

German Magazine Commentary on the Battle of Neuve Chapelle by Margarete Munsterberg, 10-13 March 1915

(Translated from the popular Berlin periodical, the *Kriegs-Rundschau*)

As early as October 29, 1914, our infantry regiment had stormed Neuve Chapelle, and until March 10th we were undisputed masters of the place. At the beginning of March, however, when the foggy weather began and observation from the air was impossible, our opponent succeeded, around March 10th, in carrying out movements of troops, unnoticed by us.

As appeared through reports in English newspapers, he concentrated no less than two army corps, consisting of two English divisions, two Indian divisions and Canadian troops, besides very strong artillery, a part of which was French, for a joint attack upon our positions. The attack surprised us greatly, but found us by no means unprepared, so that one Jager battalion and one infantry regiment were able for the present to repel the attack of the English.

These, however, directed an overwhelming artillery fire - about ten to twelve grenades (frequently of American origin) to one metre of the trench - against our lines of defence, which were completely buried.

In spite of these unfavourable conditions, the English attack was warded off twice, and again and again the enemy started new strong artillery fire. Contemporaneous with this attack upon Neuve Chapelle, the English started a further attack upon Givenchy; an English infantry division advanced against two German battalions, but was repulsed with enormous losses through the fire of our infantry and artillery.

The English, advancing in great masses, were mowed down in sections. Meanwhile the fight over Neuve Chapelle continued. Here Indian troops rushed ahead - and seemingly unarmed. In the preceding days numerous Indians had deserted to our lines, hence our troops believed that in this case they were again dealing with deserters and so did not shoot. This sin of omission was thoroughly avenged; for close before our positions the Indians began to throw hand grenades and attacked the garrison of our trenches with knives.

Through these attacks by very superior numbers on March 10th, our troops in the trenches suffered severely, so that reserves had to be brought forward. These gathered under terrible English fire and advanced against the English with contempt of death. Although they did not succeed on this day in throwing the opponent out of the positions taken by him, nevertheless they were able to prevent a further advance of the greatly superior enemy forces and to hold the new positions against all attacks of the opponent.

After more reserves had reached us on March 12th in the forenoon, we did the attacking; and the burning desire to settle with the hated English accelerated the steps of each soldier. We succeeded in gaining ground at several points and in throwing the opponent back on Neuve Chapelle. The complete re-conquest, however, of the place Neuve Chapelle itself, which was constantly under heavy enemy fire, would have required needless sacrifices, and for this reason we limited ourselves to attaining the general lines previously held by us.

The strategic plan of the enemy to break through had failed with enormous losses, and the English found themselves forced to give up their plans. But the great moral success of the fighting round Neuve Chapelle and round Givenchy lies in the repulse by comparatively weak German troops, of his attempt to break through which was undertaken with such great masses.

Although the opponent succeeded in winning slight tactical successes and in gaining territory, these successes are quite out of proportion to the enormous losses, particularly of officers, which were characterized as "heavy" even by the enemy himself. The papers have brought details, taken from letters and reports of officers, about the English method of warfare, which have been made known to the German troops as official warnings. According to these, in the battles round Neuve Chapelle, 250 Englishmen, in German cloaks and helmets, lured a band of German soldiers toward them, only to shoot them down from a short distance. German prisoners were used, as it were, as cover by the English during their advance.

Source: *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. I*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni* 1923

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle by Count Charles de Souza, 10-13 March 1915

The battle of Neuve Chapelle was an action in which through a surprise attack the British reconquered the position which the Germans had occupied in October and powerfully organized in front of the British pivot at La Bassee.

The former attempt had failed because it had been made with inadequate means. This time the operation was carried out by two army corps, the 4th Corps and the Indian Corps, which were swiftly and secretly concentrated on the line Rue d'Enfer-Richebourg St. Vast, their forward movement being covered and supported by the fire of 350 guns, British and French.

The Germans were surprised, outnumbered, outflanked on both sides, and, after a stubborn struggle, they were ousted from the position. The victory was complete, and would have been more satisfactory had it been less costly. The British casualties exceeded 12,000 out of 50,000 men engaged on that occasion.

This was due to the impetuosity of the new troops and of some officers who misunderstood the object of the attack, advanced too quickly and too far, and thus uselessly exposed their men to the effects of the severe counterblows which the Germans, with their accustomed thoroughness, did not fail to deliver.

