

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT109: 15 – 18 November 1915 (November 4)

General Situation

Sir John French was hanging on to his command in mid-November 1915 by his fingernails. His defence of his own position was that the attacks at Croisilles - Guemappe (5-3.1009) had been a success despite the disappointing territorial gains. Furthermore, he claimed the Germans were exhausted and as he said “like a man reeling under a thousand blows”. There was some strength in this argument but when the Germans launched a counter-offensive against the British 2nd Army on 15 November, Sir John French was forced to resign within hours. General Sir Douglas Haig was the only Army Commander whose force had not been exposed to the disappointments of the recent fighting and he assumed command of the British Expeditionary Force on 17 November.

The Western Front



Figure 1: The German attack on the British III Corps near Armentières, 15 - 16 November 1915.

In the early hours of 15 November the Germans began an intense bombardment of the British 2nd Army line between German-held Ypres and Armentières. Among the falling shells the distinctive blast of the heavy Austrian siege howitzers could be discerned though few in the British ranks knew then what they were. Before dawn, the Prussian Guards moved into no-man's land just north of the Lys River. As casualties mounted there was something close to panic among the British troops as it was realised an assault was imminent. Every appeal to the British artillery to respond and strike the

massing German infantry had been met with negative answers. They would only fire in an emergency. Shell stocks were very low and nothing had yet been replenished since the British attacks earlier in the month. This failure of the guns to fire was what forced Sir John French's resignation. So much effort had been expended building up the British artillery that for it to be useless in a crisis was too much to bear.

In the early morning, the British III Corps lost many front line positions as wave after wave of German infantry pressed forwards on their front. The British 2nd Army had no reserves other than a single cavalry division (2nd). By evening, the Germans had even reached some reserve line positions and the British attempts to counter-attack had all failed. Despite all the pressure, the British still refused to give in to the temptation to retreat and successfully held an attempt to break into Armentières by the German 40th and 1st Guards Reserve Divisions on 16 November. In the end no German units advanced more than two kilometres but they had nevertheless struck a very hard blow and the commander of the German 16th Army, Crown Prince Rupprecht, was much commended for it.

On 17 November, it rained. The situation was stabilising and reserves were arriving from the north to fill some dangerous gaps in the British line. The Belgians and French took over a division's length of the British line at each extremity. General Haig's first priority on taking charge was to steady his command and ensure there were no more surprises. The whole British Expeditionary Force was ordered to stand on alert for the whole of 18 November regardless of their positions and regardless of the nearness of the enemy.

The Italian Front

The war was terrible in Italy as well. Cadorna drove the Italian Army mercilessly. Despite the short dark days and difficult mountain roads he had managed to re-position the Italian 1st and 4th Armies for an attack on Lavarone (6-4.2218). Lavarone was defended by emplaced guns on the hills which formed part of the defensive system protecting Trent. Cadorna intended to take it from the east and south and the situation seemed favourable because the previous Italian advances had meant that the Austrians were already outflanked. The defending Army of Tyrol had three infantry brigades assigned to defend Lavarone. Cadorna had thirteen Divisions available and was therefore confident when the attack began on 17 November.

A passage in an unpublished work of Ernest Hemingway¹ described what happened:

“Carlo lay on the hillside watching the sky fascinated by the moments when the moon broke through the racing clouds. He was able to forget his wound and kept congratulating himself that he was lucky to have one that didn't really hurt so long as he didn't move his leg. He didn't mind telling the others his good fortune though they kept quiet having the type of wound that kept you quiet.

The details of the attack played through Carlo's mind. How impressed had he been by the long lines of infantry snaking up to the front with the sound of shellfire ahead? Everyone knew Lavarone was a

¹ *The Guns of Lavarone*: Hemingway reputedly wrote this short book over a weekend in Paris in 1920. The manuscript was taken by a French hotel maid from a paper bin while the author slept off the effects of a pasty drinking challenge issued by Pablo Picasso. The manuscript resurfaced in 1996 and its authenticity is still bitterly disputed by academics.

tough proposition but it was impossible not to be confident. Also, had they not passed many artillery positions firing into the hills? To be sure these guns were ordinary field artillery but they must have been giving the Austrians a pounding. During the night before the attack, Carlo's whole unit had sat up to watch the gun flashes which lit up the mountains in a great half circle focussed on the Austrian defences.

It was splendid but if he wanted to think of something more splendid he thought about the last time he had gone fishing with Signor Aldi around Capri and the boat had nearly capsized with the weight of tuna. The old man Aldi was so ancient that he claimed to have shared a ship's biscuit with Garibaldi during the crossing from Sicily. The tuna bonanza day was the day Marina had hidden on board and insisted there would be equality for women in the fishing industry after the Revolution.

It was a long time before Carlo could concentrate on anything other than a speculation on the annual catch in the Bay of Naples in a case where half the fishermen were in the armed services. Why wasn't he in the Navy he asked?

