back. The cost was high. Leutnant Ketzlick, commander 4th Company, was killed, together with one of his platoon commanders, Leutnant Lehmann, as well as numerous other ranks.

*Hauptmann Behrmann Reserve Infantry Regiment 261*³⁵

"While the soldierly fate of the right flank companies was being determined, great masses of British [*sic*] soldiers broke in along the boundary between Reserve Infantry Regiment 261 and Bavarian Infantry Regiment 11 (16th Bavarian Infantry Division). This caused an immediate break in the desperate defence. Whilst the main thrust continued to the east, strong forces swung south, falling against the flank of the 1st Company (Reserve Leutnant Wittkop) and 3rd Company (Reserve Leutnant Balla). In this area, too, all the machine guns were out of order. The first serious resistance did not come until the enemy hit the *Berliner-Riegel* [Berlin Stop Line], where the weapon of Gefreiter Neumann was still in full working order.

"Of the first three British [*sic*] waves, almost nothing remained, but then there was a stoppage which could not be cleared. Frantic efforts, shaking and pulling could achieve nothing. Having soaked up dirt and moisture for days, the belt was jammed and could not be freed. Shot through the head, Gefreiter

Neumann fell, as did the rest of his crew, together with a large group manning the trench. Some brave lads rescued the machine gun and carried it into an adjacent post. To the front the enemy, who had been pressing strongly, were pinned down in the muddy craters by the fire of the remaining infantrymen.”

The Canadian 4th Division had also suffered considerably, so further attacks were suspended until night fell. However, a further major effort was directed at Sector *Döberitz*. When battle was joined there, the ensuing confused action gained ground. Leutnant Hoppe was wounded and evacuated. Leutenants Ketzlich and Lehmann were killed, so command in this vital sector passed to Reserve Leutnant Fladt, who had himself been wounded in the head. He eventually had no choice but to pull back towards the *Potsdamer Riegel* [Potsdam Stop Line] and the Intermediate Position (North). Elsewhere, Reserve Infantry Regiment 261 was still holding right forward in the centre of the position. Extraordinary though it sounds, what was left of 3rd, 1st, 11th and 9th Companies was still holding on there, despite increasing exhaustion and casualties that went on mounting.

As an example of the physical strain involved, Leutnant Balla, commanding 3rd Company, noted that during one hand grenade battle when the Canadians were throwing Mills bombs up to thirty metres, his worn out men, each having thrown dozens of grenades, could only achieve half that distance. Despite this, the fight went on. One cool rifleman of his company, benefitting from the protection of an infantry shield, fought off one large group of Canadians single handed for several hours. The company also enjoyed the occasional stroke of luck. When a British aircraft appeared overhead to engage the company in its crater position, the defenders fired white flares at it. Apparently this was a British recognition signal and the aircraft flew away again.

*Hauptmann Behrmann Reserve Infantry Regiment 261*³⁶

“Bringing down concentrated fire against the forces pushing down from the east were the machine guns, echeloned back towards the rear, and the remainder of the garrison under Leutnant Balla. British [*sic*] losses were heavy, but ever more groups kept streaming forward through the gap that existed between our left hand neighbouring division and us. Forward, elements of 3rd Company under Leutnant Klabisch hung on grimly, regardless of their casualties. They fought with the desperation of the heroes of yesteryear, but without being able fully to beat back the troops who were able to take cover in the numerous shell holes. Firing from the rim of a crater, Gefreiter Siefert shot at every worthwhile target, whilst the British [*sic*] threw grenades from a range of thirty to thirty five metres. One by one these throwers were picked off. ‘Yet another’, the courageous [Siefert] would shout after each shot.

“Unteroffizier Becker was despatched to Battalion Headquarters with a report on the situation, upon which piece of paper each of their valuable lives

depended. Becker was never seen again and, minute by minute, the daring little band that was 3rd Company reduced in numbers. A few more shots, a last grenade then, in one final desperate effort, Leutnant Klabisch and his grenadiers fixed bayonets and charged the enemy. Wild shouts were drowned in the noise of British [*sic*] grenades exploding, there was a final flurry of hand to hand fighting and the flickering shadows disappeared into the mud like ghosts. It was all over. Honour the memory of these men who, staring certain death in the face, nevertheless hoped to cheat it.”

