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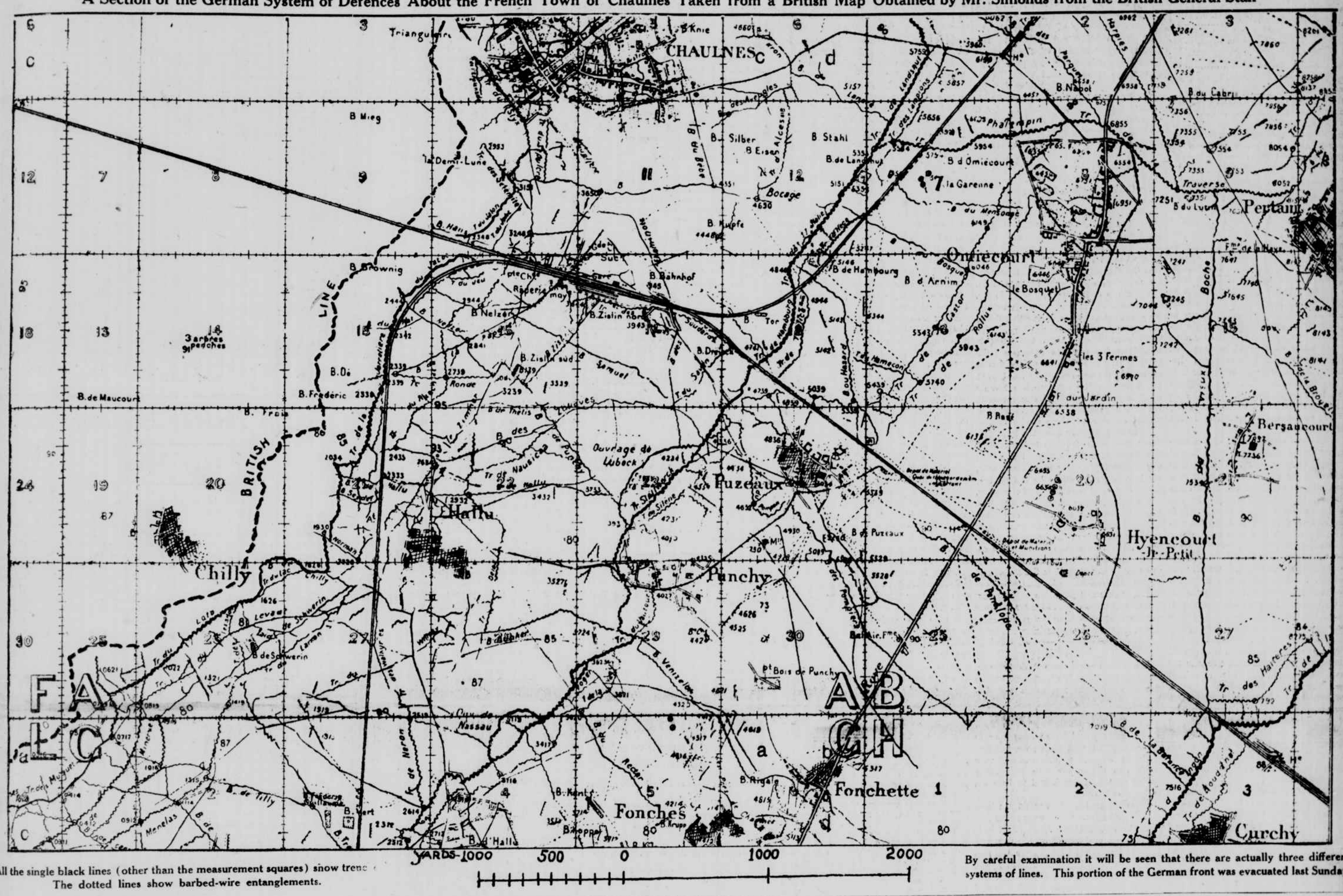
THE GREATEST RETREAT SINCE THE MARNE

A Section of the German System of Defences About the French Town of Chaulnes Taken from a British Map Obtained by Mr. Simonds from the British General Staff



All the single black lines (other than the measurement squares) show trenc
The dotted lines show barbed-wire entanglements.

