

IMMORTAL NAMES

A River And A Famous Highland Division

(From a Daventry broadcast by WILLIAM FORREST)

THE sombre yet magnificent story of the Battle of France enshrines two names already made immortal by the last Great War. One name is that of a river, the Somme, and the other is that of a British Army Unit, the 51st Highland Division.

For the second time within a generation, destiny brought these Highland Regiments—the Seaforths, the Camerons, the Gordons, whose very names stir the blood—for the second time destiny brought them to the banks of that river where the kilted warriors of 1916 struck terror into the hearts of the Kaiser's bravest troops. They came to the Somme on the first day of June. They came from the Maginot Line. I remember, how well I remember, spending four days with the Highland Division up in the Maginot Line. That was in the first week of May, just on the eve of the great German onslaught in the north, and in the month that followed, while I was up in Flanders with the main body of the B.E.F., I thought many times of the Gordons, the Camerons and the Seaforths, still standing by out there in the all quiet Maginot Line.

Into the Battle

Was it possible that they would escape the fury of the blitzkrieg in which all the rest of the B.E.F. was engulfed. That was

not to be. Indeed, it was the fate of the Highland Division to suffer more terribly than the others. While the epic of Dunkirk was drawing to its close, the Highland Division was pulled out of the Maginot Line. Back through Metz they came, through Verdun further and further west, on towards the Channel, but not to be evacuated.

The French Army was still in the field. The line of the Somme and the Aisne still held. The Highland Division was thrown into the line. On the first day of June they took over the defence of the Somme along a frontage of 18 miles from Erembert to the sea. The Germans held bridgeheads on the south bank of the river near Abbeville. Before the Highlanders arrived, the French had tried to straighten out these bridgeheads, but in vain, and the great German offensive across the Somme was terribly imminent.

The Order to Retire

The French Command decided on a further attack for the 4th June. At 3 o'clock in the morning it began. The German lines at this point ran across the southern slope of the ridge called Caesar's Camp. The French had already laid a heavy barrage across the ridge. At 3.30 the heavy French tanks moved forward. The lighter tanks and infantry followed. The enemy anti-tank guns and unus-

pected mines worked havoc to those tanks. The leading companies were annihilated. Still the others went on. They went on until they had gained their first objective, half way up the ridge. Here, exposed though they were to machine-gun and rifle fire, they clung to the ground until evening fell, and the French gave the order to retire. Further to the left, the Gordon Highlanders overcame all opposition and captured the wood known as the Grand Bois, west of Cambrai, but they, too, received the order to retire because the main attack in the centre had failed.

Remorseless Pressure

In the days that followed, the enemy remorselessly pushed home his initial success. The pressure became daily more overwhelming. All the Highland Brigades took heavy punishment, the Argylls and Sutherlands worst of all. By the evening of June 6, they were reduced to about one third of their original strength.

A stand was made on the River Bresle. It lasted but one day, and they fell back on the River Bethune. Here the depleted Brigades, who for a whole week had been fighting against vastly superior odds, without a moment's respite and subjected as never before to that terror of modern warfare, repeated dive bombing—here on the River Bethune they were reinforced by 900 men who had been hustled up from the base. Within 48 hours, these 900 officers and men were prisoners of the Germans.

Cut Off

On the 10th June, reports indicated that German tanks and motorised infantry were advancing north from Rouen and threatened to cut off our line of retreat to Le Havre. Supplies from Le

Havre no longer arrived. The front collapsed. And there was but one hope for the remnants of the Highland Division. That was evacuation from St. Valéry de Caux between Dieppe and Le Havre. But when the men reached St. Valéry the town was already in the hands of the enemy. Some of the men tried to swim out to a few small craft lying off the seawall. Most of them fell under enemy machine-gun fire.

Finding the approach to St. Valéry impossible, the Navy moved the evacuation transports up the coast to the village of Beau le Richeclose. A few isolated units of the Division made their way to this point and were saved. The remainder having held out for yet another day, the slender hope of finding other ports were compelled, when all their supplies and ammunition were exhausted, to surrender.

That was the end of the story, which is now told for the first time. It is the end of the Highland Division.

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THE LAST LESSON

(Continued from previous page)

chanted their letters, singing together. At the back of the room old Hauser had taken off his glasses and, holding his spelling book in both hands, he spelled out the letters with them, his voice trembling with emotion. It was so funny to hear him that we all wanted to laugh—or to cry. I shall always remember that last lesson.

Suddenly the clock in the church steeple struck twelve. It was followed by the ringing of the Angelus. At that moment the Prussians tramped past from their morning drill and the noise of their trumpets rang through the window. . . M. Hamel rose from his chair. We could see how pale he was. I don't think I had ever seen him look so splendid.

"My friends," he said, "My dear friends . . . I . . . I . . ." Something seemed suddenly to stifle him; he was unable to complete what he intended to say.

He turned quickly to the blackboard and took up a piece of chalk. With his whole strength he wrote in great letters which filled the board:

VIVE LA FRANCE

He never spoke. He just stood motionless, his head tilted back against the wall. With a wave of his hand he seemed to be saying to us:

"It's all over. Go now—all of you—go quickly."

THE END



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