

The anticipated blow fell on 21 March when Ludendorff threw down his last card in his gamble to win the war before the British could transport, and the French train and equip, enough American troops in France to trump the numerical advantage that the Germans currently possessed. Following the armistice with Russia, forty-four German divisions had transferred to the Western Front. Although these now contained fewer men than an Allied division, some of them had been specially trained in the tactics that had won decisive victories at Riga and Caporetto. At least 188 German divisions faced 163 Allied infantry divisions in France: 58 British, 99 French, and 6 American. In addition the Allies had 12 Belgian divisions, the French and British divisions in Italy and the cavalry divisions. Of the 6 US divisions, however, 2 were still disembarking and none of the others was ready to fight. The French had armed the Americans: by 15 March the total supplied amounted to 156 batteries of 75s, 35 batteries of short 155s and 5 groups of the modern extra heavies, plus 2,894 machine guns and 12,864 automatic rifles.¹

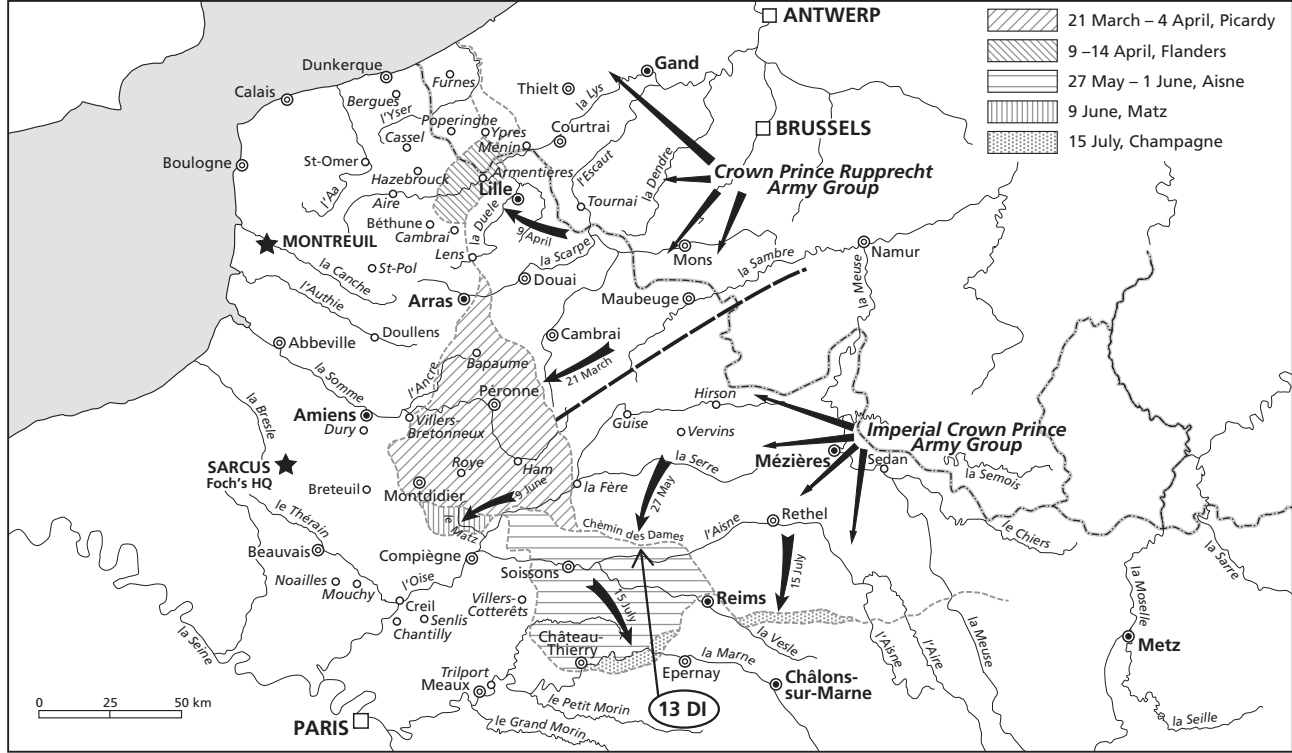
Two offensives against the British front

The last intelligence before the Germans attacked reported 108 enemy divisions on the front, with 74 in reserve, whose whereabouts were known in about two-thirds of cases. The only enemy activity that the French had noted was two trench raids (*coups de main*) around Reims and Verdun; otherwise 20 March had been 'a calm day overall'.² Pétain believed that the German offensive was about to begin, as did General Cox, the new head of intelligence at GHQ. Pétain's head of intelligence, Colonel Cointet, agreed with Cox on the two most likely areas of attack: the rivers Scarpe and Oise, and also in Champagne. They disagreed, however, on the relative weight of the attacks, Cox judging that the French sector would see the main action, because the political situation in France was less stable. Cointet believed, on the other hand, that the

British would bear the brunt of the attack.³ Whichever assessment was correct, there was no joint planning to resist the enemy offensive. The only Franco-British arrangement concerned the use of reserves for support in case of emergency, and this had only been made because Haig and Pétain wished to avoid dealing with the SWC and supplying divisions for a general reserve.

In order to give each other mutual support against a powerful offensive by these numerically superior German divisions, the British and French headquarters had agreed a detailed programme to counter likely German attack plans. When Gough's Fifth Army relieved the French Third, the latter went into reserve, leaving just a headquarters staff. If the main German offensive was engaged on its front, Third Army would be reconstituted and intervene either by relieving some Fifth Army units, or by placing French units under British command. Alternatively, it could form a stop line behind the British, or preferably mount a counter-attack. All the transport and supply arrangements were settled on 21 February for French troops to concentrate in one of three possible sectors to meet the expected German offensive. For these tasks, Third Army was given five infantry divisions, a cavalry corps, three regiments of heavy artillery, ten squadrons of aircraft and a large artillery park. On 22 February a similar scheme was settled whereby the British would relieve Sixth Army or mount a counter-offensive should the Germans attack the French front.⁴ General Fayolle was ordered back from Italy, where the military situation had stabilised, and given command of the reconstituted Reserve Army Group ready to take charge either of the riposte to a German violation of Swiss neutrality or of the response to a German offensive in France.

Ludendorff's aim was to punch a hole in the Allied front and to see what might transpire, or, more specifically, after punching the hole, to roll up the British against the sea, destroy their armies, and then turn on the French. His March offensive ran from the river Scarpe in the north around Arras to the junction of the French and British armies on the river Oise – a distance of 103 kilometres. See Map 12. Impeccable German staff work had assembled a formidable array of guns and aircraft without allowing either the French or the British to find out exactly where the blow was to fall. On the first day of Operation MICHAEL, 21 March 1918, the Germans fired over three million rounds which mostly fell on two British armies, General Byng's Third and General Gough's Fifth. With fewer than half the men and guns of the enemy, the British fell back in disarray. The Germans advanced 5 kilometres that day, repeating the advance the next day, and making an amazing 16-kilometre advance on the 23rd, when they reached Ham and Péronne.



12. German offensives, March–July 1918

Just before midnight on that first day, Pétain alerted three divisions of General Pellé's V Corps to the danger, whilst Haig was writing in his diary that the day's results were 'highly creditable to the British troops'. When early next morning Haig received a clearer impression of the effects of the German attacks, he invoked the agreed provisions for mutual help. By the afternoon of the second day, three French divisions had arrived by road and one of them, 125 DI was already in action. On 23 March, when the Germans made their greatest advance, Pétain and Haig met to discuss the situation. Haig asked for twenty French divisions to be moved to the Amiens area, but Pétain claimed to have replied sharply that it was a question of 'military honour', that Haig should order his troops to stand and be killed. He, Pétain, could only take over up to Péronne if the British held from Péronne to Ham. In short, Barescut recorded, it was a 'cordial' meeting, but 'very clear and peremptory [*très net et tranchant*]'. Haig appears to have missed the rebuke, for his own diary record mentions only that Pétain was 'most anxious to do all he can'.⁵

Pétain was already worried that the British were retiring too far and too fast. Indeed, at GQG the staff judged that Fifth Army no longer existed.⁶ Nonetheless Pétain reactivated the Reserve Army Group and placed Fayolle in command of its two armies, First and Third, together with the remnants of British Fifth Army. Fayolle's command covered the whole area between the former Franco-British junction as far as Péronne on the bend of the Somme. Seven French divisions arrived during the course of 23 March, three by road and four by rail. First Army was now commanded by General Debeney who had taken over from Anthoine after the end of the Flanders battle. It consisted on 26 March of three divisions (133, 166 and 4 DC) joined by 163 DI on the 29th. Third Army, still commanded by General Humbert, consisted of Pellé's V Corps and VI Corps, the latter being swapped to First Army. However, V Corps was a large unit, with five infantry divisions (including the 125 DI which had already joined the fighting on 22 March) and one cavalry division. Third Army grew with the addition of XVIII Corps on 26 March, XXX and XXXV corps the next day, and on the 29th XXXIII Corps.