There was also confusion in the matter of bringing up reinforcements. The position, however, remained in the possession of the British, although their opponents did all they could to recapture it - a fact which when contrasted to the previous engagement makes it clear that the enemy was inferior both on the defence and the attack.

Source: *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. I*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni* 1923

The Weekly Dispatch- Neuve Chappelle

"Sir John French sat in his head-quarters, the nerve-centre of the British Army, watching the carrying out of each move as one might study a chess-board. The telegraph wire and the dispatch-rider told him all he wanted to know. They told him that the vast concentration of troops behind the Neuve Chapelle lines, which was one of the essential features of this plan, was being conducted in the absolute secrecy necessary to success. No German Taube or aviator came near enough for reconnaissance; otherwise the movement of masses of troops north and south of the British front would have warned the enemy that some big move was impending, and he could have made his dispositions accordingly . . .

"The concentration of both guns and men took place behind the road which connects Fleurbaix with Neuve Chapelle—the Rue Petillon. The reinforcements of men were arranged in billets six miles behind the British trenches. They included the 7th and 8th Divisions, part of the Canadian contingent, Princess Patricia's Light Infantry, and part of the Indian corps, with whom were several British regiments—in all some 50,000. Though no battalion from Kitchener's new army figured in the concentration, our new recruits were well represented, having supplied considerable drafts to most of the regiments.

"The concentration of guns followed the line of an arc, so that the full fire could be directed on any particular area. They were placed so closely together that there were no fewer than 350 machine-guns, 4.7 guns, and howitzers on a front of 2000 yards—a concentration of artillery which history had never before witnessed in such a restricted sector. Even the extraordinary German artillery concentration in the attack of Warsaw was outdone in point of close massing.

Account of Neuve Chappelle – G. A. Leask

It is said that rehearsals of the plan of attack took place behind the lines. Every company commander closely examined through his field-glasses the position which his men were to assault, so that when the hour for advance came he would know exactly what to do.

The battle opened at 7:30 a.m. on the 10th March by a powerful artillery bombardment of the enemy's position. This bombardment had been well prepared and was most effective, except on the extreme northern portion of the front of attack.

At 8:05 a.m. the 23rd (left) and 25th (right) Brigades of the 8th Division assaulted the German trenches on the north-west of the village. At the same hour the Garhwal Brigade of the Meerut Division, which occupied the position to the south of Neuve Chapelle, assaulted the trenches on its front.

After being held up in front of the enemy's wire entanglements for some hours, the 23rd Brigade, thanks to powerful artillery support, was also able to move forward, and by 11 a.m. the roads leading northward and south-westward from the eastern end of the village were in our hands. On the following day, March 11th, the attack was renewed by the 4th and Indian Corps, but it was soon seen that a further advance would be impossible until the artillery had dealt effectively with the various houses and defended localities which held up the troops along the entire front. We made efforts to direct the artillery fire accordingly, but owing to weather conditions, which did not permit of aerial observation, and the fact that nearly all the telephonic communications between the artillery observers and their batteries had been cut, it was impossible to direct our fire with sufficient accuracy. The result was that when our troops which were pressing forward occupied a house here and there, they suffered from our own artillery fire, and had to be withdrawn.

Unfortunately on the third day of the battle the same unfavourable weather conditions prevailed, and hampered artillery action. The 4th and Indian Corps most gallantly attacked the strongly fortified positions in their front, but they were unable to maintain themselves permanently in those which they succeeded in capturing. However, most of the objects for which the operations had been undertaken had been achieved, and the British offensive came to an end.

Most of the ten V.C.s were won on the 12th, a day chiefly remarkable for the violent counter-attacks, supported by artillery, which were delivered by the Germans. Thanks to the gallant work of our bomb-throwers these assaults were all repulsed.

The great deeds of individual bravery which are now to be described well illustrate the difficulties under which our men had to fight at Neuve Chapelle. The Germans had constructed barbed-wire entanglements in front of their trenches, and it was in breaking through these that several of our heroes gained their reward. Others performed prodigious feats with hand grenades, for in places the fighting was adapted to this revival of an ancient mode of warfare. Where the Germans could not be dislodged by rifle-fire or bayonet, the hand bomb proved efficacious.