The attack...he remembered the attack. The weak autumn sun was setting in their faces. The captain muttered something about silhouettes and then shouted "Avanti". How they cheered as they rushed the first Austrian trench which turned out to be empty. How the alpine meadow on which he now lay looked as they steeled themselves to cross it in the fading light. How the bullets flecked the ground and how he had stumbled over the wire which still entangled his foot.

There were people about now, moving in the dark with muffled voices and a light. Should he take an interest? Surely you were not allowed to have a torch in a place like this. Suddenly there were old friends about and a familiar face. Marina wearing a beret, a leather jacket and trousers, what style! She was the very picture of the future, Carlo's future if he had one. How was that possible? "Is he hurt? Not badly, some scratches. Get him up and cut his leg free. Come on Carlo, stop daydreaming and get out of this Imperialist war. The Revolution needs you"."

The Eastern Front

The Russian retreat towards Riga accelerated as the Germans kept up a pursuit. The war had already gone over this ground two or three times and the German infantry and cavalry complained that there were many obstacles to their advance. It seemed like there was barbed wire and fallen trees everywhere and it was hard to say which side had been originally responsible.

Further south, in the Pripet Marshes, it was the Russians who were advancing and they also often experienced the same difficulties advancing in country where the enemy had destroyed buildings, roads and bridges. The recapture of Pinsk and Rovno on 18 November were two points of encouragement for the Russian Army but it would be wrong to say that its morale was improved at all. Having to march across muddy terrain in November chasing the elusive Central Powers forces was not an activity that cheered the average Russian soldier. Behind them their lines of communication were often in chaos.



Figure 2: The Russians move forward in the Pripyet Marshes again, 15 - 18 November 1915.

The Balkans

The recovery of the Serbian Army had progressed a little since it had been able to re-enter the national territory. The aim of the Serbian leadership was to liberate their whole country step by step. The Vardar valley was the most favourable invasion route and the Serbians were slowly concentrating there as much as possible.

In mid-November, the Serbians were ready to try and breach the Bulgarian Bregalnica Line. The Bulgarian 3rd Division was digging in along the Lower Bregalnica Valley but it did not seem to be a priority of either the Bulgarian 1st Army, which was concentrated more at Skopje, or the Bulgarian 2nd Army which was chiefly concerned with the defence of Bulgarian national territory further east.

The Serbians crossed the rivers at various points led by the Skopje Division and the Belgrade Garrison Brigade. The countryside around the confluence was very rural and the first significant town the Serbians were trying to reach was Džumajlija (7-6.1308). However, the river crossing was more difficult than expected as the stream was very strong and there were few boats. The time spent ferrying allowed the Bulgarian defence to stiffen and Džumajlija remained out of sight.



Figure 3: The Serbian attack on the Vardar-Bregalnica confluence, 18 November 1915.

The Near East

The latest Turkish advance on the Suez Canal was very similar in form to the prior effort they had made in September and featured the same outflanking move by the Ottoman camel regiment. This forced the Indian 18th Brigade to again abandon their lines at Romani (8-8.1138).

In Mesopotamia, the British were studying closely the whole logistical problem of a further advance up the Tigris. Townsend was urging a move on Baghdad and he was preparing an attack on a line of low desert bluffs known as Hill 35 and Hill 23 (7-9.3523) occupied by the Turkish 35th Division which dominated a turn of the river about 30 kilometres above Kut. On 18 November, the Indian infantry moved in on the Turkish held hills with great determination and after a firefight lasting several hours forced the defenders to withdraw to shelter further back. If the Indian 31st Brigade had been commanded with more aggression it could have occupied the abandoned Turkish positions at nightfall but the Turkish retreat had not been recognised and the advance was made much more slowly.

By the end of this action, Townsend's force was close to the limit of its supplies. Ammunition was running low. River craft were in such short supply that the main river head remained below Ali Gharbi and equipment and sustenance were then carried overland 100 miles to Kut. Townsend already knew that this line of communication would not be able to operate during the flood season

which was only three months away. In southern Iraq, Nixon controlled two additional divisions (10th and 4th Indian) which he could not send upriver for fear they would unhinge all the logistical arrangements. To ease the demands for shipping from India, Nixon decided to send the Indian 2nd Cavalry Division back to India.

