

The battle of La Bassée

The battle of La Bassée, 10 October-2 November 1914, was part of the [Race to the Sea](#), the series of battles that established the line of the Western Front from the Aisne to the North Sea. The BEF had been swept up in the great retreat that had ended at the [first battle of the Marne](#). Once the situation east of Paris had stabilised, it was decided to move the BEF north to Flanders. This would greatly simplify the problems of supplying the British army in France by bringing the army closer to the channel ports. It was also still believed that it would be possible to get around the right flank of the German armies that had marched south to the Marne, and Flanders was seen as a good area for cavalry.

II Corps of the BEF ** arrived at Abbeville by train on 8-9 October. It was then decided to send it north east towards La Bassée, to the left of the French lines. Sir John French was planning a general offensive along what would become the British line, aimed at recapturing Lille and perhaps even breaking through into Belgium.

The battle really began on 12 October. On that day II Corps was ordered to advance east to a line running north from Givenchy. The British advance was opposed by four German cavalry divisions from I and II cavalry corps. It would take three days to reach the line originally intended to be the target for the fighting on 12 October. During those days II Corps suffered 2,000 casualties, half of them on the first day. Givenchy was captured on 12 October, but lost on the next day.

On 15 October the British learnt that the German cavalry corps were about to withdraw, but not that they were about to be replaced by the infantry of VII corps. [General Smith-Dorrien](#) ordered a new offensive, this time to the south east. Its aim was to outflank the German troops attacking the French lines to the south. The attack began on 16 October, and made slow progress. Givenchy was recaptured, but the advance failed to reach Le Bassée (the official history records that British troops were not to be this close to Le Bassée for four years). II Corps suffered another 1,000 casualties during this phase of the battle.

A key element in the failure of the offensive was the arrival of German reinforcements. XIII corps took over part of the line held by VII corps, thickening the German lines.

Another Allied attack was planned for 19 October. The only success during this attack would lead to tragedy. The 2nd battalion of the Royal Irish captured Le Pilly, a village on Aubers Ridge, but the rest of the advance failed. The Royal Irish were dangerously isolated, but before the order to retreat could reach them they were surrounded by the Germans. Of nearly 900 men only 300 survived to surrender to the Germans.

On 20 October the Germans went onto the attack. A major offensive was launched all along the German line from Arras to the sea. Fortunately, that day II corps had halted their offensive and been ordered to hold their line. German attacks on 20 and 21 October were repulsed, but Smith-Dorrien decided to retreat to a stronger defensive line that had been prepared behind the front line.

Although work had begun on preparing this new line, it was still very basic compared to the trench lines that would follow. Very little barbed wire was available, all of it taken from local fields, while there had not been the time or labour to dig proper trenches. What the line did have in its favour was that its line had been carefully selected by the engineers.

The new line began close to the right wing of II corps, but as it ran north the gap increased, until at its northern end it was two miles behind the most advanced portions of the line. The retreat was carried out over the night of 22/23 October, and caught the Germans by surprise. 23 October was thus a quiet day.

The same period also saw the arrival of the Lahore Division of the Indian corps to the rear of the line. During the rest of the battle Indian troops would play an increasingly important role in the fighting, until on 30 October the Indian Corps would relieve II corps. By then the fighting had

largely died down.

The German attack was renewed on 24 October along the entire Sixth Army front. A daylight attack failed to make any headway. It was followed by an attack at dusk, which did break into the British trenches at two places, but local counter-attacks restored the situation.

A second night attack, on 26/27 October, caused more problems. Part of the British line was broken, and the village of Neuve Chapelle captured. This created a shallow salient in the British line. At this early period in the war the buildings of Neuve Chapelle still survived, making the village a dangerous strong point that threatened the British lines. A major counter attack was launched on 28 October, but failed to retake the village. On 29 October the village was reported to have been evacuated, but later in the day German troops used the ruins as cover for their last major attack of the battle.

After the failure of the attack on 29 October, the Germans moved much of their heavy artillery north towards Ypres, where it took part in the battle of Gheluvelt. This marked the end of the serious fighting at Le Bassée, although small scale attacks continued for some days.

(www.historyofwar.org)

** The 1st Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment had been attached to the 14th Brigade of the 5th Division of II Corps, under General Smith-Dorrien, at the beginning of October 1914. It would appear that Private **John Frank WILLS** may have been killed in the German bombardment and attack of 24th October.

