

The Greatest Day in History

Chapter One

Monday, 4 November 1918

The New Zealanders were on a roll. For weeks they had been chasing the Germans across France, forcing them steadily back towards the frontier with Belgium. Ahead of them now lay the ancient citadel of Le Quesnoy, straddling the road to the frontier beyond. One final push and the German army would be out of France altogether.

Le Quesnoy stood on high ground amid rolling countryside. It had been a fortress for eight hundred years, its thick walls long familiar to the English, who had had their first taste of cannon fire there in 1346. The walls had later been strengthened by Marshal Vauban, who had remodelled the ramparts in the seventeenth century to withstand a long siege. They stood sixty feet high now, topped with gun emplacements, heavily defended by the German garrison of the town.

The New Zealanders came out of the mist in the early morning of Monday, 4 November 1918. They bypassed the town first, clearing the surrounding fields of Germans before turning their attention to the citadel. It was an easy target with modern artillery. The New Zealanders could have reduced it to rubble in no time if they had wished. But there were five thousand French civilians in Le Quesnoy, as well as the German garrison. The New Zealanders didn't want to use artillery if they could avoid it.

Some prisoners were sent in instead, to explain to the garrison that their position was hopeless. The Germans didn't doubt it, but their garrison commander was reluctant to surrender without a fight. When the prisoners failed to return, a message was dropped by aero- plane urging the garrison commander to capitulate, promising that his men would be honourably treated if they raised the white flag. When the commander still refused to parley, the New Zealanders decided to capture Le Quesnoy the old-fashioned way, by storming the bastion and climbing the walls with scaling ladders.

They cleared the walls of the enemy first, putting down a heavy barrage on the outer rampart while the storming party advanced behind a smokescreen. After some fierce fighting, the New Zealanders breached the outer walls and forced a way across to the moat. German troops threw stick grenades down on them as they circled the inner rampart, looking for a way up. The only feasible route was via a bridge across the moat. They estimated that a thirty-foot ladder on the bridge would just reach the top of the inner wall surrounding the town.

While Lewis guns swept the parapet to keep the Germans' heads down, a party of the New Zealanders' 4th battalion doubled forward with a scaling ladder. Keeping an eye out for grenades,

they raised the ladder precariously against the wall. The place was ominously quiet as Lieutenant Leslie Averill began to climb. The only sound he could hear was the water gurgling in the moat as he reached the grass bank on top of the wall and peered over it into the faces of two startled Germans, who promptly ran away.

Averill fired his revolver after them and scrambled down the bank into the town, closely followed by Second Lieutenant H. W. Kerr and the rest of the battalion. Within minutes, they had gained a foothold in Le Quesnoy and were chasing the Germans along the street, egged on by the townspeople cheering wildly from their windows.

While the 4th battalion scaled the walls, the New Zealanders' 2nd and 3rd battalions were attacking from the other side of the town. Private James Nimmo and two others had been sent forward to find out what had happened to a reconnaissance patrol that had gone missing. They approached the walls cautiously, but could see no Germans as they made their way round to the gate. But the Germans were still there, as Nimmo recalled in a letter home:

'How I am alive to write this today I don't know, or at the very least I should have been in Blighty. We got into the town and were simply overwhelmed by civvies. Laughing, crying, and just about mad with joy. It was ten minutes before we could get away from them. Then two of us searched everywhere near the gate but found no Jerries. We then found out by the aid of a word or two of French and by signs that one of our boys was down the street wounded. The civvies reckoned there were no Jerries round that part so we decided to go and get him.'

The French pressed food and drink on the New Zealanders before they went. Nimmo grabbed a pancake to eat on the way as a civilian led them to the wounded man:

'Had just got a mouthful when the old boy opened out from fifty yards down the street. The civvy got one through the hand. One of my mates got one through the leg and one in the arm. There was no shelter and there was nothing for us to do but run for it. A good hundred yards. Could see the bullets hitting the cobbles in front of us, and were getting pieces of brick from behind, but neither of us got hit. Halfway along I saw a doorway and decided on a spell. I bounced into it in such a hurry that I bounced out again like a ball. I took it gently next attempt and had a few minutes in which to get my wind. Then it was a case of go again, and he opened as soon as I appeared and helped me along the final stretch. One poor little dog ran after us barking like blazes and had his leg blown clean off.'

But the fighting did not last long. The garrison quickly surrendered, knowing when it was beaten. By nightfall the town was free of Germans at last, almost a thousand of them marching meekly out of the gate as prisoners of war. Private Nimmo was sorry to see them go, because he hadn't had a chance to collect any souvenirs before they left. The New Zealanders liked wristwatches best, although revolvers and field glasses were useful too, or an Iron Cross at a pinch. Even pornography,

if there wasn't anything else. The Germans always had good pornography.