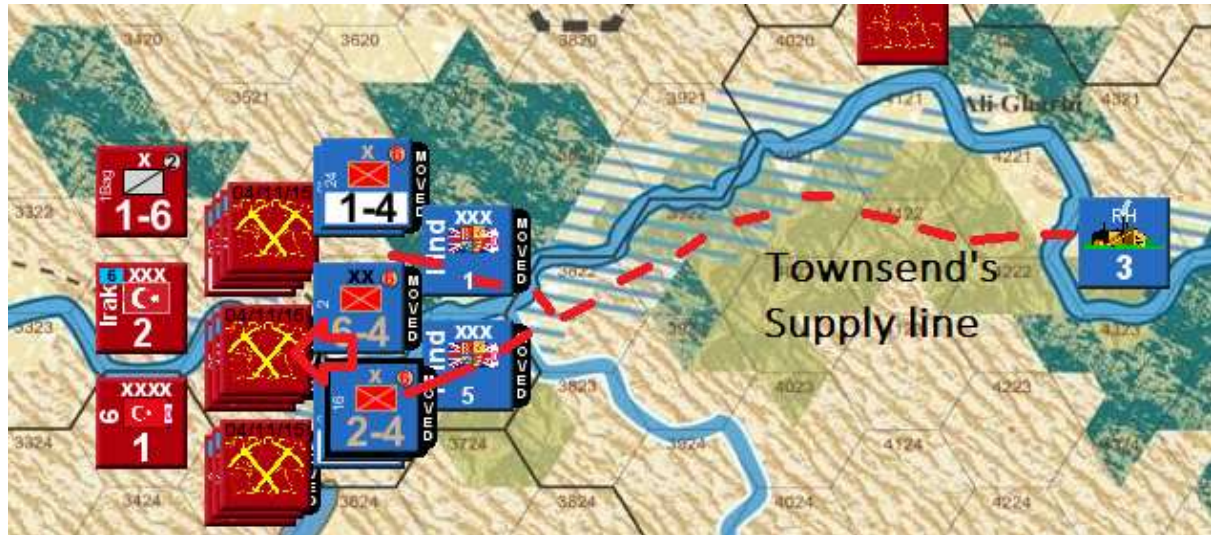


Figure 4: Townsend attempts to extend the British advance above Kut, 15 – 18 November 1915.

There were no notable actions either at the Dardanelles or in the Caucasus in mid-November.

DM Summary – November 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	6	15	7	5				11	44	1003*	Good
Austria-Hungary	1	-	1	2				1	5	438*	Good
Ottoman	1	-	-	2				-	3	55	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	1				-	1	15	Good
Central Powers	8	15	8	10				12	53	1491	
France	4	2	-	-				-	6	671	Good
Great Britain	-	14	15	13				-	42	211	Good
Russia	3	1	2	-*				-	6	649	Shaken *Pinsk and Rovno recaptured
Italy	2	-	1	5				-	8	46	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-				-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-	1				-	1	(32)	NA
Entente	9	17	18	19				-	63	1575	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: Very little worth mentioning other than that the GE 10th, 11th and 12th armies have largely linked up on the approaches to Riga along with additional supply and some artillery ready to start major offensive operations before winter settles in. The rest of the EF forces continue to prepare themselves for the coming winter.*
- *Balkans: Quiet – digging in for winter.*
- *West: Intelligence suggested that the British armies had burned up the bulk of their munitions and were very low in supply. This was seized as opportunity for the launch of an offensive by 16th Army with support from 1st Army. The target is Bethune. If the attack goes well the British have to stand and take their losses or withdraw and leave their Engr Regt there to be overrun. They will have to stand and I hope to punish them. I still have to temper the strength of the attack, though, so as not to overtly weaken any other point of my front.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: The raiding force has now made contact with the forward Indian Bde in Sinai.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

AP: I have to applaud the German attack in France. The loss ratio was 11:5 against the British thanks to the low level of British supplies and some weakness in the front after the losses of the recent British offensive. It doesn't often make sense for the Germans to concentrate against the British but this was an example of a good opportunity. This should also show the value of counter-offensives to the CP as the Entente are typically most vulnerable after they have just completed an offensive themselves.

I didn't allow the same opportunity for the Germans against the French in that after the French offensive I have left a reserve of supply unused just for this kind of eventuality. The supply stockpile limits change in 1916 and the French and British ones get a lot bigger. In fact I probably have at least 4 months now from being forced to make any move forward in the West.

The other major situation at the moment is at Riga. I have considered abandoning it. I doubt I will. I have enough reserves to make a fight of it and although the Germans have supplies on the way they have little artillery and not so much infantry. If he attacks now I should be able to extract a heavy price from counterattacks. I think the CP are starting to suffer from a shortage of combat strength and another month in which the Germans are engaged against the British, French and Russians is just going to add to this and make it very hard to "Verdun" the French anytime soon. Some kind of attack may be compelled as the Germans seem to have a lot of supply stockpiled which my attacks this month have not burnt through.

I wouldn't say the Germans might not gain something from capturing Riga right now (the Germans can usually do anything they really set their mind to). It would certainly knock the stuffing out of the Russians who will be well behaved for a long time after that and this would benefit Austria – who is enjoying a holiday from Russian attention just now. It all seems high risk to me at the moment but

Ivor has overturned my assumptions several times already in this game and he could end 1915 with France, Britain and Russia all in no state to take offensive action without an extended rest and or re-supply and with the Italians stymied by winter and mountains (+4 counterattacks!). This might give the Germans some breathing space in which to recover some strength themselves.