

## Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT153: 23 – 27 May 1916 (May 6)

### General Situation

The mood in Falkenhayn's headquarters at Spa was positive once it became clear what the pattern of the Allied assault in the West was. The German 13th Army was signalling that it could hold the British attack with adequate support from the 1st Army on its northern flank. This meant that the German right flank could stand securely on the defensive against the British while a heavy blow could be directed at the French centre which could now be fought in the open as it approached the main line of German defence. Falkenhayn regarded the corner of the German front at Peronne as the key position and had dispatched swift orders to concentrate artillery there. He was gratified to discover that the 13th Army wanted to attack with its own free left wing and the German 14th and 2nd Armies were ordered to provide maximum support to disrupt French movements.

### The Western Front



Figure 1: German attacks on the Aisne and the Battle of Nesle, 23 - 25 May 1916.

Ernst Junger's joy at the approach of the French to the Aisne was redoubled when his unit received orders to attack. On 23 May, he was at Soupir (5-3.1313) by the river and the French had reached the opposite side. Nevertheless, the Germans still had some bridges and they were not prepared to allow the French to settle into their new positions in peace. In any event, this part of the French front was lightly held and the French 10 Cavalry Division was responsible for more than 20 kilometres of front line supported by the Spahi (Colonial) Cavalry and the 5th Cavalry Division. The 10th Cavalry was in reality a strengthened mobile infantry unit which had left most of its horses in the rear and was loosely spread out around Villers-en-Prayères (5-3.1314). The Germans correctly diagnosed weakness and during the night of 23 – 24 May began re-crossing the Aisne. Ernst Junger recorded in his journal:

*"Shortly after dawn, we watched as squadrons of the Guard Cavalry crossed the bridge. I could hardly believe that open warfare was returning and we would match the French cavalry sabre and lance against sabre and lance. The Guards moved away into the open countryside where they provided us with flank protection and threatened to descend on any French who thought withdrawal was a better option.*

*Our regiment was ordered to attack behind the line of the river. The French were not expecting us. My company was in the front and as soon as we were among the French positions their firing, never very effective, became sporadic and confused. We came upon many groups which offered no resistance because they had not distinguished us from their friends. The faster we went the less danger we were in. Soon it was clear that most of the French were now scrabbling to get away and in doing so they ran into the ungentle arms of our lancers. By mid-morning we were finished and the reserve companies took over. Oberst Müller was certain, he said, that we had overrun at least a French Division judging from the amount of equipment they left behind."*

This was no exaggeration. The French 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division had been eliminated as any kind of effective force on 23 May. The blame, it was decided in the French camp, lay in lack of appropriate training. This unit had been deployed as an infantry force by cavalymen whose training had not prepared them for this type of fighting. Surprisingly, their reconnaissance skills had let them down completely and they seemed to have no sense that large active German formations were nearby and they did not take suitable precautions. Interestingly, neither the Spahi nor the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry had allowed themselves to be overtaken by this disaster and they in fact conducted a much more effective rear guard operation against the German cavalry at Revillon (5-3.1314), late in the day, before withdrawing.

Although this was an embarrassing reverse for the French, they recovered from the check at Villeren-Prayères and, during the next four days, the infantry of the French 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Armies more solidly secured the line of the river. Neither was this the largest scale action of this time. That was the Battle of Nesle (5-3.1012) which took place during the period 23 – 25 May.

The French plan of advance included an envelopment of the German line at Peronne by the right wing of the French 5<sup>th</sup> Army (II Corps) supported by the French 10<sup>th</sup> Army (III Corps). The Germans were able to foresee this and had with unprecedented speed brought a powerful concentration of artillery to Peronne to give their 13<sup>th</sup> Army enough punch to strike back at the French. The combats which occurred during three days at Pertain, Potte, and Punchy (5-3.1012) were conducted by very large bodies of troops moving in open countryside in which there was very little cover. Once these battlefields were swept by bullet and shell very heavy casualties were inevitable on both sides in a manner reminiscent of the meeting engagements of the frontier battles in 1914. The Germans had the better of it because of their ready artillery which gave their infantry the edge whenever French resistance seemed likely to hold them up.