Still, there would be plenty more where that came from. The Germans were giving up in thousands now, not just hundreds any more. The British army had attacked along a thirty-mile front that Monday morning, pushing forward in a vast sweep from Valenciennes to the river Sambre. Men, tanks and artillery had been in action since well before dawn. The French army was advancing too, and so were the Americans in the Argonne. All along the line the Germans were in retreat, either falling back in disarray or else running across the fields with their hands in the air, determined to surrender while they still could.

Some were still fighting, clinging tenaciously to their foxholes, but most had no more fight in them or any further stomach for the war. They just wanted the shooting to stop so that they could go home. As the day progressed and the reports came in to British headquarters, it became increasingly apparent that the German army was disintegrating at last, defeated in all but name. The Germans were ready to lay down their arms and stop fighting once and for all. It was the breakthrough everyone had been waiting for.

While the New Zealanders triumphed at Le Quesnoy, Second Lieutenant Wilfred Owen of the Manchester Regiment was leading his men forward at Ors, ten miles to the south. The Manchesters' orders were to cross the Sambre-Oise canal just above the town and dislodge the Germans from the far side. It was no easy task, with the bridges destroyed and the enemy unmoved by a preliminary bombardment which had been intended to knock them out. Owen's men reached the canal without mishap, but then came under heavy fire from the opposite bank. They returned it with interest, keeping the Germans' heads down while a party of Royal Engineers dragged a pontoon bridge of duckboards and cork floats to the water and assembled it for the crossing.

The bridge was almost ready when it was hit by shellfire. The engineers struggled to repair the damage, but were steadily picked off by the German machine guns. In response, Second Lieutenant James Kirk of the Manchesters grabbed a Lewis gun and paddled towards the enemy on one of the cork floats. He opened up from ten yards away, pinning the Germans down while the engineers completed their repairs. Kirk was wounded in the face and arm, but kept on firing until the engineers had floated the bridge across the water and reached the other side.

The Manchesters sprinted across. Two platoons made it to the far bank and flung themselves down on the German side. A third was about to follow when another shell ripped into the bridge and tore it apart again. The damage was worse this time, difficult to repair in a hurry. But if the bridge couldn't be repaired quickly, the duckboard floats could still be used as rafts for the crossing. The Manchesters launched them at once.

Owen was in the thick of the action, yelling encouragement at his men, walking up and down

and patting them on the shoulder as they grappled with the makeshift rafts. None of his men knew it, but he wrote poetry in his spare time, dark little stanzas about the horrors of the war they were fighting. Owen hated the war and everything about it. He was particularly scathing about the civilians at home who justified the slaughter with absurd Latin tags about the honour of dying for one's country. Owen had seen men die in gas attacks and knew the reality:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs ...
You would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

The Germans kept up a withering fire as the Manchesters struggled. James Kirk was shot through the head and fell dead over his Lewis gun. He was later awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery. Owen was down by the canal bank when he too was killed, although no one saw him die. The last anyone remembered, he was with his men, saying 'Well done' to one and 'You're doing very well, my boy' to another. Several people thought he had boarded one of the rafts when he was hit, but nobody could say for certain. There were too many bullets flying around for anything to be certain.

'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?' Certainly there were no bells for Wilfred Owen as he died. The attack was called off soon afterwards and the Manchesters withdrew from the canal, taking Owen's body with them for burial in the municipal cemetery at Ors. It was a rare failure for the British on a day of outstanding success everywhere else.

While the Manchester Regiment mourned Wilfred Owen, Lieutenant Bogart Rogers of the newly formed Royal Air Force was grieving for his friend Alvin Callender, shot down a few days ago by a German Fokker. The two American pilots had been part of the British advance for the past few weeks, strafing the retreating Germans and attacking their railways and airfields whenever the weather permitted. But Callender's luck had run out at last and he had died of wounds in a Canadian field hospital. Rogers had been appointed to succeed him as a flight leader in 32 Squadron, a promotion he would have been much happier about if the circumstances had been different. Rogers had been with 32 Squadron since May. He was a society boy from California, one of several hundred Americans who had volunteered for the Royal Air Force rather than wait for their own country to join the war. Rogers had thought it a great adventure at first, until the realities of combat had hit home. He had seen an American troopship torpedoed on the way over, with the loss of

hundreds of lives. In London, he had been shaken to find women wearing khaki and British soldiers arriving at the railway stations straight from the fighting:

'You see Tommies coming in covered with Flanders mud, rifles over their shoulders and iron hats strapped to their backs, and you realise that maybe less than twenty-four hours ago they were in the front-line trenches ... I had no idea of what a tremendous affair the war is, how terrible it all is, and how the English people have worked and sacrificed.'