By mid afternoon, when things were becoming desperate for the defence, some assistance arrived when the regimental commander, Oberstleutnant von Goerne, sent forward the last of his reserves, namely two platoons of 5th Company, to the Fusilier [3rd] Battalion. Their numbers boosted, what was left of the battalion was able to re-establish the link to Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 and maintain it. The broader question, however, was if it would prove possible to launch a large scale counter-attack before the ground holding troops were worn down completely. The omens were not good. The comprehensive Canadian Corps fire plan had destroyed or neutralised a high proportion of the German guns and means of communication were almost totally wrecked. This meant in turn complete reliance on runners, who had to negotiate the cratered area under constant heavy fire. One runner, despatched from the summit of Hill 145 to the regimental command post of Reserve Infantry Regiment 261 near Vimy village, for example, took three and a half hours just to cover the two and a half kilometre distance involved.

In addition, mistakes in staff work meant that operational reserves were held too far to the rear that day. Nevertheless, it was essential to arrange some sort of counter action, using whatever troops were to hand. One of the company commanders involved in an attempted counter-attack in the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division sector described his experiences later in a manner that leaves no room for doubt concerning the obstacles he had faced.

*Reserve Oberleutnant Trummert 4th Company Bavarian Infantry Regiment 14*³⁷

“We were rudely awakened from our sleep during the early hours of Easter Monday. An unimaginable increase in enemy fire to the densest drum fire, coupled with the noise of several mine explosions and the roar of our own defensive fire, set in so swiftly that no more effective alarm system to wake us could possibly be devised. Within a few moments, more or less equipped for battle, we were assembled in our companies and ready to move on the road in front of the miners’ cottages at Méricourt. There we stood, whilst every man wondered why our services had not been called on. There was a simple explanation why the Division did not make use of us or 3rd Battalion Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 11, located in Hénin Liétard, which formed the other

part of the reserve. It was because the first information concerning the attack, which had occurred at 5.00 am, did not arrive at Divisional Headquarters until 8.00 am and, when it did, unfortunately it did not make the situation clear.

“As a result, initially we had several hours at our disposal to prepare ourselves for what was to come, distribute coffee, then issue ammunition, hand grenades and rations. Towards 10.00 am the Battalion received orders to move forward as brigade reserve. Because the roads were packed with ammunition wagons, transport for the wounded etc., we advanced along previously reconnoitred trackways. We soon found that even these routes were swept with artillery fire, which forced us to make numerous time-consuming detours, but had no other effect. Nevertheless, by about midday, we arrived at La Coulotte. We spent the first part of the afternoon there whilst the battalion Commander went to find out what the situation was. It transpired that the morning attack had been limited to Vimy Ridge, but that a large part of the First Position had been lost.

“Bavarian Infantry Regiment 14 had maintained its positions on the *Gießler Höhe*, however, which meant that there was a dangerous gap to its left which had to be closed. Towards 6.00 pm the expected order arrived from Brigade. The Battalion was to launch a counter-attack in Sector *Döberitz*, which would enable Bavarian Infantry Regiment 14 to hold on to its positions. The battalion ordered the following dispositions: 3rd Company *Sandgrube* [Sand Pit] 3; 4th Company *Sandgrube* 2; 2nd Company Givenchy north of the track to Souchez and 1st Company to the south of the same track. From these assembly areas, the further advance was to begin at 8.00 pm and, because the companies were not able to set off until 6.30 pm, timings were tight.

“In addition a number of other circumstances made matters even more difficult: the difficult going underfoot; the snow squalls, which meant that darkness fell early; lack of knowledge of the route and the terrain; and last, but by no means least, the considerable amount of enemy fire. As a result, it was not until 11.00 pm that it could be reported that all companies were in position. This in turn meant that the advance could not begin until midnight: the line to be achieved was defined as one linking Bavarian Infantry Regiment 14 with weak elements of Bavarian Infantry Regiment 11, who were holding out near the *Sachsen Lager*.