By careful examination it will be seen that there are actually three different systems of lines. This portion of the German front was evacuated last Sunday.

By FRANK H. SIMONDS

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On Tuesday, February 6, the Germans before the British lines and about the little village of Grandcourt began a retirement which gradually expanded until it became clear by the last days of the month that they were to evacuate that salient between Arras and Bapaume which had become costly and dangerous to hold by reason of British and French advance during the summer of 1916. On March 17 a new retirement away off to the south between the Oise at Noyon and the Avre at Roye disclosed the even more important fact that the Germans were making a general retirement.

By Tuesday, March 20, which is the date on which this article is written, it is possible to get some idea, not of how far the German retirement may go, to be sure, but how far it must go now in any case. In the last four days we have seen an advance of the Allies along a front of more than a hundred miles and for distances ranging from one to twenty-five miles. At the moment they are still advancing, and the front from Arras to Soissons, which was once a wide curve outward into France toward the Channel, has now become a straight line. This new line bears the same relation to the old that the string does to the bow.

We know that the Germans have decided upon a withdrawal which must now extend as far as their second position in France, the position formerly described as the Cambrai-St. Quentin-Laon line, and now rather more frequently mentioned as the Hindenburg line. We do not yet know whether they mean to stand on this line or go all the way back to the frontier, although every bit of evidence at hand points to a stand at the line.

Before this article reaches my readers the answer to the present riddle will be unmistakable, but at the moment it is necessary to deal with both possibilities, that of a halt on the Hindenburg line and that of a retreat to the frontier, to the line that extends from Charleville, on the Meuse, to Lille.

At the outset let us answer the question: Why did the Germans retreat at all? Simply because the British and French by their attacks of last summer and fall, attacks comprehended in the affair called loosely the Battle of the Somme, penetrated so deeply into the German first system, reckoning the Hindenburg line as the second system and the frontier line as the third, that it became difficult to hold and at some points dangerous.

Reasons for the Retreat

Before the attack of last summer the German line from Arras to Soissons was a wide curve, resembling the bow mentioned a moment ago, with the Soissons-Arras air line as the string. After the attack and just before the retreat the German front had been changed into two semicircles, two bows, if you please, and the British had driven a wedge right into the centre. In doing this they had created two salients, a narrow one between Arras and Bapaume and a wider one between Péronne and Soissons.

In point of fact, the Allies had cut straight through the original German defence lines and the Germans had been compelled to throw up one barrier after another behind the breach, as dikes are hastily erected after a break in a Mississippi River levee. These works had none of the strength of the original fortifications, and the British progress was at an increased pace as the push went on.

As early as last September military observers began to discuss the possibility of a German retirement, and some of my readers may recall an article of mine on this subject. Falkenhayn was said to have advised this, and his advice was cited as explaining in part his removal and the coming of Hindenburg. The retreat did not come; the Germans held on, and very soon after the weather became bad, at a much earlier date than usual, and the discussion was forgotten.

We see now, however, that it was well founded speculation which looked toward the German retreat, and we may conjecture that the reasons for the delay were political quite as much as military. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that the Germans, already resolved to make a peace proposal, wisely decided that the proposal would be weakened if it came after a considerable retreat. Then it would be said that they had proposed peace because they were retreating and thus sought to escape defeat.

Accordingly they held on, made their Rumanian campaign and then suggested peace, with their lines still almost at the maximum. But when the peace proposals had been rejected political considerations gave way to military, and they chose to retreat. One must also calculate that by postponing the withdrawal until spring they were able to proceed unmolested to the construction of still more elaborate works at the point they had selected to stand on.