After a few weeks in England, Rogers had crossed to Boulogne, where he had had another shock as he watched a trainload of wounded being unloaded from the front. He had soon gone up to the front himself, and for the past six months had been flying two patrols a day over enemy territory as the British fought off the Germans' spring offensive and then attacked in their turn. He had been credited with six confirmed kills of enemy aircraft, although the real figure was undoubtedly much higher.

Rogers had almost been killed himself once when he was flying along in a daydream, thinking about England and what a nice place it was. A burst of machine-gun fire from a German plane had brought him to his senses and he had quickly taken evasive action. He found the war in the air a lonely business, with no one else to talk to and nothing audible above the sound of his own engine.

Rogers liked the English so much that he joked to his friends that he was becoming a regular Britisher, enjoying afternoon tea and drinking a toast to the king at dinner nights in the mess. He had even tried to sing the British national anthem once, until he remembered that he didn't know the words. But he remained American at heart, celebrating the Fourth of July with other Americans in the squadron and doing his best to teach the English baseball with a cricket bat.

Since 2 November, the squadron had been at La Brayelle, an airfield near Douai recently captured from the Germans. Baron von Richthofen had flown from there, his private cottage an object of fascination to the newcomers. Rogers himself was billeted in an old French chateau that the Germans had converted into a hospital. Apart from a few shell holes in one wing, it was very comfortable, much better than the officers' previous base. Rogers's room was intact except for one broken window and a cluster of bullet holes in the wall. He hoped he and his two room mates would remain there some time.

As for 32 Squadron, it had been reduced to just nine pilots and seven aircraft as the advance continued, less than half what it was supposed to be. 'There are only three flying officers in the squadron who were here when I came,' Rogers had commented in September. 'Makes one feel pretty old and experienced. It surely is hell to see them pass by. But the only way to do it is simply to forget that you ever possessed such a thing as an emotion or a nerve and carry on just as if nothing had happened. Is it any wonder that fellows go to pieces?'

By 4 November, the situation had deteriorated further with even more deaths: 'We've been

having a rotten time of it, another awful scrap a couple of days ago. We were lucky to get back at all. A couple didn't. I managed to get another Hun. I'm pretty sure he was done for, but then five more chased me all over the shop. Too many!'

Afterwards, Rogers had been driven over to the aircraft depot to take delivery of a replacement aircraft and fly it back to La Brayelle. He had returned in a rainstorm, the clouds so low that he had had to fly all the way at treetop level to get the plane home. But replacement aircraft were no use without pilots, and there were far too few of those. At the present rate of attrition, Rogers was afraid that there would be no pilots left at all if the war didn't come to an end pretty soon.

On the other side of the line, Lieutenant Herbert Sulzbach of Germany's 63rd Field Artillery had been under fire all day from the French guns along the Oise-Aisne canal. The barrage had begun before dawn and had continued without let-up ever since, thousands of heavy calibre shells churning the earth around the Germans into a quagmire until it seemed to Sulzbach that there wasn't a square centimetre left untouched.

He and his men had found a cellar to hide in and were taking it in turns to man the observation post up above, but smoke from the French guns had reduced visibility to fifty yards, which was making their life very difficult. The telephone lines to the rear had been cut as well, leaving Sulzbach with no idea of what was happening any- where else. He was worried that the French had already infiltrated the German lines and were about to overrun his position:

'What's the situation with the infantry? Nobody has any idea, and nobody knows either if the enemy aren't already behind us, because it's impossible to see anything in this mist. Are our lines collapsing, has everyone been captured and will we be too in a minute? The situation is hopeless! My batteries are still firing like mad and so far at least we have come across no retreating infantry. Now come the remaining gunners of No. 1 and No. 3 batteries carrying their firing mechanisms in their hands. The guns themselves have had to be abandoned after being overrun by the enemy. I remain at my post. Hauptmann Knigge attempts to reconnoitre new positions to the rear.'

The situation was as bad as any Sulzbach had known in more than four years of war. A civilised man from a Jewish banking family, he had enlisted in August 1914 and had been sent to the front four weeks later. As an admirer of the British, he had been horrified at the sight of his first dead Tommies in Flanders. Since then, he had seen plenty more bodies and had won the Iron Cross fighting for the Fatherland. His aim now was to keep his men in the field until the politicians could negotiate a decent peace, one that allowed the Germans to lay down their arms with honour.