Crisis point was reached on 24 March. Pétain told Clemenceau that Haig was retiring northwards towards the Channel ports. If Haig continued thus, refusing to reach out to the helping hand that Pétain was extending to the British armies, then they both faced defeat, and this result, so Pétain believed, would be the fault of the British. He saw Haig again late that evening, when Haig repeated his request for a large French force to come to his aid. The account of this meeting in the British official

history follows Haig's own, in which he describes the French CinC as being 'very much upset, almost unbalanced, and very anxious'. This post hoc description, as well as being unlikely – Pétain was too proud to appear 'very anxious' – accords neither with Haig's contemporaneous account, nor with that of the British head of the British military mission to GQG, who was present, nor with Barescut who noted in his diary that Pétain had cheered Haig up.⁷ According to Barescut, the interview between the two CinCs was cordial, but precise and definite. He reported Pétain as asking Haig to 'hold on at all cost'.⁸ The French could only take over the front as far as Péronne if the British continued to hold north from Péronne. By now, however, the Germans were across the Somme and crossing the old Somme battlefield.

Haig's later claims that Pétain said that he had orders to cover Paris rather than maintain contact with the British, and that he (Haig) was so concerned by this that he sent a telegram to London asking for a member of the government to come to France, are both false. The insulting tone of the phantom telegram, allegedly asking for some 'determined general who would fight', reflects in all probability Haig's dislike of Pétain's tone when insisting that the British hold on.⁹ That Pétain did speak firmly to Haig, warning him that the French Army could not continue stretching out its left hand indefinitely, is confirmed by what Pétain told Clive a few weeks later. Pétain said that he had had the whole of France to retire into, but that Haig would be very badly placed, with his back to sea, if he continued to withdraw.¹⁰ Haig was indeed thinking of retiring to the Channel ports, against the policy that had been in place from the start that it was more important to keep contact with the French than to hold on to those ports. As Barescut acknowledged, Pétain was less likely to insist with Haig than was the energetic Foch.

The next day, 25 March, the difference between Pétain and Foch became more marked. Lord Milner had arrived in France, despatched by Lloyd George with full powers to act on the government's behalf. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Henry Wilson, also arrived in France, leaving London after having received telephone calls from both Foch and GHQ. Eight more French divisions arrived in Fifth Army's sector, two arriving by road and six by rail. Three more would arrive by road the next day, another seven on the 27th, and a further four on the 28th. The British complained that they arrived without guns and munitions, but this was unavoidable in the circumstances – would they have preferred to wait for the French guns to arrive? Nonetheless small units were thrown into the gaps in the line immediately they reached the front. Many commentators saw the parallel with what had happened at Ypres in 1914, when units were similarly thrown into line pell-mell.

So Pétain did far more than he had promised in the mutual support arrangements. On 25 March it became clear to French intelligence from interrogations of prisoners that enemy units had been moved away from the Champagne area, hence that German action there had merely been a feint. Cointet informed Pétain of this mid afternoon, and Fourth Army in Champagne confirmed GQG's interpretation, whereupon Pétain ordered two more reserve divisions (38 and 77 DI) from Epernay (Champagne) to the Somme.¹¹

The British and French military and political leaders spent 25 March in discussions and agreed that all should meet the next day to decide what to do. At that next meeting, in the Doullens town hall, Foch was appointed to coordinate the Allied armies in France. Foch's wife wrote this account in her diary after he arrived home late that night.

In light of the events of these last few days, unity of command is more necessary than ever ... Poincaré understood that it was indispensable and supported Ferdinand ... discussions, talks ... then the British arrived, talked on one side ... an hour later all gathered around a big table and it was there decided and resolved that the French and British governments give General Foch the task of ensuring the coordination of all the Allied forces in the west. About time! We have lost two precious days, said Ferdinand ... 'Pray to God that it is not too late.' In fact, the situation is serious, the British have abandoned the line of the Somme. 'It's disgraceful', says Ferdinand – Field Marshal Haig was saying that he could not move away from his bases and General Pétain was alleging that his army had to cover Paris, that he could not scatter it, and that between the two of them a breach was opening to let the Boches through ... Field Marshal Haig said to Ferdinand: 'It's Ypres all over again.' 'Let us hope', he replied, 'that it ends the same way.'¹²

The reaction within the army to Foch's appointment was mostly positive, although not unanimous. In Salonica, Guillaumat judged Foch to be 'anarchic and impulsive', but knew now from his own experience of inter-allied command that it would require more than Foch's nomination to restore the situation.¹³ Yet Poincaré's liaison officer responded to the President's feeling of having done a good day's work by saying that in all military spheres there would be 'a feeling of relief and confidence'.¹⁴ Pershing's officer at GQG reported 'evident pride and satisfaction' at Foch's appointment.¹⁵ At GQG there was relief. Barescut had already canvassed Weygand on 23 March to do all he could to get Foch put in charge: 'General Foch's personality is indisputably the one needed for this designation.' Cointet thought that Foch's characteristic energy on taking command showed 'mastery of events', and in Humbert's Third Army the staff had been impressed by Foch's sureness of touch and precision of views.¹⁶ There was never any question that Pétain might

be given the Allied command. His chief of staff, General Anthoine, was saying on 27 March that the war was lost and that no time should be wasted before making peace.¹⁷

Pétain's order to the Reserve Army Group had been that the British Fifth Army hold on the Somme, and French Third Army from Montdidier to the Oise. If retirement became necessary, Fifth Army was to retire to a line along the river Avre between Amiens and Montdidier, while Third retired on a line from Noyon to Roye. This disposition would create an intact line between the British forces north of Amiens, through Fifth Army between Amiens and Montdidier, then through Third to the Oise, to join up with the rest of the French Army.¹⁸ Barescut, however, thought that such a big withdrawal to the Oise–Montdidier line was very risky.¹⁹ Once Foch began his 'coordination', however, ideas changed. He insisted that not another metre of ground should be ceded. Fayolle complained that he was pulled between the two men: according to Foch 'Amiens must be covered. Order of importance: 1) Amiens, 2) Noyon. Pétain calls me on the telephone this morning and says: 1) Noyon, 2) Amiens. The day before yesterday, "Use the Oise as cover." Besides he has no plan.'²⁰

At first the poilus were proud of their contribution to stopping the enemy and especially proud that the new Allied generalissimo should be a French general.²¹ The morale report for the second fortnight of March on the armies not involved in the fighting claimed that, far from being downcast, the troops were 'stimulated' by the German offensive. In particular, the German big guns firing on Paris provoked real anger, and not only amongst those who had friends and relatives living or working there.²² The military governor of Paris confirmed the 'confidence' of its citizens in the protective measures put in place, and he spoke of the 'greatest calm' among those who had remained in the capital and had not fled the bombing and shelling.²³

Ludendorff's MICHAEL offensive had run out of steam by the end of the month and he put a halt to it on 5 April. Foch's energetic and oft-times resented pep talks had inspired commanders to patch up the holes in the front where and when they appeared, and the enemy was forced to suspend operations because of its own supply problems. The successful Allied resistance had proved the wisdom of appointing a supreme commander. Moreover, Pétain had done far more to supply troops than had been arranged in the pre-war mutual support agreement, and French troops had fought hard to mend the breach in the Allied front. Between 21 and 31 March the French suffered 37,278 wounded and 20,175 killed or missing, the proportion of killed to wounded indicating