At the moment when the frost broke and the spring muds became general, thus holding up pursuit, while atmospheric conditions hampered aerial observation, the Germans began their retreat, slowly at first, and finally, just at the end of the bad weather and after the roads became better, they suddenly slipped out of a very wide front and began to withdraw rapidly and successfully, apparently taking their foes by surprise, and thus being able to avoid the worst of the dangers that are to be reckoned with whenever great armies attempt to retire from in front of a strong and active enemy.

By last Sunday we had a running retreat unlike anything that has occurred since the Battle of the Marne in the West. We had British and French cavalry pounding down the roads leading toward the Hindenburg line, and we had the Germans hurriedly evacuating villages and leaving a trail of ruin behind them. This is still the situation when I write.

But unless the Germans intend to go back to the Belgian frontier this condition must now change abruptly. Less than ten miles on a very wide front intervenes between the Allies and the Hindenburg line, and Wednesday or Thursday should see the answer to our first problem. If the Germans mean to hold this second line, then we shall have by that time just the kind of bulletins that came from Paris and London when Kluck got behind the Aisne, in September, 1914.

Supposing that the Germans do make a stand on the Hindenburg line, what is there to be said of the retreat? Granted that the withdrawal is on a front from Arras to Soissons and that the new front runs before Laon, La Fère, St. Quentin, Cambrai and joins the old line east of Soissons and southeast of Arras, there is little real military advantage to be discovered for the Allies, whatever the moral advantage. This is true because the Germans have not retired from country having any great military value. Nor has it any great material value, since it does not contain large cities or mines of any value.

The retreat gives the French back perhaps a thousand square miles of French territory, and it removes the threat to Paris which German possession of the Noyon salient always had. It shortens the line somewhat, thus releasing German and Allied troops, but not any large number of them. On the new line the Germans can construct defences quite as strong as on the old, which they have done, and the communications behind the new position are quite as good as they were behind the old.

Allies' Offensive Postponed

If the great offensive of the Allies was designed to take place on the front that has now been evacuated, it will have to be postponed for a month or two at the least, until the British and French can bring up new roads and railways to the newer firing line, and thus the Germans will gain a considerable period of time, if their object is to prolong the delay before the decisive struggle begins.

Only one grave danger confronts the Germans, and so far there is every sign that they have avoided it. A retreat is one of the most difficult of all military operations, and this is true not alone because of the dangers incident to going back, but also to the possible loss of morale of the retreating troops and the consequent difficulty in rallying them to stand on a new position. When I was in the British lines there were several generals who expressed to me their doubt as to whether the Germans could get away, but the real doubt was as to their ability to stand on the new position if they should retire. The "getaway" has been successful beyond anything any critic could have expected; we are soon to see whether the halt and stand will be equally successful. Given the speed and success of the retreat, it should be.

Summing up, then, the situation as it exists, we are seeing a retreat from the lines taken in September and October, 1914. We are seeing a retreat which is a consequence primarily of the Battle of the Marne, where the Germans missed their chance for a decision, and a direct consequence of the Battle of the Somme, where the British and the French dented the German line between Arras and Noyon so deeply that it became necessary to retire to a new front between those points. We may see a further extension of that retreat, so that the line runs north and south from Laon, east of Soissons, to some point west of Lille.

Such a retreat is purely strategical. Apart from the evacuation of the Lens coal district, it would give the French no land of value and the Germans can stand on as good a position as they had before. All along the point has been made by the Allies that the possession of territory itself means nothing, and on their own statement it is fair to recognize that the territory now abandoned by the Germans has little military value.

Passing now on to the second question, "What will follow from a retreat to the frontier?" one may say this: First of all, such a retreat is unlikely because it would mean the abandonment of a great deal of territory which has a material value, large cities, the entire railroad system of Northern France, the coal region of Lens, and it would deprive the Germans of the advantage they possess in holding against ultimate settlement a large and valuable section of Northern France.