During the afternoon, his batteries provided covering fire while a Bavarian regiment launched a counter-attack to recapture the 1st battalion's guns. The attack was a success and the guns were taken to the rear. Towards evening, a runner arrived with orders for Sulzbach's men to follow under

cover of darkness.

They began to withdraw at 10 p.m., moving along hedges and fields to avoid the fire on the roads. Even so, they had to hit the ground every so often to escape a passing shell. Their nerves were in shreds after being bombarded all day. To add to their discomfort, the night was pitch black and raining, so dark that by midnight they were hopelessly lost.

Fortunately, they saw a light soon afterwards. It belonged to an artillery battery from a neighbouring division. Sulzbach's men were way out of position, but they were too exhausted to go any further that night. Borrowing blankets from their hosts, they lay down in a hay barn instead. Tomorrow, they had orders to continue the withdrawal towards the river Meuse, the last natural barrier available to the Germans along this part of the line. They might just make it to the Meuse if the French gunners left them alone. For now, though, Sulzbach and his men got themselves out of the rain and snatched a few hours' sleep while they had the chance.

At his flat in Berlin, General Erich Ludendorff was sitting at his desk, sunk in despair. He had been in despair for days, ever since the Kaiser had dismissed him from his command on the Western Front. Ludendorff had been sent home in disgrace, so unpopular after the failure of his strategy for winning the war that cinema audiences had cheered when his dismissal was announced on the screen. He was still trying to come to terms with his sudden fall from grace.

Until recently, it had been a good war for Ludendorff. A master of military logistics, he had made his name against the Russians as chief of staff to Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg. Together, they had become the most powerful duo in Germany, responsible for a policy of total war on all fronts. Overruling the political objections, Ludendorff had dictated a strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare at sea, an illegal torpedoing of civilian ships without regard for their crews, which had done much to turn American opinion against the Germans. He had been responsible, too, for the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, forcing the defeated Russians to accept peace terms so draconian that Germany's remaining enemies had seen no option but to fight on regardless.

In the spring of 1918, Ludendorff had launched a major offensive on the Western Front, aimed at capturing Paris and putting an end to the war before the Americans arrived to avenge the sinking of their ships. It had very nearly succeeded. The Germans had been able to see the Eiffel Tower through their field glasses before the tide had turned and they had been forced to pull back. Since August, however, they had been in continual retreat, with no more manpower to replenish their losses and the Americans shipping troops to France at a rate of 150,000 every month. Ludendorff's last great gamble had failed.

He himself had collapsed under the strain. For months before his dismissal he had sought consolation in the prayer book of the Moravian Brethren, thumbing through his dog-eared copy to

see if the religious text for the day offered any military guidance. He had suffered a severe nervous breakdown, alternating between panic attacks and bursts of increasingly irrational optimism.

His staff had been so worried that they had arranged for a psychiatrist to visit Ludendorff's headquarters and secretly observe him at work. The psychiatrist had diagnosed overwork, prescribing a course of treatment that included the regular singing of German folk songs. But none of it had done any good. Ludendorff's nerves had gone and nothing could be done about it.

On the morning of 26 October, the Kaiser had summoned Hindenburg and Ludendorff to a meeting in Berlin to discuss the situation. Ludendorff had offered his resignation, something he had often done without expecting it to be accepted. This time, though, the Kaiser had accepted it at once and Ludendorff had found himself out of a job.

Hindenburg had half-heartedly offered his resignation as well, but the Kaiser had refused to consider it. As the two men left, Hindenburg had tried to console his old friend, only to be angrily rebuffed. 'I refuse to have any more dealings with you,' Ludendorff had hissed, adamant that Hindenburg should have insisted on resigning in sympathy. 'You have treated me very shabbily.'

Now Ludendorff was back in his flat, sitting gloomily at his desk. 'In a fortnight, we shall have no empire and no emperor left,' he had told his wife when he was sacked. The Kaiser had already left Berlin for Spa, the German army's headquarters in Belgium, ostensibly to avoid the Spanish influenza in the capital, in reality because he felt safer at Spa, surrounded by his troops. The mood in Berlin was so ugly that he might well have been assassinated if he had stayed. And if the Kaiser wasn't safe in Berlin, how much longer could the empire survive?