(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

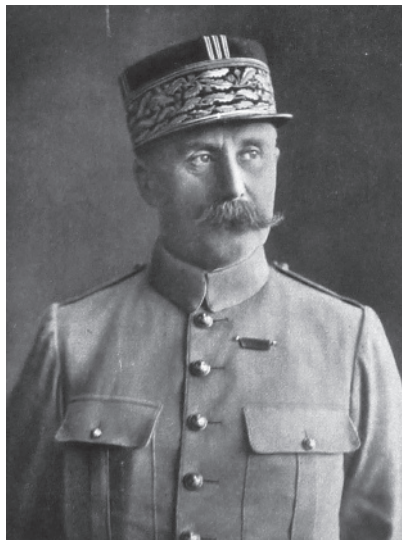


Fig. 17 One Allied and three French Commanders-in-Chief
(a) Joseph Joffre (1852–1931) (b) Ferdinand Foch (1859–1929)
(c) Robert Nivelle (1856–1924) (d) Philippe Pétain (1856–1951)

that the French were fighting hard.²⁴ The post-war comment of Sir Herbert Lawrence, Haig's chief of staff in March 1918, is most unjust:

Even with Foch's good will, he had great difficulty in getting them [the French] to do anything and the utmost he succeeded in doing at the time was to put four divisions behind the Arras front where they did nothing but interfere with our lines of communication.²⁵

Rather, Fayolle's summary is to be preferred: Foch supplied the plan, Pétain the means, and Fayolle himself the execution. The French Army's contribution to stopping the MICHAEL offensive was to take back the front between Somme and Oise that Fifth Army had occupied and lost, and to resist the German attacks there; also to constitute the Reserve Army Group with Fayolle who knew the area and the British from the Somme battle in 1916 and to supply a number of divisions as reserves.

Clearly the end of the fighting in Picardy on the Somme did not mean the end of the battle. Ludendorff's next target, as the Allies realised, and soon had confirmed, was the British front once again, this time further north in Flanders. This second blow was to have been much stronger, but MICHAEL had cost too much and so GEORG became GEORGETTE. Nonetheless Prince Rupprecht's *Sixth Army* carried out an initially successful attack along the line of the Flanders hills, aiming to reach the important rail junction at Hazebrouck, thence to Calais and the sea.

By the time that GEORGETTE began on 9 April, the Allied response to the German offensives was well in place. Foch had moved to confirm his role by asking for greater powers. He had been appointed to coordinate, but he had no resources of his own and it was vital to plan for the future. Moreover, only the British and French had signed the Doullens agreement. Clemenceau invited Lloyd George to discuss the matter, and on 3 April in Beauvais they were joined by Generals John J. Pershing and Tasker H. Bliss, the American CinC and the American representative on the SWC. There, all agreed to entrust Foch with 'the strategic direction of military operations'. Later, on 14 April and after further discussion, Foch was permitted to use the title 'Général en chef des armées alliées'. Foch had set the main plan of defence in March: plug the holes and defend Amiens. He appreciated the vital necessity of retaining the rail communications east of Amiens, which Ludendorff appeared not to have considered important, and which Pétain had been prepared to forgo by suggesting a line of resistance further south. Also Foch recognised clearly the need to build up a 'masse de manoeuvre' to counter-attack, but that was not yet possible, because French troops were being used to bolster the British front and because American manpower resources were too limited.

The movement of French reserves north to Flanders constitutes the second factor in the Allied response to the German spring offensives. On 7 April, Foch ordered Pétain, as the Beauvais agreement now gave him the authority to do, to send three cavalry and four infantry divisions to the west of Amiens, ready to intervene northwards in support of the British or southwards if the French were attacked. The cavalry divisions had not been available on 21 March, because they were being used to police worker unrest in industrial centres in central and southern France. The unrest having died down because the workers recognised the emergency, the cavalry was able to return to strictly military duties. Foch's order stripped the French front from the river Oise to Switzerland, leaving a mere forty-six French plus three American divisions holding quiet sectors to man the line with a further twelve divisions in reserve.

Despite the unified command and the movement of French reserves to the north, the second German offensive smashed the Portuguese divisions of First Army and then broke through the Second Army front in Flanders. Armentières and Messines were lost, and Haig issued his famous 'backs to the wall' order of the day. By 12 April the Germans were within 6 kilometres of Hazebrouck and were beginning to threaten Bailleul and the high ground of the Flanders hills. By 15 April Foch had moved the four divisions of his Tenth Army that had been withdrawn from Italy, together with all its artillery and aviation, to sectors north of the Somme ready to intervene if necessary. These units joined those that had already been moved, and their administration was assured by the creation of the DAN (Détachement d'armée du nord) under the command of General de Mitry. The DAN's three cavalry and nine infantry divisions came under Foch's orders on 19 April, so they were no longer available to Pétain as reserves.

On 24 April the Germans renewed their GEORGETTE attacks. South of the Flanders sector, *Second Army* launched an attack against Villers-Bretonneux, with the aim of securing a base so that the artillery and more forces could attack Amiens. Villers-Bretonneux is situated on high ground, on the old Roman road that runs due east from the city to south of Péronne, dominating Amiens and more importantly within artillery range of the railway junction at Longueau to its east. The three-corps attack, employing ten divisions in the front line with another four in the second, supported by 1,208 guns, 710 aircraft and 13 tanks, began at 04.45 German time (French time is an hour earlier) on 24 April, with the infantry going in at 07.15. This was the area of the junction between the French First Army and the remnants of the British Fifth, now re-named the Fourth and commanded by General Sir Henry Rawlinson. German prisoners had warned that an offensive was imminent, and the junction

was well supported. The four divisions of XX Corps were established solidly to the west of Amiens; the British 18 Division lay behind British Fourth Army's right-hand corps; and two French divisions (DM and 37 DI) were echeloned behind the left-hand French corps.

As usual, the initial German rush was successful and Villers-Bretonneux and the portion of Hangard Wood held by the British were captured. The loss of Villers-Bretonneux could not be allowed, and so Foch ordered immediate counter-attacks. Although an Australian brigade sent up for that purpose failed to re-take the village, at least it stopped the Germans making any further progress. The pressure on the French front was felt further south, in Hangard village, Thennes and north-west of Castel. Furious fighting lasted all day, but the Allied front did not break. Haig recognised, as did Foch, that Villers-Bretonneux must be recaptured and he allocated more British resources for that purpose. Accordingly, at 18.30 that evening he asked Foch to order French First Army to relieve his right-hand corps. After moving more French units into the area the next day, and preparing a counter-attack to be made by the DM in conjunction with the British, it proved impossible to begin the recapture of Villers-Bretonneux immediately, so it was on the morning of 26 April that the joint attack began. With the DM operating between Villers-Bretonneux and Hangard Wood which the British were to capture, 131 DI further south was to recapture Hangard village. The DM covered itself with glory yet again, making most progress and taking over from the exhausted British battalions in Hangard Wood. The Germans made no further infantry assaults after 27 April and Foch ordered Fayolle's Reserve Army Group to take over the whole sector between Villers-Bretonneux and the Avre river, keeping contact with the Australians on their left. Also, Foch ordered the preparations to be continued for an attack to push back the enemy even further from the Allied rail communications, but the German attack further north on Mt Kemmel that began on 25 April consumed French resources yet again. The German attack had made no appreciable gains; Amiens was no closer; no French troops had been diverted, although the Australians had been moved into line and had recaptured Villers-Bretonneux; and the cost was high. German casualties were 8,000, and OHL ordered a halt to operations on 26 April.²⁶ If the attack on Villers-Bretonneux was meant as a diversion from Flanders further north it had failed.²⁷

Before the Flanders attack on Mt Kemmel began, however, Pétain had sounded the alarm. He wrote a long letter to Foch on 24 April complaining that the British were 'reducing their effort' by suppressing nine divisions because of lack of reinforcements to make up their losses, while 1.4 million mobilised men remained behind in Britain. On the other

hand, by 27 March he, Pétain, had committed twenty-seven divisions, either engaged in fighting or moving into the battle zone. Now, almost a month later, forty-seven French divisions were in the former British sector, either supporting British troops or having relieved them. In exchange, the British had supplied four worn-out divisions to be built up again in a quiet sector of the French front. Pétain could not understand this inequality: 'an incomprehensible error, at the very least'. No fresh troops were available to respond to any German attack that might occur on the French front. Pétain ended by stating forcefully that France would fight tomorrow on the British and perhaps Belgian fronts, later on the French front, just as French troops had fought on the Italian front – but France wished 'to be certain that the British Army and British Empire, like the French Army and France, are determined to make *the maximum effort*'.²⁸