“For my 4th Company the objective was in the former Third Line in the area *Souchez Weg – Koch Weg* [Souchez – and Cook Ways]. Between my start line, the *Hamburgergraben* [Hamburg Trench] and *Souchez Weg* lay the 500 metre wide *Givenchy Mulde* [Givenchy Hollow], which was always wet and, as a result of the winter weather and years of shelling, had become a bottomless crater field. Founded mostly on Jurassic chalk, the entire re-entrant was as good as impassable. As a result not one single communications track led forward from Givenchy in the direction of Souchez across it. Now, across this terrain, which

was completely unknown to them, 3rd and 4th Companies had to advance, through snow squalls and the pitch black night.

“From *Hamburgergraben* the ground dropped away sharply to the base of the hollow, which was located much closer to this trench than to *Souchezweg*. I set off with two platoons leading and one following up, right rear, with the task of maintaining contact with 3rd Company. To begin with the formation was maintained quite well, but the closer we got to the base of the hollow the swamplier the ground became. With each step we sank up to our knees. We were no longer advancing; this was mere staggering forward. Anybody who had chosen to wear jackboots rather than the more practical lace-up boots with puttees was extremely lucky not to lose them. Many were in this predicament and unable to continue. The remainder waded gallantly on, some moving faster; some slower, encumbered as they were by the heavy weight of ammunition, hand grenades, rations and other items.

“As a result the company was soon strung out. Flares that helped us to maintain direction and cohesion were only fired occasionally, but there were continuous salvoes of enemy artillery fire in the Hollow, interspersed with bursts of enemy machine gun fire. I was in the lead with my so-called company staff (two runners and my brave Sanitäts-Unteroffizier Schönberger). Because there was no sign of the enemy, we made our way forward as quickly as possible, reasoning that the platoons would be following close behind. After what seemed to be a very long time, we arrived, dog-tired and pouring with sweat, at a collapsed trench, which from its direction and dimensions could only be *Souchezweg*. Here we realised for the first time that we had lost all contact with our platoons.

“We lurked there for some time, our eyes straining to pierce the darkness. We seemed to be entirely alone. Certainly there was not a trace of the enemy, our company or any other. I despatched my runners to find the platoons and remained there with Unteroffizier Schönberger. More time passed without us seeing another person, so we moved further on, in order to reach the Third Line. Suddenly we saw steel helmets sticking up out of the mud very close. It was impossible to tell if they were the flat British helmets or the coal-scuttle shaped German ones. The wearers were not moving any more than we were, so I attempted to contact them in a neutral manner, by giving a quiet whistle. Now there was some movement. The whistles were returned and to my joy I realised that we had German helmets in front of us.

“It was the commander of 1st Company who, together with some of his men, had moved to find us. Oberleutnant Völk was in a similar situation to me, He too had pressed on with a few men in advance of his company. Soon we were joined by some sections of 2nd Company Bavarian Infantry Regiment 14 under Reserve Leutnant Türk. Before the remainder of the Battalion arrived we came across a few men of Bavarian Infantry Regiment 11 in an almost totally

collapsed dugout; but of the enemy there was no sign. Soon, moving along either side of the communication trench, came 1st and 2nd Companies, more or less complete, then a platoon of my 4th Company under Vizefeldwebel Rupp turned up. To our left 3rd Battalion Bavarian Infantry Regiment 11 had moved strong forces forward into the Third Line, which now seemed to be held in sufficient strength.

“In the circumstances my platoon and I could be spared, so after a discussion with Oberleutnant Völk I headed back to the start point, collecting the other two platoons of my company on the way. They had got lost in the hollow and were stuck. Back at the assembly area I met up with 3rd Company, which had swung round so much during its advance that it ended up in Sector *Burg* [i.e. on the right flank of the divisional frontage, rather than the left!]. I went to Command Post *Augsburg* in Givenchy, which was occupied by the commanding officers of our battalion and that of 3rd Battalion Bavarian Infantry Regiment 11, where I made a written report concerning the results of the night’s operation and the current situation in the Third Line. Both commanders were of the opinion that as much had been achieved with the forces available as had been expected.”