An Armistice was what they needed now, a few months' respite to allow the Germans to regroup and rearm, ready to resume the fight in the spring. They had no men left to fight with, but the class of 1919 would be available soon, school leavers still in training. A new army, new weapons, renewed enthusiasm for the struggle. Ludendorff was convinced that the Germans could do anything in the spring, just so long as they had a breather first, a few months of peace negotiations nicely protracted to keep the enemy at bay while they recovered their strength.

For the moment, though, Ludendorff remained at his desk in a state of catatonic shock. He said little, did less, just sat at his desk for day after day while events took their course and chaos reigned all around. His wife was very worried about him.

Ludendorff had been replaced on the Western Front by General Wilhelm Gröner. He had been in Kiev when Ludendorff was sacked, stripping the Ukraine of its remaining resources for the German war effort. Arriving in Belgium a few days later, Gröner had immediately set off on a tour of the troops to appraise the situation before making his report to the government in Berlin. What he had seen on his two-day tour had appalled him.

The German army was in no state to continue the fight much longer. The men were woefully under strength, so hungry that they were stealing oats and barley from the horses, so ill equipped that they pulled the boots off the dead and wore British jerkins because they had none of their own. Some were refusing to go into the trenches, others were slipping quietly away from the front and living rough behind the lines until the war came to an end. Those who went home on leave often didn't come back. Those who did return arrived in railway trains with 'Slaughter cattle for Wilhelm' chalked on the side, a view of the conflict identical to Wilfred Owen's.

Some of the troops were munitions workers, removed from vital war work and conscripted into the army for much lower wages. Others were trade union agitators sent to the front to get them out of the way. Still others had been prisoners of the Russians, fondly imagining that their war was over until they had been released from prison camp to fight again. Far too many of them were old men or young boys, drafted into the front line because there was no one else to fill the gap. On the rare occasions when they managed to overrun a British position, discipline had often fallen apart as the men gorged themselves on British rations and staggered about drunk rather than fight any further. It was not a recipe for success.

With time, Gröner might be able to turn the situation around, but time was not on his side. The British, French and Americans were all pushing together and the German army would collapse within days if something wasn't done to stop them. Gröner was rapidly coming to the view that the only way to stop them was to end the fighting as soon as possible and seek peace terms while the Germans were still in a position to negotiate.

Gröner was a realist, a hard-headed man of modest origins who had never been part of the high command's inner circle and did not share their distorted view of the possibilities. He came from Württemberg in southern Germany and was rare among German generals in being neither Prussian nor a gentleman. He had been excluded for years from the most prestigious military appointments because his father had been a paymaster, rather than a member of the old officer class. But Gröner was also a gifted organiser who had risen by his talents and could not be ignored forever. His time had come at last, although too late for him to do anything except take the blame for a mess that was not of his making.

What Gröner had to do now was to go to Berlin and make his report. A telegram had just arrived from Germany's new chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, asking him to come at once. If he caught the train from Spa that night, he would be in Berlin next morning. He would brief Prince Max on the position at the front, and Max would brief him on the situation at home. With rumours of trouble in Berlin and a naval mutiny at Kiel, as well as all the disasters in the field, they would have plenty to discuss when they met. General Gröner was not looking forward to it as he left Spa that Monday evening and caught the overnight train back to Germany.

At Kiel, on the Baltic, the rumours of a mutiny were all too true. The men of the German fleet were in revolt, openly defying their officers and refusing to obey their orders. They had taken over most of the ships in the harbour, hauling down the imperial flag at gunpoint and replacing it with the red banner of Bolshevism. Thousands of them were rampaging through the town, joining forces with the dockyard workers in a riot of protest and indiscipline through the streets.

The Kiel fleet had played little part in the war since the battle of Jutland in 1916. The mutiny had been triggered by a rumour that it had been ordered to sea for one last do or die battle against the British. It was said that the officers preferred to go down fighting rather than suffer the ignominy of defeat. The sailors disagreed, seeing no point in dying unnecessarily at this stage of the war.

But their mutiny went much deeper than a reluctance to put to sea. They had been on short rations for months, fed miserably while their officers had the pick of whatever food was available. Like everyone else in Germany, the sailors were cold, tired, hungry and fed up with deprivation, sick of being lied to about a war that was never going to end. It was the war they were protesting about, the insistence of the ruling class on blindly prolonging the fight instead of negotiating the compromise peace that everyone else was longing for.

From the bridge of the *König*, moored alongside the Kaiser Wharf, Captain Karl Weniger was monitoring the events in the rest of the fleet with mounting alarm. Almost alone among the warships in the harbour, Weniger's ship was still loyal to the Kaiser and still flew the imperial flag. Weniger was a good captain with a good crew. His men could still be counted on to do what they were told. Yet for how much longer, when their comrades ashore were running amok with no one to stop them?