On 23 May, the French II Corps passed through Pertain heading up the road towards Peronne. They had expected the Germans to be sitting back waiting for them and were surprised when six Divisions of the German 13<sup>th</sup> Army came forward to pre-empt their advance. After many losses the French advance became a retreat. On 24 May, the German 14<sup>th</sup> Army entered the combat to defeat the French III Corps at Potte. Finally, the French attempted to hold Punchy on 25 May and after a bitter all day struggle had to fall back further that evening. This retreat threatened to expose the left flank of the French 10<sup>th</sup> Army which decided to abandon Noyon that night in order to secure stronger positions to the rear. By these brutal battles, the Germans relieved the pressure on the corner of their line and Peronne ceased to be in any immediate danger.

On the British Front, the fighting on the Somme was also renewed on the 25 May. Rawlinson, commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> Army was under pressure from Haig for some tangible results. However, the whole 4<sup>th</sup> Army was perplexed that the apparently effective initial attacks had not done more to damage the German defences which everywhere seemed in good condition. This was casually blamed on the excellence of the design of the German trenches which were reputed to be constructed of concrete and steel and more deeply buried than the Piccadilly Line. A more critical assessment of these operations had indicated that most of the British assaults had actually missed their intended targets and had often hit positions as much as a mile away from their proper objectives. The shelling had been inaccurate and there were rumours that strong winds had deflected the bombardment to the north so that targets which had needed to be hit with precision were all missed.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2: Battle of the Somme, the British attack on the SPW Redoubt, 26 - 27 May 1916.

Among the German positions still standing was the massive SPW Redoubt between Thiepval and Pozières (5-3.1010) which was held by the German 42<sup>nd</sup> Division and was named after three strong bunker positions S, P and W which were at the apexes of its triangular form. Rawlinson ordered his IX Corps to seize the SPW Redoubt on 26 May. He required that it be accomplished by rush and surprise for the artillery could not be repositioned fast enough to provide support comparable to what was given at the start of the offensive. In order to help the 4<sup>th</sup> Army take this tough objective, Haig required Allenby's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army to make diversionary attacks on 26 and 27 May between Miraumont and Achiet-le-Petit (5-3.1010). This would see the veteran British II Corps take on the German 8<sup>th</sup> Division.

<sup>1</sup> Player Note: by error the losses were taken from the wrong hex.

By the evening of 26 May, all the field hospitals of the British 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies were overflowing with casualties. It was also a bad day for the German Army but there was no denying that the British had by far the worst of it. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army sector the machine guns of the German 8<sup>th</sup> Division had mown down one attack after another. The greater experience of the British II Corps counted for little in this situation and after two days the attackers had practically nothing to show for their efforts.

At the SPW Redoubt the British had an initial success with a mine which buried a good part of the garrison of the S bunker complex. The German 42<sup>nd</sup> Division was broken up by this explosion and was absorbed by neighbouring formations which still had a functioning command and control capability. The British follow up was nevertheless too slow. Although S was overrun, the German 17<sup>th</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> Reserve Divisions fought back from P and W converging on the ruins of S which were lost and won and lost and won by the IX Corps and parts of the British IV Corps had to be committed to salvage the situation. All this occurred in the space of a single bloody day. By the end of it, the Somme battlefield had as fearful a reputation as any in the war to date. The immensity of the effort needed to prevail was enormous and could not be concealed from anyone. It was going to take hundreds of days like 27 May to win this war and that was the most frightening thought.

### The Italian Front

The Italians were busy repairing the losses which they had suffered in their recent attack on the Isonzo. Cadorna was all for urgency demanding that the offensive restart before the Austrians might have a proper opportunity to recover. The 2nd and 3rd Army commanders were much less sure having a better idea of the strength of the Austrian defences.

### The Eastern Front



Figure 3: Russian Front between the Dvina and the Neris Rivers, 23 - 27 May 1916.

Apart from routine patrolling and reconnaissance, there was little activity of note on the Russian Front. The Tsar had noted with satisfaction the commencement of large offensives in the West and the conditions for a Russian offensive had not been better for a long time.

