

1915 – STALEMATE ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Through 1915, various attempts were made to break the stalemate on the Western Front. These came mostly from the Allied side as the Germans concentrated their main effort against the Russians on the Eastern Front. For them the Western Front became largely a defensive war, and this was reflected in their trench building. Their trenches were generally well constructed and often equipped with deep dug-outs and with concrete “pill boxes”. Well placed machine gun posts could decimate an attacking force. To achieve a breakthrough it was necessary first to bombard these defences and to destroy the barbed wire and machine gun posts for the infantry to have any hope of success – but this of course meant the enemy had clear warning of where an attack was coming from and could call up reserves.

Most of the Western Front was held by French troops and they launched several attacks during the year. In the **Champagne** region in January and at **Vimy Ridge** in May the French troops suffered heavy casualties in battles which achieved nothing significant, and further attacks in these areas in the autumn simply added to the growing toll of deaths. For the British there were other difficulties. Their small professional army had suffered heavy casualties and the Territorials – the former “weekend” soldiers now carried most of the burden. Kitchener’s new army was



Trench with barbed wire



Soldiers sheltering in mine craters at Aubers Ridge

growing rapidly but would need months of training before it was fit for action. Another problem was a continual shortage of heavy guns and ammunition, as Britain’s industries struggled to put themselves on a war footing.

To do their bit and support their allies the British launched attacks in Artois on what they hoped might be weak spots in the German lines. At **Neuve Chapelle** on 10th March, British troops, including the 2nd Scottish Rifles attacked on a narrow front. Despite a heavy advance bombardment, they ran into intense German machine gun fire and the attack was given up after two days. The Scottish Rifles, reduced to 143 men, were by now under the command of 2nd Lieutenant W. F. Somervail, whose family owned Hoselaw. At **Aubers Ridge** on 9th-10th May another attack ended in failure largely due to a shortage of shells to bombard the German defences. In three days 11, 619 men were killed or wounded for no gain. A few days later at **Festubert** a further attack was called off as casualties mounted. The shortage of shells was reported in the press, causing a major scandal back in Britain with fierce criticism of Mr Asquith’s government.