Several men had been killed the previous day when a patrol had opened fire on rebel sailors in the town. The survivors were howling for revenge and had the support of the garrison and townspeople. It was foolhardy, in the circumstances, to continue flying the imperial flag from the *König*. But the only alternative was to take the flag down and Weniger was damned if he was going to do that. The *König* was the Kaiser's ship and Weniger was the Kaiser's man. He would be surrendering if he took the flag down. He had decided to bide his time instead, keeping the flag flying while he waited for order to be restored in the fleet, as, please God, it surely would be, sooner or later.

Across the harbour, Grand Admiral Prince Heinrich of Prussia, the Kaiser's younger brother, was biding his time as well, keeping a wary eye on the situation from the windows of his palace in the heart of the old city. He was there with his wife and eldest son, listening apprehensively as shots echoed across the rooftops and makeshift red flags appeared on government buildings. Whatever fears Weniger had of a Bolshevik revolution were multiplied tenfold in Prince Heinrich. He was a cousin of the late czar of Russia and he could never forget what the Bolsheviks had done to the czar

and his family. He didn't want the same to happen to his own wife and son.

It had very nearly happened already. A party of sailors had burst into the palace and confronted Heinrich at gunpoint. They had abused him to his face, accusing him of living comfortably while they were starving. 'Do you think I eat better than you do?' he had demanded angrily. 'Yes,' one had insisted. 'You have more to eat than us. You eat and drink just like the Silesian lords.'

The sailors had been persuaded to leave after a while without doing him any harm. But the situation was deteriorating all the time and Heinrich was terrified that they would return and kill his family, just as the Russians had killed the czar. His wife was worried too, because the czarina had been her sister. What if the sailors put her son up against a wall and shot him, as the Russians had shot her nephew the czarovich? It was too awful to contemplate.

The Danish border was only sixty miles away, an easy run to the north. If the worst came to the worst, they could be there in a few hours, seeking sanctuary across the border for themselves and their son. Prince Heinrich and his wife weren't cowards and didn't want to run, but they certainly would if they had to. Better that than stay in Kiel and be massacred by a Bolshevik mob.

While Heinrich sat tight in Kiel, his brother the Kaiser was in Belgium, inspecting military units behind the lines. He was travelling on his personal train, distributing medals and making speeches at every stop, handing out cigarettes to the men lined up for his inspection. They seemed in good spirits to him, although the officers travelling with the Kaiser had noticed a marked lack of respect for him behind his back. Some of the men were even unfriendly to his face, although the Kaiser appeared not to notice.

It was a difficult time for the Kaiser. He had only been in Belgium a few days, having fled from Berlin to avoid the ever-increasing clamour for his abdication. The threat of Spanish flu had only been an excuse for leaving, as had his claim that he ought to be with his troops in the field as the war approached its climax. In reality, the Kaiser just didn't feel safe in Berlin, with revolution in the air and the newspapers calling daily for him to stand down. He much preferred to be with the army in Belgium.

The Kaiser was closely identified with everything that had gone wrong in the war, but he was determined not to abdicate if he could avoid it. He was a descendant of Frederick the Great, and Frederick the Great would never have abdicated. 'I wouldn't dream of abandoning the throne because of a few hundred Jews and a thousand workers,' he had insisted on 1 November, when the idea had been put to him by an emissary of the German government. 'Tell that to your masters in Berlin.'

The Kaiser was going to stick with it instead and see the crisis through. If all else failed and revolution did break out in Berlin, he was quite prepared to return at the head of his soldiers and

hang the ringleaders out of hand, if that was what he had to do to retain his throne.

Right now, though, the Kaiser was with his men in the field. 'In Flanders, I saw delegations from the different divisions, spoke with the soldiers, distributed decorations, and was everywhere joyfully received by officers and men,' he later recalled, although his commanders had told him privately that morale was poor among the troops, especially the ones in the rear. Worst of all were the troops returning from leave at home. They often came back full of Bolshevism, only to be accused by their comrades of being blacklegs for unnecessarily prolonging the war. The discontent was spreading rapidly as morale continued to plummet.

By some accounts, the Kaiser was with some troops near his train that Monday when he heard a sudden burst of fire from not far away. Glancing up, he was just in time to see a squadron of enemy bombers swooping overhead, aiming for his train. He kept his composure, as did his soldiers, but some nearby civilians scattered, among them a panic-stricken chef in hat and apron who ran for cover as the bombers attacked.