### The Balkans

A trade mission had reached Bucharest from St Petersburg on 27 May. It carried with it an offer of the Russians to purchase the entire surplus of the Romanian grain harvest in the event that war was declared on the Central Powers. The Romanian negotiating team queried how the Russians would pay for this and in response they displayed what appeared to be freshly minted letters of credit from France.

### The Near East

In the Caucasus, both sides were considering renewing offensive operations. Yudenitch had begun concentrating his reserves in the Upper Aras Valley where they would be well positioned for a further thrust towards Erzerum. However, there was too little ammunition available and Yudenitch admitted that the chances did not look good. The Turks meanwhile had even less ammunition and fewer reserves. The Turkish 3<sup>rd</sup> Army nevertheless gave orders for the front line positions in quiet sectors to be thinned to create free reserves.

### DM Summary – May 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
<b>Germany</b>	-	-	7	-	19	20		12	58	1232	Good
<b>Austria-Hungary</b>	-	1	4	4	-	-		1	10	513	Good
<b>Ottoman</b>	-	-	1	3	-	-		-	4	76	Good
<b>Bulgaria</b>	-	1	-	-	-	-		-	1	21	Good
<b>Central Powers</b>	-	2	12	7	19	20		13	73	1827	
<b>France</b>	-	-	10	-	*-	15		-	25	737	Good – *Reims re-captured
<b>Great Britain</b>	-	-	-	-	20	17		-	37	289	Good
<b>Russia</b>	-	-	2	1	-	-		NA	3	762	Shaken
<b>Italy</b>	-	-	11	8	-	-		-	19	81	Good
<b>Belgium</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-		NA	-	(105)	NA
<b>Serbia</b>	-	(1)	-	-	-	-		NA	(1)	(35)	NA
<b>Entente</b>	-	-	23	9	20	32		-	84	1869	

### Player Notes

CP:

- *East: No change.*
- *Balkans: Quiet.*

- *West: The sword finally fell with a massive artillery barrage along two locations of the front – the one costing me a regiment of artillery which I had foolishly forgotten to withdraw and the other causing very minor damage. The British attack was significant in its strength and artillery support and cost me two reserve divisions plus elements of a full strength division. Loss ratio was 20:19 in my favour; if you can call it that. Hardly a favourable ratio given that I was well dug in. There has also been a broad front French advance to close up with my positions along the Aisne. This has brought his forces out of their trenches finally but his timing is excellent as it coincides with his British offensive in a well-coordinated action. He knows I have to shore up the front opposite the British. However, offence is the best form of defence so I take some risk to move a Cav Div to support an attack on a concentration of French Cav and also launch a fairly strong attack on the French II and III corps south of Peronne. They are in the open. I am entrenched with strong artillery support. If this fails to provide at least a reasonably favourable ratio of loss in my favour then I truly give up on the WF. It is my hope that these attacks will force him to shift forces to reinforce any losses and thus diminish his offensive capability in the areas he wishes to gain a preponderance of mass.*
- *Caucasus: I do a lot of shifting laterally in the CAU. The coast is no longer under such pressure but he is concentrating in the centre and I expect a blow to fall here.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet as he rebuilds his strength.*

*AP: This turn nicely displayed some of the main dilemmas of the Central Powers in 1916. The first thing is how to manage the three pointed struggle in the West. The attacks on the French continue to make sense because otherwise I would make only the most minimal attacks with the French. This exploits the advantages the Germans have of greater supply and stronger stacks as well as the temporary advantage of the French being out of trenches.*

*The results of this turn would be acceptable to the CP if repeated but that is partly because I made a partially supplied attack with the British (it never makes sense to add artillery into a partially supplied attack). I am not sure if this really is the best but my offensive would run out of supply after probably no more than 3 or 4 turns of maximum effort. Also unsupplied attacks give free hits on the enemy so I will maximise German losses if I make some use of these. British losses are secondary considerations at the moment and I also have a better chance of draining German supply by these tactics.*

*The other CP problem is that with German losses now elevated in the West there should be aversion to German losses on other fronts. However, I am gearing up for further action against Austria and once that country is at shaken morale the need for German intervention in the Austrian sphere will become acute. Even Turkey faces growing risks as I will be able to hit the Jerusalem-Jaffa line soon after clearing Sinai and there will not be summer combat penalties there.*