In light of these figures, Pétain's anguish is understandable. French intelligence still had not learned the location of forty-eight of the sixty-nine enemy reserve divisions on the Western Front, so the German armies remained capable of striking a powerful blow in one or more other sectors.²⁹ Yet it was more important to prevent the separation of the British and French armies, because that would enable the Germans to deal with each in turn. As Allied commander, Foch was looking at the whole picture; Pétain was thinking solely of the French front and building a head of steam about 'perfidious Albion'. Fayolle, however, was less worried, writing in his diary of Pétain's pessimism and even going so far as to prophesy that Pétain would not finish the war as CinC.³⁰ Pétain's own operations bureau was beginning to criticise him and his chief of staff General Anthoine.³¹ As for Foch, he was pleased that relations with the British seemed to be improving, and that the junction between Belgians, British and French was assured. Although the position around Villers-Bretonneux was 'hot' for a while, he wrote to his wife, he was sure that the British would come through and by 25 April he believed the situation to be stabilised. He had seen Pétain on the 24th, the date of the latter's letter just cited, but he claimed that they were in agreement because '*I decide and shoulder the responsibility*'.³²

The fighting in Flanders was more serious than the attack around Villers-Bretonneux. This was the final German attack of their second offensive, an attempt to break through to the coast. As a result of the fighting at the start of GEORGETTE on 9 April, General Plumer had been forced to pull back his Second Army in order to shorten his front, thereby abandoning the Passchendaele salient that had been won at such awful cost the previous year. Foch insisted that the rest of the Ypres salient be retained, and he placed the DAN under Plumer's command. To the

south of Ypres and protecting the Channel ports lies a chain of low hills, dignified by the name 'mont' only because the surrounding land is so flat. The highest, most easterly of these hills is Mt Kemmel which was strongly fortified and whose summit provided excellent observation. It had been in Allied hands since 1914. The British IX Corps was completely exhausted, and 28 DI took over the defensive lines on Mt Kemmel on 18 April, with 34 DI moving into position on its right the following night and 133 DI in contact with the British line. German intelligence noted their presence on 22 April.³³

Indications that the Germans were preparing to attack Kemmel had come from prisoners as early as 20 April, as well as from increased aviation sorties and road building, and the radio silence which confirmed the prisoner statements. During the evening of 24 April, 28 DI learned from captured prisoners that a powerful gas attack was to begin early next morning. The French also knew the location of some of the main enemy batteries and that the elite Bavarian *Alpine Corps* had arrived opposite the French. Although thus forewarned, 28 DI was very weak. It had already lost twenty-five officers and 1,024 men by the evening of 24 April and was in a difficult position by next morning. The division had been ordered to advance the French lines 500–1,000 metres to the east of Mt Kemmel. The French artillery barrages pounded the objectives, but the infantry only managed to advance a short distance. Uninformed, the gunners maintained their barrage, leaving a band of some 300–800 metres unbombarded, from which the Germans did not neglect to profit.

Following their usual careful planning the German bombardment on 25 April was highly effective. It began with gas shells in order to neutralise the front lines, and the flanking sectors were drenched with gas to prevent re-supply and to disrupt preparations for any counter-attack. Warned just after midnight of the gas attack to begin at 4am, 28 DI had no time to prepare for the violent bombardment that instead began earlier, at 2.30. Then, at 5.30, the *Minenwerfer* came into action, followed shortly thereafter by the infantry using flamethrowers. The brief but very heavy bombardment was worse than before Verdun in 1916, some French declared. This assault completely overwhelmed the French defenders who also suffered harassment from machine guns firing from aircraft that had control of the skies. The Germans broke through and overran 28 DI in short order, splitting the French and British troops and penetrating around the hill from the north. Seventy minutes later, units of the *Alpine Corps* were in position on the summit of Mt Kemmel.³⁴ It was another spectacular, albeit limited, success for gas warfare. Yet the German breakthrough had been so successful that the infantry ran into their own gas and, having swept over the summit just after 8am and then

down the other side, they halted until the artillery could be moved up ready for the next objective. This was the road running west from Ypres, via Vlamertinghe to Poperinghe. The delay enabled the Allies to fill the 6-kilometre gap in their front. On 26 April, Foch ordered up more French artillery units and, the next day, three more divisions (168, 42, 121). This was enough to parry the renewed German attacks on each day between 26 and 29 April, when Ludendorff finally called a halt to GEORGETTE. The stiff Allied resistance, the knowledge that French troops had been moved in large numbers to Flanders, and the fear of a French attack developing on the Somme combined to force OHL's hand.³⁵ Mt Kemmel remained in German hands almost until the end of the war, but to little effect; it was abandoned in the last weeks of the war during the general retirement. The Germans had been unable to capture any other of the Flanders hills, and Ypres and the Channel ports survived, although the coal mines around Bruay were within range of German guns. The remnants of the unfortunate 28 DI were withdrawn on 30 April and returned to Pétain's command.

At GHQ it was believed that the French had simply run away. Haig was scathing: 'The French have lost Kemmel – a position of extraordinary strength. How they managed it I don't know.'³⁶ Although a degree of *Schadenfreude* and relief that the disasters were, finally, not all British is understandable, yet Haig's comment in his post-war account is grotesque: 'between 21st March and 15th April, the French did practically nothing and took no part in the fighting'; and when, finally, French troops took over the Kemmel sector, 'these French troops lost one of the strongest positions on our front and practically made no effort to re-take it'.³⁷ One British artillery officer commented post-war that 'the French gunners had run like hares!', and another British officer remarked: 'We had been told that the French would hold the hill at all costs.' However he admitted: 'Certainly the bombardment was intense and as concentrated as any I had experienced.'³⁸

Yet the evidence is clear that the German artillery barrages before launching the infantry attack on Kemmel were stupendous. They prevented the re-supply of the defenders with munitions.³⁹ And, for the French, it was another case of having to fill a gap in the line caused by a British retreat. Captain Henri Desagneaux arrived in the north with his unit on 14 April. The French inhabitants were pleased to see French troops, as they had lost confidence in the British. Relations between British and French troops were tense, Desagneaux claimed: roads were lined with enormous British camps, but the men were doing nothing except polish horse brasses and spruce up harnesses.⁴⁰ When extracts from the French translation of Haig's diary and papers were published in

1964, French readers were outraged. The British had run away at Kemmel 'like rabbits', one writer claimed.⁴¹ The Army's report on morale for the first two weeks of May reflected, of course, the hard fighting. The pride in coming to the rescue had become 'great physical fatigue' resulting from the 'implacable character of the struggle', the great length of time in line in active sectors, and the losses. Some units of the DAN had begun expressing a desire for relief 'with a certain vehemence', leading the report writer to conclude that they had been truly 'overworked'.⁴²

Despite Haig's unjustified scorn, the fighting for Kemmel hill had been fierce. The French memorial on the hill is an ossuary with the remains of 5,294 men, of whom only 57 are identified by name. As for the casualties of 28 DI, who had defended the hill, they were 4,183 men and 106 officers for 25 April alone, bringing the division's total casualties for that day plus the preceding nine days to 5,248 men and 131 officers. As their commanding general reported, the men were extremely tired but there had been no signs of large numbers having abandoned the battlefield. The division now consisted of no more than ten companies of men.⁴³ The enemy was unable to make any further progress because German casualties were great also, *Fourth Army's* battalions being reduced to 200–300 men, instead of 750–800.⁴⁴ The Germans had planned to push the Allied line back as far as the Ypres–Poperinghe line in the initial onslaught, supported by a huge artillery barrage which included guns as large as 42cm calibre.⁴⁵ The telephone log for 29 April reveals that Lossberg, *Fourth Army's* chief of staff, told Ludendorff at 12.20 and again at 21.35 that the enemy's artillery was powerful, disposed in depth and well sited. There were also many machine-gun nests.⁴⁶ Ludendorff closed GEORGETTE down on 1 May.