Three bombs whistled through the air and exploded harmlessly nearby. They were followed by a shower of propaganda leaflets which fluttered to earth as the aircraft disappeared. The soldiers laughed as the cook sheepishly picked himself up. The Kaiser laughed too. 'Idiots!' he said, looking at the civilians. A bombing raid was no reason to panic.

Nevertheless, it might be a good idea to arm the train with machine guns, if it was going to be a target for enemy aircraft from now on. The Kaiser made a note to have it done as soon as he got back to Spa.

In Paris, the leaders of the Allied nations were meeting to discuss an end to the war. In a house on the rue de l'Université, British prime minister David Lloyd George and his counterparts from France and Italy were debating the terms for an Armistice with Marshal Ferdinand Foch and General Sir Henry Wilson. The subject had occupied them for weeks, but it had taken on a new urgency that morning with the news of the British breakthrough around Valenciennes. The politicians were meeting to finalise the precise wording of the terms that would be offered to the Germans if they decided to seek an Armistice in the next few days.

The house on the rue de l'Université was the Paris residence of Colonel Edward House, President Woodrow Wilson's personal representative at the talks. The United States considered itself an associate of Britain, France and Italy, rather than a formal ally, but with a large army in the field it nevertheless had a big say in the talks. Indeed, the peace proposals to be put to Germany were based on a fourteen-point plan outlined to Congress by President Wilson the previous January.

The mood was ebullient as the leaders talked. Turkey had stopped fighting since Lloyd George had been in Paris. So had Austria-Hungary, Germany's last remaining ally in the field. The

Germans were on their own now, with no one to help them. They still had an army in France and Belgium, but they would surely accept an Armistice within a few days if one was offered to them.

The Allied ministers had been working for a long time to get the terms of an Armistice exactly right. Too lenient, and the Germans would resume the war at a later date. Too harsh, and they might refuse to sign at all. The terms the Allies had eventually decided on were harsh in the extreme, stripping the Germans of arms and territory and leaving them unable to defend themselves against any future aggression.

The terms were so stringent that Lloyd George feared the Germans might well refuse to sign. He had said as much to Marshal Foch, who had agreed with him that the Germans probably wouldn't sign. But Foch wasn't worried, because the German army was beaten in the field, so whether they signed or not made little difference in the long run. The fighting would be over by Christmas, whether the Germans liked it or not.

The meeting began at 11 o'clock and was over by lunchtime. It was agreed that President Wilson would make the approach to the Germans, telling them to contact Marshal Foch if they wanted to learn the Allies' terms for an Armistice. Lloyd George took his leave of Georges Clemenceau and the Italian premier Vittorio Orlando as soon as the discussion was over and set off back to England after a highly satisfactory few days in France.

His party travelled by train to Boulogne, where a British destroyer was waiting to take them to Dover. There was no longer much danger from U-boats, but the crossing was rough, even by Channel standards. Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary to the War Cabinet, was seasick during the voyage, as were most of the others. The sea was so bad that they had to be taken off by boat when they reached Dover.

Nevertheless, Lloyd George was in a splendid mood as they travelled through the night to London. The collapse of Austria and Turkey meant that he was bringing wonderful news home with him. He was going to see the king the next day to brief him on the Paris talks. In the afternoon, he would announce the terms of the Austrian Armistice in the House of Commons. Another few days and he would surely announce the Armistice with Germany as well. After that, he could call a general election and go to the country on his war record.

The Allied politicians were all agreed on an Armistice, but for General John Pershing, commanding the United States troops on the Western Front, the issue was far from clear-cut. Why, he wondered, did they want an Armistice with the Germans when the British, French and Americans were within a few days of defeating them once and for all? Why not just keep going until the German army had collapsed altogether and they had no choice but to surrender? It made little sense to stop now, just when they had the Germans on the run.

Years ago, as a cadet at West Point, Pershing had witnessed the funeral train of Ulysses S. Grant, the Civil War general who had later become US president. The general had been nicknamed 'Unconditional Surrender' Grant for his refusal to accept anything less from the defeated South. He had known what he was doing, in Pershing's opinion. The Confederates had understood that they were beaten after Grant had finished with them. The Germans needed to understand, too, if the Allies wanted to avoid having to fight the whole war again some day.

'There can be no conclusion to this war until Germany is brought to her knees,' Pershing had recently told his army. He believed it passionately. If there was an Armistice, both sides would simply stop fighting and go home. The Germans would hold their heads high, declaring that they had never been defeated in the field. But if they were forced to surrender, they would have to lay down their arms in front of their conquerors. The Allies would proceed to Berlin and march down Unter den Linden with their bands playing and their flags flying. A victory parade in Berlin was the only way to show the Germans that they had been vanquished. Anything less was folly.