Further south, once Brigade Commander 79 Reserve Infantry Brigade, Generalleutnant Dieterich, received information about enemy penetrations into the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division sector, together with news that there had been break in on both flanks of 79th Reserve Division, he ordered his immediate reserves, 2nd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 261 (Hauptmann von Goerne) and 2nd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 263 (Oberleutnant Heinicke), to move to the railway embankment south of Vimy and to get their machine gun companies there by the fastest possible means. Simultaneously, 2nd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 (Hauptmann von Block) was called forward to the cross tracks at La Gueule d’Ours, east of Vimy, as a final reserve. Once these forces were in position the immediate threat of a breakthrough in the Reserve Infantry Regiment 262 sector had been countered, but the troops in place were still far too weak to contemplate launching an attack at that time.

However, about midday, 79th Reserve Division was ordered by Group Vimy to recapture the Third Line and the commander learned that 1st Battalion Infantry Regiment 118, 56th Division and 3rd Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment 34, 80th Reserve Division, had been sent to reinforce him. Orders had reached these troops in Billy Montigny a few minutes earlier. They were to move at once and their midday meals had to be abandoned uneaten in the field kitchens. This was not the best preparation for battle but, nevertheless, they force marched forward, trying to avoid constant shrapnel fire.³⁸ General von Bacmeister, commander 79th Reserve Division, decided to use his reinforcements to close the gap which had opened up between his southern regiment and 1st Bavarian Reserve Division and to launch a counter-attack against Telegraph Hill [Hill 135, north of Thélus]. For this task he allocated 1st Battalion

Infantry Regiment 118 and one company of Machine Gun Sharpshooter Detachment 20 to Generalleutnant Dieterich.

This was part of a broader operation to attempt to restore the situation along the ridge. Action was urgently required, but such were the problems that it was 6.00 pm before the troops were in position and able to cross their start lines.

*Sergeant Dorrman 6th Company, Reserve Infantry Regiment 261*³⁹

“During the early hours of Easter Monday a dull rumbling from the front woke us. Soon we received the order, ‘Get your assault order on. Everything else must stay here!’ Each man was to take a piece of bread with him. The most senior of the NCOs were placed in charge of sections of soldiers and then the company set off, leading the battalion. The field artillery was going into positions to the left and right, with British shells landing in amongst us. Nevertheless we reached the railway embankment near Vimy unscathed. The 210 mm howitzers of a Saxon foot artillery regiment were in position here. My group took up position near some of these monsters. With each shot I thought that my eardrums would burst. In addition, shell fragments and pieces of ballast from the embankment were flying everywhere and hitting our helmets. Later the Tommies lifted their fire more to the rear areas, where I could observe the approach of our ammunition columns. A gunner standing jacketless by one of the guns stopped a wagon and swiftly unloaded it. Then, just like a baker placing loaves of bread in the oven, he loaded one shell after the other into his gun, which was readjusted right and left after each shell. If I had been allowed to leave my post I would have run over to this comrade to express my appreciation.

“As things became a little calmer we left sentries up on the embankment and took cover in the dugouts of the artillery. Towards 9.00 pm, we were ordered forward. I went with Leutnant Rahlfs at the head of our platoon. The artillery fire of both sides hindered our movement. Wearing our gas masks, we leapt from one crater to another, dodging the falling gas and phosphorous shells. In the meantime the sky had darkened so much that it was impossible to see the next man, even if it was possible to touch him. There was then a shower of hail which, even though it was thoroughly unpleasant, saved us. We were not far off from the howitzer position, which had once been German, when we came under fire from there. Because our flanks were hanging in the air, we were later ordered back to our jumping off point. Unfortunately two men were missing and we never heard anything of them again. Towards 4.00 am we were meant to be launching another assault, but this was cancelled later.

“Gradually we began to feel hungry, because we had each only brought a piece of bread forward with us. The gunners and our sister regiment 263, to whom we had been allocated, gave us something to eat; the number of casualties meant that not all the rations had been consumed. During the morning