Ludendorff's fears of a French counter-attack on the Somme, mentioned above as a factor in his decision to suspend GEORGETTE, were not unfounded. Foch was eager to mount a counter-offensive, even though for the moment the Allies were desperately plugging holes. A detailed study was made at GQG for an operation to free Amiens, but the plan had to be postponed because too many resources had gone to Flanders.⁴⁷ Foch was not prepared to launch an offensive without the necessary means. Preparations continued nonetheless, and by the end of May Fayolle was almost ready with an operation to free Montdidier first and then Amiens. Fayolle believed that such an operation could provide a much-needed morale boost without costing too much in troops. Foch's directive for the operation arrived on 21 May, but Pétain was waiting to criticise Fayolle's plan, so the latter thought. There was constant disagreement between Foch and Pétain, Fayolle wrote, with Foch always

wanting to attack but Pétain unwilling. Both were right, Fayolle concluded. What was needed was to 'combine them to make one single man, a true complete leader'.⁴⁸

MICHAEL and GEORGETTE had both failed. The French and British Armies had not been separated, nor had Ypres fallen, opening the way to the coast. The French Army's contribution to the successful defence had been the despatch of large numbers of troops to stop up the gaps during MICHAEL. Then, during GEORGETTE, the French had not relieved British divisions but had been inserted behind the BEF, ready to intervene if necessary. In addition, French troops had fought to defend Villers-Bretonneux, and had taken over the front on Mt Kemmel, being successful in the first endeavour but failing to retain the high ground in the second. Nevertheless, German artillery still threatened the vital Paris–Amiens railway, forcing the Allies to use longer routes with smaller throughput, and the equally vital coal mines around Bruay. Although the British losses were much more severe, French casualties in March and April amounted to 92,000; forty-one French divisions had taken part in the fighting; the French front was now 97 kilometres longer, and French reserves were greatly depleted. On 1 May, between the Oise and the North Sea, they amounted to twenty-four divisions, plus two cavalry divisions requiring reconstitution. For the rest of the front, from the Oise to Switzerland, there were sixteen divisions (only seven of them fresh) and three cavalry divisions. Yet French intelligence estimated the number of German divisions on the same date, 1 May, at 206, that is to say twenty-four more than on 20 March. The whereabouts of forty-nine of them were unknown.⁴⁹ As Hindenburg put it post-war: 'Twice England had been saved by France at a moment of extreme crisis.'⁵⁰

The repercussions on the French Army

From the point of view of the French troops who had not been transferred north and who remained between the Oise and Switzerland, the most significant result of the two German spring offensives was the fact that the French Army were now stretched very thinly. Each division had to man a much wider front and had fewer or no reserves behind it in case of emergency. On 7 May Pétain sent to Foch a table showing the current situation of the French Army. Its front had grown from 530 kilometres on 20 March to 655 kilometres: it had taken back 30 kilometres on the left bank of the Oise that the British had abandoned, and the Reserve Army Group and the DAN held another 80 and 20 kilometres respectively, with twenty-four divisions in line (including one US division) and a further eighteen in reserve, six of whom were still moving between

sectors. The Eastern and Northern Army Groups were left with forty-six divisions in line (including three US divisions) and fifteen in reserve. Of these fifteen, two were Italian and not yet ready for the front, and one British. More British were due to arrive under the *roulement* scheme, but all were among the most severely tested in the recent fighting. (Roulement, or rotation, was intended to place tired British divisions in a quiet French sector in order to recuperate.) Furthermore, among the twelve French divisions in reserve, only three had not been in the fighting – one of them being 13 DI – and the two most battered divisions from the Mt Kemmel battle (28 and 154 DI) would be fit for nothing for several weeks. Although the front from the Oise to Switzerland was quiet, the Verdun sector was fairly active, requiring frequent reliefs of the troops there. Pétain concluded that the French armies had ‘reached their limit’; the British would have to manage in the north; French depots were empty of troops until July.⁵¹ He foreshadowed the dissolution of units since Clemenceau as war minister had refused his reiterated request for a further 200,000 men to make up the deficit.⁵² The class of 1919 had been called up in April 1918, and 229,215 men incorporated, 75 per cent of the total.⁵³

The task of increasing Allied manpower fell to Foch and Clemenceau. Both embarked on a long and acrimonious series of discussions to extract more British and American troops.⁵⁴ The French were convinced that more than a million British soldiers in uniform were to be found in the UK, not all of whom could possibly be required for Home Defence. Foch insisted with Haig, and Clemenceau likewise with Lloyd George, that depleted British divisions should not be suppressed but filled up again with some of those million-plus men. Foch also insisted that the ‘B’ men – those previously declared unfit for overseas service – should not be formed into separate divisions, creating a two-tier organisation of units fit only to hold quiet sectors but not to fight. He won that argument.

The second source of manpower lay across the Atlantic and there were equally acrimonious debates over transport and deployment of the inexperienced and mainly untrained doughboys. Pétain had argued unsuccessfully for amalgamation over the winter, although on 28 March Pershing had loudly trumpeted his offer to engage all his infantry, artillery and aviation: ‘all that we have are yours; use them as you wish . . . the American people will be proud to take part in the greatest battle of history’.⁵⁵ Agreements were made, and argued over, to transport American infantry and machine-gunners only, leaving behind administrative troops until the emergency had ended. Lloyd George believed that the new arrivals should join the British since they were transported in British

ships for the most part; the French believed rather that the British were pulling a fast one and that they themselves had priority, as they were training and equipping them. Moreover, the task of training the Americans was an added burden, as US infantry regiments were attached to French divisions for intensive training before being returned to their American divisions. On 1 May Pétain issued a note on training to army and army group commanders, insisting on the need for tact and diligence in this task.⁵⁶ Barescut had to warn Pétain himself about tact, saying that there should be no request for US troops to join French units, nor should there be any talk of 'instruction'. Rather the talk should be of a future American sector.⁵⁷

A third source of manpower lay in France's empire. Mangin's 'force noire' had not become a very powerful force thus far, but the manpower deficits were becoming too pronounced to forgo this source. Mangin was not without political influence as he had contacts among deputies, who were also members of the Chamber's army commission, and he knew Clemenceau. After being sacked after the 1917 Chemin des Dames battle, Mangin had established enough contact with Clemenceau in Paris that the new premier and war minister gave him another command in December. In a report that he gave to Clemenceau the same month, Mangin claimed that 70,000 natives could be raised from Africa as part of a force of 'colonial contingents' of over a third of a million plus a further quarter of a million labourers.⁵⁸ Clemenceau claimed not to be a French imperialist, but metropolitan France was in dire need of manpower. Accordingly he charged the black African deputy, Blaise Diagne, as 'Commissioner of the Republic' to undertake a recruitment mission to his constituency in Senegal. There was resistance from the colonies to this, because recruitment would remove their source of cheap manpower, but Clemenceau was not interested in such arguments and even promised Diagne that some improvement in the 'social condition' of native Africans might follow the war. Diagne arrived in Dakar on 18 February 1918 with an imposing 350-strong entourage. By all accounts, he enjoyed a great propaganda success, but the numbers were less impressive. Although a first levy raised 63,000 men in French West Africa and 14,000 in French Equatorial Africa, there were many medical problems, and the influenza epidemic reached West Africa in September. By November, 50,000 men had reached France or Algeria, some of them volunteers attesting to the successful propaganda, but this was too late, of course, for Pétain in May.⁵⁹

Conscription had been extended to indigenous French citizens in Algeria, which was part of France, in 1916. The conscripts and voluntary engagements of 1918 were almost 50,000 of which 13,942 were

engagements. However, many of the conscripts were tubercular or otherwise unfit because of famine conditions over the 1917/18 winter, and few served in France. In addition, Algerian labour was recruited and a monthly average of 3,422 men crossed the Mediterranean between January and April 1918. This was a much lower figure than the previous year but reflects the rarity of shipping to transport the men.⁶⁰ Morocco provided 10,000 men, Madagascar 4,000 and Indo-China 6,000 during the course of 1918, but once again, by the time these men had been trained, the crisis had passed and they did not serve in France.⁶¹ In 1917 a second recruitment round in New Caledonia had produced 390 Kanak natives who arrived in France in early 1918. They brought to 948 the total native contingent embarked (in all 1,137 enlisted in the two recruitment rounds), being 10.8 per cent of the total adult male Kanak population.⁶²

There was help also from the Italians. They had returned four of the French divisions sent to Italy after Caporetto in 1917, and in April 1918 they supplied an Italian corps of two divisions, under the command of General Alberico Albricci. The II Italian Corps relieved a French corps in the Argonne in mid May. In addition, 60,000 Italian labourers were provided for digging defensive lines behind the French front. American troops were moving into front-line and active sectors, rather than simply relieving quiet sectors to free up French divisions. The first American action, well supported by French command and French artillery, was at Cantigny at the end of May.