Pershing had made his views known in a paper to the Supreme War Council, only to have them rejected out of hand. 'Political, not military', had been Lloyd George's judgment. 'A clear announcement of his intention to become a candidate for the presidency', had been Colonel House's. The politicians took it for granted that Pershing had ulterior motives in advocating unconditional surrender rather than an Armistice. They presumed that he wanted to ride down Unter den Linden at the head of his men so as to become an American hero, ideally placed to seek the presidency in 1920. They didn't believe him when he insisted that his motives were purely military.

Marshal Foch understood what Pershing was saying, but did not share his concern. 'Tell General Pershing not to worry,' he had announced reassuringly. 'I'm going to get exactly what he wants from the Germans.' In Foch's view, the Armistice terms were so stiff that they amounted to a surrender in all but name and couldn't be interpreted by the Germans as anything else.

But Pershing was not so sure. Defeat in the field was the only language the Germans understood. The Allies were making a big mistake in seeking an Armistice instead of carrying on the war to the bitter end. As he travelled to the Second Army's headquarters in the Argonne for a flying visit to discuss the continuing advance, Pershing couldn't help wondering if they wouldn't all come to regret the decision one day.

At Escarmain, four miles across the fields from Le Quesnoy, the French had put a stuffed fighting cock on a pole at the crossroads. The cock was France's national emblem, a symbol of their resurgence over the retreating Germans. It had amused Private Stephen Graham of the 2nd battalion, Scots Guards as he marched past it at dawn, on his way up to the line. He thought it a bizarre sight in the middle of a war, with bagpipes playing and gunfire booming in the distance as

the New Zealanders began their assault on Le Quesnoy.

The Scots Guards were part of that morning's advance, but they were not due to go into action until the next day. While the New Zealanders were busy at Le Quesnoy, the Scots were bypassing the citadel on their way to Villers-Pol, their starting point for the attack next morning.

It had been misty when they set out, but the weather soon cleared as the sun rose. Before long, they made their first halt, falling out for a cigarette beside the Sepmeries road while batteries of sixty-pounders and eight-inch howitzers bombarded the Germans from a position just behind them.

The gunners obligingly warned the troops to 'hold tight' when they were about to fire. Most of the men kept their fingers in their ears as the bombardment continued. They weren't sorry when the halt was over and they resumed their march towards the front. They soon had their first glimpse of the enemy, as Graham later remembered:

'We passed a dead German lying with his head in a pool of blood, and then batches of German prisoners carrying stretchers. The wounded of our own comrades began to come down, and told of an easy progress, stopped now and then by isolated machine-gun posts of the enemy.'

The Germans were an ill-looking lot, much the same as the ones Graham had seen the previous week in the prison cage at St Hilaire:

'Strange, unwashed, ill-shaven, dirty men in shoddy uniforms, with broken boots and weather-beaten old hats - all sorts and sizes of men, Prussians, Westphalians, Bavarians, Alsatians, different types of faces, all relieved, all "out of the war", and yet all depressed. With the failure of Germany's fortunes in the field, the last vestige of dignity seemed to have departed from the faces of the prisoners; they were creatures that once were men; human beings who had suffered three successive kinds of degradation - they had been industrialised, then militarised, and finally captured by an enemy.'

An active Christian, Graham found it hard to hate the Germans, despite having it endlessly drummed into him by the Guards sergeants that the only good German was a dead one.

The battalion reached Villers-Pol that Monday afternoon and snatched a few hours' rest before evening. They were due to attack at dawn next morning, one of many battalions keeping up the pressure on the second day of the advance as part of a concerted effort by the Allies to knock the Germans out of the war once and for all. They were given a hot supper after midnight and a tot of rum. Then, at 2 a.m. on Tuesday, 5 November, the battalion moved out again, weighed down with bombs, shovels, sandbags and all the extra kit they needed for the attack.

Scouts led the way, checking for Germans before the rest followed. The night was dark and windy, but Graham could still make out some vague shapes in the gloom, which turned out to be the bodies of men killed in the previous day's fighting. His platoon reached their start line in good time and fanned out into battle formation for the attack. They had a Grenadier battalion to their right and

the Welsh Guards in support behind them.

Checking their equipment one last time, the men synchronised watches and settled down to wait for dawn. All along the line, British, French and American soldiers were doing the same, ready to press forward again next morning for the second day of what they all hoped and prayed would prove to be the last big push of the war.