If such a retreat takes place we shall be bound to conclude that the Germans are very short of men and that they have made the retreat primarily to reduce their line and thus to release men. Their front would be shortened by not less than eighty miles by such a retirement, and this would release perhaps half a million men. If such a retreat is to take place we may expect the Germans sooner or later to make a stand on a line starting about Lille, going southeast through Valenciennes, in front of Maubeuge, to Hirson, and thence to Mézières, on the Meuse, and along the Meuse to the present position before Verdun. Generally speaking, such a position would be based upon the old French covering forts at the Belgian frontier, the positions from which the French and British advanced to their defeats in August, 1914. These defeats of Mons and Charleroi were so heavy that the Allies were compelled to abandon their frontier covering positions, which were deeply outflanked by the rapid advance of Kluck.

It is, roughly speaking, about twenty miles from Bapaume, where the German retreat began, to Cambrai, which is in the Hindenburg line. It is another twenty miles from Cambrai to the frontier. It is twenty miles from Ribecourt, before which the French stood when the German retreat began from the Noyon salient, to La Fère, which is in the Hindenburg line. But it is thirty miles at least to the frontier from La Fère. Thus, if the Germans are going to continue their retreat beyond the Hindenburg line, it will take at least another week before they settle down on their new front.

The test, of course, of all their purposes will be when we see whether they stand or retire along the Hindenburg line. We shall know that before this article is published. We shall not know their purpose if they go beyond that line for perhaps two weeks more.

The Larger Possibilities

Now, turning to the broader question, what does the German retreat mean in the larger possibilities of the war? If it is comprehended in a retirement to the Hindenburg line it may mean merely a local withdrawal to a new position stronger than the old, since the old has been battered and bent by the Battle of the Somme. It may mean that having achieved this strategic withdrawal the Germans will stand on the defensive in the West from the North Sea to Switzerland and strike against Russia, against Italy or in the Balkans. It may, on the other hand, mean that the Germans will strike either against the British in Flanders or against the French in Champagne or in Lorraine on the Western front. If the Germans do not feel that their Western line is safe against the Allies for another summer campaign, they will attack in the West, because they could not leave the West in peril and send the masses of their troops to the East, as they did in 1915, or to Galicia and Rumania, as they did in 1916, after their own operation at Verdun had failed.

Personally, my judgment is that we shall see a German attack directed either against the French or against the British, an attack which will be comparable to that of Verdun and will have as its primary purpose an anticipation of an Allied offensive in the West this year. With all its failures, the Verdun attack did materially weaken the Allied drive in the West last summer, and I think it will be agreed that an offensive is the best defensive under the conditions which exist now in Western Europe.

We must face the possibility of some sudden German blow following immediately upon the present retreat, and such a blow will probably fall somewhere along the Western front. The German military critics, quite justly, point to the retreat of Hindenburg from Warsaw in 1914, which was followed by the great advance upon Lodz in November. The greatest mistake that could possibly be made would be to believe that the Germans have not the man power to strike again, and that their withdrawal from their old lines is a confession of complete weakness and is a prelude to a general breakdown.

We have not reached such a time. It may be questioned whether we shall reach it this year. The present German retirement is, to use the French phrase, a recoil to leap forward the better. It is strategic; it is an incident in a larger strategy which is not defensive but offensive, and we may be very sure that there will shortly come a gigantic German effort. The German General Staff are enduring a temporary loss of prestige incident to a retirement and the momentary depression in Germany which must result, but they are prepared to expect this. Germany is following out her own plans logically. She is shortening her lines preparatory to attacking. Where she will attack we do not know. If she did not intend to attack she would not have made so considerable a withdrawal already. If she goes back to the French frontier, then we may conclude that the attack will come either in the shape of a drive for Calais or in another effort to regain the road to Nancy; or, what is more likely, an attack upon Russia.

However, in view of what happened in Rumania last year, when all the opening moves seemed to forecast a great reverse for the Central Powers, we shall do well now to await the disclosure of the actual German purpose and of the real, as contrasted with the apparent, reason for the withdrawal.