Meanwhile Pétain had to ensure that the French divisions that remained under his control were prepared for the new infiltration tactics used by the Germans. He reminded his army and army group commanders that the offensives had shown the vital necessity of keeping up training in small unit actions during rest periods. Most lower level commanders knew only trench warfare and were finding it difficult to adapt to the new conditions. Artillery officers were not used to having to come into action rapidly, and infantry officers were unable to manoeuvre in depth. Pétain urged that general officers should supervise training so as to enable their men to regain 'flexibility and mobility' and to develop as much as possible the ability to manoeuvre. Training was now more important than ever.⁶³ Lessons were drawn from the recent fighting: issue orders rather than make plans for immediate counter-attacks; teach men to operate in flexible groups, using the terrain and encircling strongpoints rather than attacking head on; there should be strict liaison between infantry and tanks, which were useless operating on their own.⁶⁴ On 23 April Pétain asked the army commanders involved in the March–April fighting to prepare a report on the fighting, with details about the

artillery, aviation, tanks and enemy manoeuvres, to be provided as quickly as possible with a note about the lessons learned from the action.⁶⁵ A note about the German use of tanks at Villers-Bretonneux was circulated on 8 May to all armies with the purpose of pointing out to the infantry the areas vulnerable to attack. Wooden models of tanks were to be constructed for instructing the troops.⁶⁶ Other practical details also received attention. The maps used by British and French gunners were marked up differently, but sound-ranging units, for example, needed to be able to communicate intelligence about enemy batteries. A conference was convened in Paris with a view to standardising 'plans directeurs'.⁶⁷ Pétain requested that funds be set aside so that rewards could be given for prisoner captures. With the thinning of troop densities in the front line it was becoming more difficult to take any prisoners in trench raids, yet the intelligence gained thereby was invaluable. Clemenceau granted the request, providing 50,000 francs for each of the ten armies.⁶⁸

During this period between German offensives, Pétain took one further step which had a significant effect. He had always seen eye to eye with the man he appointed to head the aviation services at GQG in September 1917, Colonel Duval. Pétain wanted a 'mass' of aviation to support the ground battle, for the French air service had done very well in helping the British to resist MICHAEL. Although German aircraft had reconnoitred the ground before the assault and reported troops moving up to the artillery, the French had gained air superiority by 24 March. They flew hundreds of sorties between 22 and 26 March, day and night, bombing railways, bridges, munitions depots and supply convoys. They machine-gunned enemy troops on the ground and shot down German observation balloons. Although the British and French together lost more aircraft (189) than the Germans did (65) between 21 and 26 March, the Allies had greater reserves.⁶⁹ Currently, however, resources were spread around the armies, but a battle was not necessarily confined to one single army sector. Pétain wanted mastery of the air, with French bombers destroying railway stations, assembly points and so on in the enemy rear, thereby forcing German fighters to come out to be destroyed in turn. Then French observation aircraft could spot at liberty for the artillery. Duval had worked the previous year to standardise aircraft types, helped by the under-secretaries Vincent and his successor Dumesnil. On 14 May Pétain issued the order creating the Division aérienne (Air Division), under Duval's command. It consisted of four groupings, each named for its commander: the first contained two wings (Escadres 1 and 12); the second, three fighter and two bomber groups; the third, one wing (Escadre 11); the last, two bomber groups, one of which was Italian. Duval retained his role as head of aviation at GQG in addition to

this new command, in which he reported to the Reserve Army Group's commander, Fayolle, whose chief of staff he had been briefly. A few days later, however, Pétain took control himself. (As comparison, the Royal Air Force had been created on 1 April 1918.)

Although some army and group commanders disliked losing control of their own aviation resources – but not Fayolle, who realised how important the 'principle of mass' was to aviation⁷⁰ – Duval created a force that more than justified its existence in July, as will be seen in the next chapter. He argued against using the Air Division as a strategic bombing force, as the British wished to use their Independent Air Force under Sir Hugh Trenchard. What was the point of bombing Cologne, Duval asked, if the war was lost in France? Instead he drew up a doctrine that replaced individual action by massed groups with the aim of destroying the enemy's aviation.⁷¹ Having trained together, the French pilots would create the mass and the concentration that Pétain and Duval wanted. The experience in Flanders confirmed Duval in his decision. The DAN's aviation service reported how German aircraft had massed for the attack on Mt Kemmel, machine-gunning trenches and gun batteries, and then had returned to its normal tactic of smaller patrols over a wider front.⁷²

There was one 'fly in the ointment' during all these changes and improvements within the French Army: relations between Pétain and Foch. There is ample evidence that the two men were in complete disagreement over strategy. Foch urged the preparation of a counter-offensive, whilst Pétain resisted. 'We must be economical, if we wish to last out, and not throw ourselves into a mad adventure', Pétain told the liaison officer with the government.⁷³ Yet he kept insisting that he was on good terms with Foch – as he had insisted to Nivelles – although this did not stop him from complaining to Poincaré about Foch's throwing troops in Flanders into 'unthinking, badly prepared attacks'.⁷⁴ Matters came to a head over Fayolle's preparation of the Amiens offensive that Foch had been attempting to launch so as to liberate the Paris–Amiens railway. On 15 May all met at Fayolle's headquarters, and Foch laid out his views about how the offensives, that the Allied armies should be preparing without delay, were to be 'envisaged'.⁷⁵ Clearly annoyed, Pétain wrote to Foch the next day, stating that the Allied CinC's comments 'constituted only a discussion at the tactical level'. He requested, therefore, a 'written directive' with Foch's 'strategic idea', so that he would have 'a basis for the definitive instructions to be given to General Fayolle'.⁷⁶ This was clearly a shot across Foch's bows, telling him to leave tactics alone and restrict himself to strategy. It must be admitted that Foch did interfere in matters tactical, but this might be forgiven in the two crises of March and April. Pétain was sufficiently annoyed to

threaten resignation but Barescut managed to dissuade him from such an extreme step.⁷⁷

As the arguments raged at the highest levels over obtaining more British and American manpower and between Foch and Pétain over the planning for a counter-offensive, the whereabouts of many of the German reserve divisions remained unknown. From 30 April the 2e Bureau's daily intelligence reports recorded an unchanging figure of 206 German divisions on the Western Front. The number of those divisions in reserve in the rear varied between a low of sixty-two on 4 May and eighty-two on the 17th. On the eve of the next German offensive, 26 May, French intelligence recorded eighty such divisions, the whereabouts of only thirty-five of them being known. More worryingly still, sixty-two of those divisions were considered to be 'fresh'.⁷⁸ The raw numbers did not give a true story, because the March and April offensives had greatly depleted the infantry within those divisions. Nevertheless, it was divisions that the intelligence reports counted. Pershing's liaison officer, Major Paul H. Clark, was told on 20 May that GQG had no idea where the next offensive was to strike.⁷⁹ (The fact that Pétain re-started the training school for staff officers at Melun indicates perhaps that GQG did not expect an attack on the French front.)⁸⁰ Foch insisted that another attack on the junction of French and British troops in the north was entirely possible, indeed was likely, since that was where the greatest profit could be gained by separating the two armies or by reaching the Channel ports. Pétain remained concerned, however, for his thinly manned front that stretched from the Oise to Switzerland.

Three offensives against the French front

The failure of both MICHAEL and GEORGETTE imposed on OHL certain conclusions. First, they realised that Foch had been correct to move the bulk of the French reserves into northern France because thereby he had halted the German advances. Second, Foch intended to hold northern France at all costs, but this meant that he had too few resources to mount a strong counter-attack. Third, in order to retain the initiative, the German armies had to attack again before the arrival of American troops gave Foch greater resources. Finally, that German attack had to draw French reserves from the north before the British could be finished off. This meant, in consequence, an attack further east. General von Boehn's *Seventh Army* was ordered to prepare an operation, code-named BLÜCHER, using units pulled from the eastern army groups. It could not have such a wide front as MICHAEL or GEORGETTE, given the longer German front now created in northern France and the losses already

sustained. Nor could it take place too far east since the aim was to disrupt the Allied troops opposite Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, in order to renew the attacks against the British. The Germans selected the Chemin des Dames sector whence they had been dislodged the previous year. Supporting attacks on both flanks were to threaten Reims and prevent a French attack out of Montdidier.⁸¹

Although ideally positioned to obtain the main objective – to force the Allies to remove French reserves from northern France – yet the terrain chosen for BLÜCHER was difficult for the attacker. The geographic features, river valleys and intermediate ridges, all ran east–west. The road and rail communications did the same, but the Germans would be attacking from north to south. Thus rivers had to be crossed, the Ailette, the Aisne and the Vesle, and the ridges in between climbed. Ludendorff had sufficient sense to refuse all requests to widen the attack, but on the other hand he expanded the first day objectives several times during the planning.

