

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

THE ALLIED COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

(The Hundred Day's Offensive)

18 July – 11 November 1918

Taken from www.historyofwar.org/articles/articles_wars_hundred_days.html

My last article ended by showing the situation at the end of April 1918 when the German Spring Offensive had failed to achieve its objective, which was to separate the British from the French and to capture the Channel ports. However, they had succeeded in creating a series of huge salients in the Allied line.

I showed then that four men from Swanton Morley probably all died in the phase of the battle after the Germans failed to take Villers-Bretonneux and the allies were engaged in pushing them back to the Hindenburg Line.

Another result of the German Spring Offensive was the appointment of Marshal Foch as commander in chief of all Allied armies on the Western front, and it was he who began to plan the Allied counter-attack.

I am now going to talk about the “Hundred Day’s Offensive” which was the final Allied offensive on the Western Front. It consisted of three separate phases.

Phase One – Clearing the Salients

The Hundred Day’s Offensive began with a French counter-attack and by the time that this had ended the Germans had been pushed back to the line of the Aisne and Vesle rivers.

The next step was the elimination of the Amiens salient. The battle of Amiens began on 8 August with a surprise tank attack by the British Fourth Army (Rawlinson). This broke through the German lines, destroyed six divisions and forced the Germans back nine miles in one day. Ludendorff described 8 August as the “Black Day of the German Army.” The second phase of the battle (Battle of Bapaume) saw the Germans forced back to the line of the Somme, and then to the Hindenburg Line, their starting point back in March. The most important feature of this battle was that it saw entire German units collapse for the first time during the war.

Two men from Swanton Morley

Now there are two men from Swanton Morley both of whom died on 7 August and it seems likely that they died during the above Battle of Amiens. These men were:

Serjeant FREDERICK GEORGE RIX S/N 5639 8th Bn. East Surrey Regiment

55th Brigade 18th (Eastern) Division

Died age 32

His name appears on the memorial at Dive Copse British Cemetery, Sailly-le-Sec.

He is shown as son of James and Sally Rix of Swanton Morley (So was he the brother of Lance Corporal James Herbert Rix, who died age 27 on 10 April 1918?)

Private ERNEST TROLLOP S/N 203536 8th Bn. Norfolk Regiment
53rd Brigade 18th (Eastern) Division

Now the 8th (Service) battalion of the Norfolks fought in both the First and Second Battles of Passchendaele, (12 Oct 1917, and from 26 October to 10 November 1917 respectively), but it suffered badly, and it was disbanded on 2 Feb 1918 at Elverdinghe when 15 officers and 300 men were transferred to the 9th Battalion and officers and 100 men were transferred to the 7th Battalion. However, I don't know to which battalion Ernest Trollop was transferred.

What I do know is that the Parish Register shows that Ernest Trollop, aged 39, was buried in the churchyard of All Saints', Swanton Morley on 11 August 1918, so I can only suppose that he was badly wounded before this date, was sent home, and died in Swanton Morley.

The final salient to be cleared was at St. Mihiel south of Verdun (on 12- 13 September.) This was the first major battle to be fought by the American army since their arrival in France. The Germans were caught in the process of evacuating the salient and, after some fierce fighting, the Americans captured 13,000 German prisoners and cut off the salient.

Phase Two – Breaking the Hindenburg Line

The success of the battles to clear the salients encouraged Marshal Foch to launch his great "triple offensive". This was a three-pronged attack on the German lines. In the north, King Albert of Belgium, with a force of British, French and Belgian troops, would attack through Flanders. In the centre of the line, Haig would command three British armies and one French army in an attack on the heart of the Hindenburg Line (between Cambrai and St Quentin). Finally, to the south, the French and Americans would attack on the front between Reims and Verdun.

The great offensive was timed to begin at the end of September 1918. The southern part of the attack was the Meuse River-Argonne Forest Offensive of 26 September – 11 November. The northern attack began on 28 September and was a dramatic success. It was actually in two phases, because rain and mud caused a delay of a fortnight with a second phase beginning on 14 October and continuing until the end of the war, by which time the Allies had advanced fifty miles.

Haig, in the centre, had been given the hardest job. His was the only front where the Germans still outnumbered the Allies. Forty British divisions supported by the American II Corps faced fifty seven German divisions. Furthermore, the German defences took advantage of a series of wide canals which ran through deep cuttings (the cuttings on the Canal du Nord and the St Quentin Canal were up to sixty feet deep.) The central attack began on 27 September 1918 with an attack on the Canal du Nord by the 1st and 3rd Armies. Two days later the 4th Army began the main attack on the St Quentin Canal. The main set-piece attack, which aimed at a gap in the line where the canal went through a tunnel, got bogged down, but an attack by the 46th Division further south captured a key beachhead across the canal, along with a stretch of the main Hindenburg Line. A second set-piece attack on 3 October met with more success, pushing the Germans out of their reserve line. **The Hindenburg Line had been broken.**

I have been able to ascertain that the 9th Battalion, The Norfolk Regiment, fought in this battle

Phase Three – The German Collapse

The three-pronged Allied offensive triggered a process of collapse inside the German establishment. On the evening of 28 September Ludendorff told Hindenburg that Germany needed to seek an armistice, because it was no longer possible to win the war on the battlefield. An increasing number of American troops were now taking part in the fighting and the British and French were demonstrating an ability to force their way through the strongest of defensive lines.

The crisis soon spread. On 29 September the Kaiser visited headquarters only to be told that victory was no longer possible. On the same day the Bulgarians began armistice negotiations – the first of Germany's allies was about to be knocked out of the war.

As the British prepared for their attack on the Sambre, the Kaiser left Berlin and moved to the military headquarters at Spa (29 October).

30 October was a key day. On that day Turkey surrendered and Germany's only remaining ally, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was in the process of dissolving. With defeat clearly imminent the German High Seas Fleet was ordered to sea to seek a final suicidal battle with the British Grand Fleet. Not surprisingly the German fleet mutinied and refused to put to sea.

Negotiations with the Allies were now under way. The only stumbling block was the Kaiser, who was unacceptable to the Allies. On 10 November Wilhelm II went into exile in Holland. At 11am on 11 November the fighting stopped on the Western Front.