

This is the Sixty-eighth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

THE GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVE OF 1918

Introduction

I last wrote about the thirteen men whose names are on our War Memorial, and who died during WW1, in my 66th article, which talked about the death of Herbert Walter Beevis, on 18 Oct 1916. This article was published in the June 2017 Edition. Since then, I have laid on an exhibition in the south aisle of All Saints' Church which attempted to demonstrate how and where each of these men died. However, it did not say much about the families of these men or where they lived in the village. So, in my 67th article, I looked in some detail at the family of Herbert Walter Beevis, and I shall try to come back to some of the other families later.

But, I now take up the story again at the beginning of 1918. I am sorry if this story is rather complicated, but I think that it is useful to understand the background to the deaths of these four men.

By this stage the Germans had realised that their only remaining chance of victory was to defeat the Allies before the overwhelming resources of the United States could be fully deployed. They also had a temporary advantage in manpower because nearly fifty divisions had been freed from the Eastern Front, after the Russian Army surrendered.

The German Spring Offensive of 1918

By the spring of 1918 the Allies knew that there would be a major German attack – they just did not know where it would come from. The British had reinforced their positions near the Channel ports, while the French had strengthened their positions further south. But this left a weakness in the line to the west of Cambrai, where the British trench system had not yet been completed. In fact, the second and third lines did not exist at all. Also, Sir Hubert Gough, who commanded the British Fifth Army in this area, had few reserves to fall back on.

The German Spring Offensive took place in four main phases and, because there is some confusion over the names of the battles, I shall use the German terminology when referring to the phases of the Spring Offensive. The phases were:

Operation Michael	21 March – 5 April
Operation Georgette (The Battles of the Lys)	7 – 29 April
Operation Blucher-Yorck	27 May – 4 June
Operation Gneisenau	9 June

Operation Michael and the collapse of the British 5th Army

Michael was the main attack, which was intended to break through Allied lines, and to outflank the British forces which held the front from the River Somme to the English Channel. The other offensives were subsidiary to Michael and were designed to divert Allied forces away from the main offensive on the Somme.

On 21 March 1918 Ludendorff launched his offensive. The defenders, consisting of the British Third and Fifth Armies, were up against a superiority in troop numbers of three to one: 26 British Divisions against 62 German Divisions, with an accompanying strength of 6,600 artillery pieces compared to 2,600 British guns. In just five hours the Germans fired one million shells at the British lines held by the British Fifth Army. The artillery barrage was followed by an attack by elite storm troopers. These soldiers travelled lightly loaded and were skilled in making fast, hard-hitting attacks before moving on to their next target. By the end of the first day of the attack, 21,000 British soldiers had been taken prisoner, and the Germans had made great advances through the lines of the Fifth Army. Senior British military commanders had lost control of the situation.

On the following day (22 March) the British troops continued to fall back, losing their last footholds on the original front line. Thick fog impeded their operations and this did not disperse until early afternoon. Isolated engagements took place as the Germans pressed forward and the British tried to hold their posts, often not knowing who was to either side of them. The greatest danger facing the British at this stage was that the Third and Fifth Armies might become separated. Early on the morning of Saturday, 23 March, German troops broke through the line. Fog was still thick over the rivers, canals and little valleys so that the Germans could bring up fresh masses of troops without being seen. By late morning all lines of defence had been overcome and there was nothing left to stop the German advance. By 24 March all the troops, German as well as British, were tired almost to the limits of endurance.

Gough's Fifth Army, which had taken over a stretch of the front line south of the River Somme previously occupied by the French, was called upon to bear the brunt of Operation Michael. According to the British historian, John Keegan, "The British Army 5th Army, bearing the awesome impact of the Ludendorff Offensive, collapsed as much morally as physically." Keegan does, however, acknowledge that the British Fifth Army was handicapped by factors outside its control. Namely, it was numerically the weakest Army in the BEF, and its soldiers had suffered grievous losses in the previous year's Ypres Battle. Furthermore most of the survivors had not had adequate rest or leave. Another serious problem was the recent re-organisation of the Fifth Army, which had been made necessary by the emerging shortage of manpower. To meet this, each Division's allocation of twelve Battalions was reduced to just nine.

The one bright spot for the British was the successful deployment of the new British "Whippet" tanks, which proved very useful in covering the fighting withdrawal of the infantry divisions which were recoiling from the German onslaught.

Anyway, on the evening of 27 March 1918 Gough was relieved of his command. (He is now considered by many to have been made a scapegoat.) He was replaced by Sir Henry Rawlinson who brought his own staff with him, and the command was given the name of the Fourth Army. *Gough's Fifth Army was disbanded.*

The first few days of the German attack were such an overwhelming success that many in Germany assumed that the war was all but over, but the German troops experienced one major problem. The speed of their advance had put their supply lines under huge strain and those leading the attack became desperately short of vital supplies. The result was that the German advance all but stopped. Also, although the German attack had been spectacular in terms of land conquered, it had also been very expensive in terms of men lost. Between March and April 1918 the Germans suffered 230,000 casualties and such losses were simply not sustainable.

The American reinforcements arrive

It was at this time that American troops began to pour into the western front – by the end of March 1918, some 250,000 American troops had joined the conflict.

On 5 April 1918 the tide started to turn when the Germans failed to take Villers-Bretonneux. That evening Ludendorff declared that the offensive was officially terminated.

The four men from Swanton Morley probably died during the second phase of the German Spring Offensive, Operation Georgette.

When considering their deaths, I shall look at the following four men together, because they all died during the period between the 9th and 19th April 1918, which was during Operation Georgette (Battles of the Lys.) This took place in Flanders with the objective of capturing key railway and supply roads and cutting off the British Second Army at Ypres. After some initial successes the German attack was once again held after British and French reserves were somehow found and deployed.

All four men from Swanton Morley died not long after this while the allies were engaged in pushing the Germans back to the Hindenburg Line