Equally, the geography should have made the task of defending the Chemin des Dames sector slightly easier. General Denis Duchêne's Sixth Army had been holding the heights of the narrow ridge since the French pushed the Germans off and down into the valley of the Ailette after the the Battle of La Malmaison in October 1917. According to Pétain's directives on defence, Duchêne should have held the Chemin des Dames itself as an outpost line, with the position of principal resistance several kilometres to the south, along the Aisne river. Duchêne had good reasons not to follow the prescription. The Chemin des Dames ridge was very strong, with good observation north and south. To prepare to abandon the ridge line in favour of a much lower position in the rear did not appear sensible. Equally as important, the ridge had been won at enormous cost, after the armies had been driven in 1917 to refuse to continue attacking. The morale effect of abandoning it, on both military and civilian opinion, would be incalculable. Despite reminders from his army group commander, Franchet d'Espèrey, and from Pétain himself, Duchêne maintained his view that the Sixth Army's principal line of resistance should lie along the Chemin des Dames ridge itself.

Sixth Army's front extended from the river Oise in the west to the outskirts of Reims, 90 kilometres further east. Eleven divisions, eight French and three recovering British, held the front backed up by some territorials and twenty-seven machine-gun companies. Each division was responsible for a wider front than usual, with 21 DI in the centre holding 11.5 km of front line. Pétain had his twelve-division reserve deployed fairly close behind Sixth Army, and four of these were under Duchêne's

control. Two of the four, however, had barely recovered from the fighting in Picardy and Flanders. Two German prisoners captured on 26 May confirmed the earlier indications that an attack was about to take place, early next morning, on the Chemin des Dames. Consequently Pétain alerted Sixth Army's reserve divisions, and Franchet d'Espèrey ordered his 1 Cavalry Corps to move up. Duchêne alerted his divisions at 7pm and ordered the artillery to fire all night on crossroads and assembly points, although not to begin counter-battery fire until the German guns opened up. The infantry in the front line had seen no indications of any attack, however, as the superb German staff-work had hidden its preparations. Nor had French aviation seen any signs of a forthcoming offensive.

Suddenly, at 1am on 27 May, one of Colonel Bruchmüller's orchestrated bombardments began on a 43-kilometre-wide front and to a depth of 10 to 12 kilometres. Unlike in Flanders, where ypérite, a form of mustard gas, had been used, the Germans fired mostly 'blue cross' gas shells, but in very large proportions: only 20 per cent of shells used against French batteries were explosive; the remainder were 70 per cent 'blue cross' and 10 per cent 'green cross'.⁸² The blue cross shells contained an arsenic-based powder which attacked the upper respiratory system, causing sneezing and vomiting. This made the sufferer remove his gas mask, so that the volatile and highly toxic gas in the green cross shell could do its work. The deluge of gas neutralised the French batteries which, it will be remembered, had been ordered to wait for the Germans to open fire before responding. The result was catastrophic. Gas was used also in the *Feuerwalze*, the supporting barrage for the infantry assault (two-fifths gas, three-fifths explosive), which indicates how well the German gunners had mastered the technique of firing gas shells accurately. Mustard gas was only used to suppress flanking attacks, thus leaving the main front of attack clear of the most persistent type of gas. With almost as many *batteries* as the British and French had guns, and with 3,080 gas projector tubes and 1,233 trench mortars, the Germans achieved the greatest superiority of tubes – 3.7 to 1, or a tube every 9–10 metres – of any First World War battle. Some captured tanks and approximately 500 aircraft completed the German offensive power of the twenty-nine infantry divisions devoted to BLÜCHER. Three million shells were fired on the first day, from guns that were calibrated in rear areas beforehand, by measuring the muzzle velocity of individual guns and applying mathematical formulae for the specific weather conditions on the day. Accordingly no warning was given by batteries registering their guns, and the barrage began in darkness. Besides, with such a high proportion of gas shells, pinpoint accuracy was not required.⁸³

The results of such overwhelming firepower were not surprising, although the force of the assault came as a huge shock to the French. The German infantry attack began a mere two hours and forty minutes later, just before dawn. Elements of the leading corps reached the top of the Chemin des Dames ridge an hour later; between 9 and 10am the Germans were along the Aisne. By 11am the Germans were across the Aisne and the Aisne–Marne canal, and by 8pm the first units had reached the Vesle, which river several units in *Seventh Army's* centre crossed two hours later. They had progressed so far and so fast that the French had no time to evacuate their guns from the north bank of the Aisne, and more significantly, Duchêne's order to blow up the Aisne bridges arrived only after the Germans were already across the river.

The Germans continued their progression the next day, 28 May. Despite having reached their objectives for the whole battle, namely the heights south of the Vesle, they were ordered to continue. Ludendorff decided to exploit the success rather than stick to the original plan of attracting French reserves so as to be able to launch operation HAGEN in the north against the British. So by nightfall the Germans had entered Soissons and had made a further 10 kilometres' ground south of the Vesle. Sixth Army had been pushed out of all its organised positions, and had nothing but open country at its back. The next day the Germans continued to push through the 25–30 kilometre gap in the centre and by evening had almost reached the Marne, a river they had last seen in 1914. The only bright spot was the French resistance around Reims which had faltered but did not break.

By now, however, the French had managed to get their defensive act together. Duchêne had thrown his reserves piecemeal into the fighting early on the first day, and they had been swallowed up to no purpose. Pétain and Franchet d'Espèrey organised General Micheler's Fifth Army of ten infantry and three cavalry divisions to join the battle. Two of their units arrived on the first day and were engaged, with three more arriving on the 28th and a further three the next day. In addition, on 28 May, Pétain took two divisions from the Eastern Army Group and another eight from Fayolle's Reserve Army Group, and these units arrived gradually between 30 May and 1 June.⁸⁴ That same day, 28 May, Pétain saw Foch, who remained confident that the attack was a diversion – as indeed it was so intended – and had told Clemenceau so. That day's intelligence assessment stated that Crown Prince Rupprecht still had more reserves (forty-one divisions) available than the armies of the Imperial Crown Prince on the Aisne (twenty-four). Indeed, with twenty-four *fresh* divisions, as many as the Imperial Crown Prince's *total*, Rupprecht presented a much greater danger. Pétain announced the necessary measures

to halt the enemy in a directive issued late that evening: the two flanks of the enemy breach were to be held strongly, that in the east backed by the Montagne de Reims where Fifth Army came into line between the Fourth around Reims and the battered Sixth, and in the west by holding the plateaux to the north and south of Soissons. Two American divisions began moving on 30 May towards Château Thierry to reinforce the French at the bottom of the bulge.⁸⁵

Although Pétain and GQG had organised the best defence possible, holding the edges of the breach so as to channel the enemy onslaught, they remained pessimistic. The Germans did reach the Marne on 30 May. Also they attacked the two 'moles', or flanks of the salient, capturing the plateau north of Soissons and pressing Fifth Army very strongly around Reims. Yet the German advance had been so pronounced that re-supply was becoming a serious problem for them. Ludendorff knew that he needed the railway line between Soissons and Reims because the north-south communications were inadequate. Although the Germans held Soissons, the French still held Reims, and without Reims the line could not be used. Ludendorff ordered *First Army* to help the *Seventh* to capture Reims. So GQG feared for Reims in the east and for the roads to Paris via the Marne and the Oise.

