



100th Anniversary of World War I:

Last Battle of Ypres

28 September 1918—2 October 1918

This month in military history

- 1777 British GEN Burgoyne surrenders at Saratoga
- 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe
- 1859 Harper's Ferry seized
- 1923 Teapot Dome Scandal
- 1942 Operation Torch
- 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis
- 1972 Operation Linebacker I ends
- 1983 Attack on Marine Barracks in Beirut
- 1994 Operation Restore Democracy
- 2004 Battle for Fallujah



The fifth battle of Ypres, or “Wipers” as the British called it, was the last battle in a series of five battles that took place near the Belgian city of Ypres in the Flanders region. The series of battles occurred between 18 October 1914 and 2 October 1918. The combined battles resulted in an estimated 810,000 to 1.2 million Allied and German casualties. Every major Allied command had troops involved in fighting in the region during the course of the war, and it became well known for the British LTC John McCrae’s poem “In Flanders Fields.”

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow,
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky,
The larks, still bravely singing, fly,
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the dead, short days ago,
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe: To you
from failing hands we throw, The torch; be
yours to hold it high. If ye break faith with
us who die, We shall not sleep, though
poppies grow In Flanders fields.*

LTC McCrae was a Canadian Doctor and was commanding a Canadian Hospital at Boulogne when he died of pneumonia on 28 January 1918.

The Allied attack during the fifth battle of Ypres was designed as the Northern pincer in Marshal Ferdinand Foch’s strategy,

which would become known as the Grand Offensive. A new series of Allied attacks on the German lines were designed to be made over the widest front possible and in coordination / supporting each other to overwhelm the Germans. The battle took place as the American led Meuse-Argonne offensive was taking place to the southeast of Ypres. Belgian, British and French forces were all involved in the attack and were directed toward the occupied Belgian town of Liege. A total of 28 Allied Divisions were involved in the attack facing against 16 German Divisions.

The attack commenced at 0530 on the morning of 28 September 1918 without any preceding artillery bombardment. The British front, alone, ran for approximately 4.5 miles in length. The attacks were immensely successful with first day advances of up to 6 miles. This advance gained more ground in a single day than in the entire Passchendaele offensive of the year before which lasted 100 days and sustained a combined 400,000 to 600,000 casualties. By the end of the first day’s fighting, rain began to fall which did not slow the advance, but complicated the logistical support for the Allies.

The combined Allied armies had finally broken through the German front to the north, east and south of the city of Ypres and were rapidly pushing the German Army back by approximately 6 miles a day. By 2

October, the Allied advance had begun to stall when German reinforcements arrived and the offensive outran its own lines of logistical support. Due to the state of the devastated ground and distance from supply depots, approximately 15,000 rations were delivered to the front lines by parachute using 80 Belgian and British aircraft.

Gunner A. B. Kenway was 23 at the time of the battle and described his experience. “A day or so previously this road (Menin road) had been held by the enemy and now the bodies of Germans and their horses lay about, the stench from which was fearful. Some were headless, some limbless, while others looked just asleep. A German gun team had been caught in the open by one of our shells as it was getting away.”

The battle’s overall cost was light when compared to the previous years. The British sustained 4,695 casualties while the Belgians sustained and additional 4,500 casualties. The Allies advanced up to 18 miles. In total the Germans lost 10,000 soldiers, 300 guns and 600 machine-guns captured.

The offensive would continue with the Battle of Courtrai taking place 14-19 October 1918. It was during the battle of Courtrai that a German Corporal named Adolf Hitler had been temporarily blinded due to a British mustard attack and was invalided out of the war.

As A Matter of Fact

The Rock Island Rapids were the main natural feature of the Mississippi River near Rock Island prior to the roller dam in 1931. One of the Corps of Engineers officers to survey the rapids was then Captain Robert E. Lee. In 1836-37 Lee was sent to chart both the Rock Island and Des Moines rapids and recommend ways to improve them.

October Trivia!

- ① What was the first building to be completed at the arsenal?
- ② In what conflict did Fort Armstrong serve as the disembarkation point?
- ③ Who was the last known casualty of World War I?

For answers, go to the announcement section on the ASC History SharePoint site.

Last Month’s Answers:

- ① Davy Crockett
- ② World War II
- ③ The RIA Museum



From the Archives

Taken from the 29 October 1918 edition of the *Arsenal Record*, “Kaiser Bill’s Halloween!!!” presents one of thousands of satirical depictions of World War I. By October 1918 the Allies had pressed into Belgium, and the Battle of Meuse-Argonne continued to rage. The Armistice would follow in just two weeks time.

In the comic, Kaiser Wilhelm II is being startled by a black cat. Incidentally, that cat is labeled with “RIA”, indicating the Rock Island Arsenal. The cat is described as moving at “some speed”, attributing to the rapid pace that arsenal employees were able to ramp up production and sustain war efforts. “Dot damn cat”, implies that Rock Island Arsenal had a history of supplying Allied forces with armament, ammunition, and equipment

for quite some time. In continuing to do so, the cat has scared the Kaiser once again.

The Moon on the tree line behind the Kaiser appears to be laughing at him. An implication that with the aid of the Americans in the ranks with the Allies, the rest of the world was, in fact, laughing at the Germans as they continued to falter on the western lines.

At the time that this cartoon was created, the *Rock Island Argus* along with newspapers across the nation had been running headlines indicating the Central Powers’ desire for peace talks. With the collapse of the western front, a foreign force ready to take Berlin, and a well supplied foe, Germany knew its defeat was inevitable.