There was no question whatsoever of evacuating Paris, as had happened in 1914. Parliament would not permit the government to leave, nor had Poincaré any desire so to do. Clemenceau stalked the corridors defending Foch and Pétain against the flying rumours and criticisms. Guillaumat was brought back from Salonika in case a replacement was required for either general. On the other hand, there was some question of abandoning eastern France. On 30 May Pétain asked Castelnau to draw up a statement of what needed to be done, in the case of a forced withdrawal, to maintain contact with the Northern Army group. Castelnau responded that, since he had no reserves whatsoever, he would be forced to withdraw if he was attacked, so as to regroup and manoeuvre to 'contain the enemy whilst waiting for better times'.⁸⁶ The next day, Franchet d'Espèrey ordered Fifth Army to evacuate Reims in order to retain some reserves for keeping the front intact to the Marne, but Fifth Army ignored the order. On 1 June Pétain instructed Fifth Army to resist where they were, with officers using violence against their own men, if necessary.⁸⁷

What about the troops? By the end of the offensive the Germans had captured 600 guns and some 50,000 prisoners.⁸⁸ Although the rapid German advance over areas that some units knew well had produced a 'painful' effect on the men, morale remained 'excellent' or 'very good' in 36 per cent of reports from the commanders of 946 units that the postal

control commission studied. A further 62 per cent reported 'good' or 'satisfactory' morale, the remaining 2 per cent not offering an opinion.⁸⁹ The men had attributed the German success on the Somme in March to the British Army's 'inexperience' and so they had not been adversely affected, but they had been 'surprised' by the loss in May of positions that many knew personally to have been strong defensive ground. The sight of refugees and fears for families in the invaded areas had been depressing, but confidence returned once resistance had stiffened. The arrival of young, eager Americans had been an 'essential element' in the restoration of confidence, together with the knowledge that the enemy had paid dearly for the Chemin des Dames offensive without gaining any 'decisive' objective.

One of the units thrown into the fray on 27 May was 13 DI. The division was one of the few to have escaped the fighting in March and April. After the victory at La Malmaison in 1917, the division had spent the winter in the Vosges; on 24 May it began its move westwards by train to join Sixth Army's reserves, concentrating around Ville-en-Tardenois. By the evening of 26 May its artillery and engineers had arrived and the division was complete, ready to undergo a period of training. That night, however, the staff were warned to be ready to move into action and the men could hear the start of the German bombardment, some of them even being affected by the gas that was fired. By 9.30am on the morning of 27 May the divisional artillery had set off to join the left of the British IX Corps and the division's commander, now General Martin de Bouillon, went to make contact with the British. Already the original point of junction had been moved, and the infantry began marching early afternoon ignorant of the situation in front of them. After spending the night in woods, they found their centre under strong enemy attack and their left completely uncovered. The division managed a fighting retreat over the next few days, and inflicted numerous casualties. As Ludendorff recognised: 'the resistance of this division cost the life and health of numerous German soldiers', he wrote in an intelligence report on 10 June. The nine days during which 13 DI was engaged cost the division 2,825 casualties of its own.⁹⁰

Foch moved his headquarters to be nearer GQG, and on 31 May met Haig and, later the same afternoon, Pétain, Duchêne and Clemenceau. After two hours' discussion they agreed that the worst was over and that their intelligence service had provided them with enough information to understand the German plan. Foch had been pressing Cointet for intelligence of Rupprecht's divisions, and it was now possible to confirm that any new German divisions would have to be transferred to the Marne from the north.⁹¹ After 1 June the tide turned. Crown Prince Rupprecht

was informed that HAGEN could not start before mid-July, when the whole point of BLÜCHER had been to enable the northern attack to begin promptly around 1 July, and Crown Prince Wilhelm learned that *First Army's* attack against Reims had stalled. Although Ludendorff continued to issue operational orders, and some progress was made against the French north and south of the Villers-Cotterêts forest, by 4 and 5 June the battle had ceased. It was decided to concentrate on preparing operation GNEISENAU. The French had committed thirty-seven divisions to stopping the German advance, and losses had been severe. During the German offensive, 27 May–5 June, the French armies suffered 98,160 casualties, of whom almost 30,000 were wounded, and 68,890 had been killed, had disappeared or been taken prisoner.⁹²

The search for the guilty, for those responsible for the débâcle, began immediately. The parliamentarians had received a considerable fright, and Clemenceau was spending his time at the front and in the various army headquarters, and so unable to calm the calls for Duchêne and even Pétain to be sacked. Barescut noted an anti-Pétain cabal; the Paris gun, 'Big Bertha', began firing again. Then Clemenceau had to spend the three days 1–3 June in meetings of the SWC in Versailles with more bad-tempered exchanges about manpower, both British and American.

The Army Commission of the Chamber of Deputies charged Abel Ferry with producing a report on the 'rupture' of the French front, or what soon became known as the 'surprise' of 27 May. Its official title was the Third Battle of the Aisne. Ferry wrote first of the long-term causes: the lack of sufficient men because of all the expensive offensives undertaken in past years in France and in the Balkans, and the failure of the intelligence services to pinpoint the German reserves as effectively as the Germans pinpointed the Allied ones. He pointed out the strength of Allied positions, given the terrain. The reason for putting the tired British divisions on the Aisne was precisely because the front was considered invulnerable. How then had the Germans managed to break through so comprehensively, creating the French Caporetto or the French equivalent of the British 21 March? Ferry's assessment, dated 17 July and acknowledged to be provisional until all the reports were in, laid the blame, except for the long-term factors, on the shoulders of the Sixth Army commander, General Denis Duchêne. It was his decision to ignore Pétain's instructions about resisting on the second line of defence, and he had placed most of his manpower in the first line with orders to hold it. The British had protested against this decision and had been ignored as well. Then he had sent forward his reserves from the intermediate position, and they had been swallowed up, having achieved nothing. Finally, he had failed to order the destruction of the Aisne bridges in

time, so that the Germans had been able to bring up their artillery and progress still further towards the Marne.⁹³ Duchêne was certainly guilty of over-confidence (even arrogance?) in overriding his superior's instructions and over-estimating the strength of his army's positions. Equally his brutal nature cannot have helped matters. Ferry called him a 'sort of bad-mouthed, uncontrolled brute', and recounted how meals in the mess were silent because his staff would not speak to him. Duchêne used to leave the silent dinner table, telling his staff: 'Sirs, to your kennels'. Castelnau's staff in 1914 had held similar opinions about Duchêne.⁹⁴

Duchêne did not bear the sole responsibility. The army group commander, General Franchet d'Espèrey, tolerated Duchêne's refusal to follow Directive #4, as did Pétain. Duchêne complained that he had been left to cope alone on 27 May, and that Franchet d'Espèrey had not been near his command post. Yet all communications had been cut, which made control of the battle impossible. The order to evacuate Reims had come from Franchet d'Espèrey. In his post-war report on operations in 1918, Pétain claimed that the only sanction he could have imposed on Duchêne was to have relieved him of his command and, since an offensive was imminent, such an action would have been too dangerous. Yet Duchêne had been in command of Sixth Army since December 1917 and in sector since then. Moreover, it was only very close to 27 May that the offensive was suspected. Pedroncini suggests that Pétain did not want to cause conflict with Foch since the offensive-minded Duchêne was more in tune with Foch's ideas than with his commander-in-chief's. It is more likely that Pétain recoiled from dealing firmly with Duchêne because the latter was such an unpleasant character. Pétain himself was convinced that the fundamental reason for the German success was that the Allied front was held too thinly. The events of March and April, he told Clemenceau, had imposed new and heavy charges on the French armies, with the inevitable result that the divisions on the Chemin des Dames were too stretched, even for the naturally strong defences of the sector.⁹⁵ Without saying so directly, Pétain laid the blame on the British for giving way in March and April, and on Foch for keeping French troops behind the British fronts.

This leads to the question of Foch's responsibility for the breakthrough. In Paris he was blamed for keeping French troops in the north, and only releasing them drop by drop. Clemenceau had to defend both Foch and Pétain in parliament and before the two army commissions. Yet, unlike Pétain, Foch was looking at the whole Western Front. He got the Belgians to extend their front in Flanders so that divisions could be released from the DAN. He resisted the British insistence that Crown

Prince Rupprecht still had fresh divisions.⁹⁶ His British liaison officer thought Haig happy to accept Foch's authority when it was a question of saving the British Army in March, but he and especially his chief of staff, General Herbert Lawrence, were less happy to go to the aid of the French Army in May. It was only when intelligence revealed that five German divisions had moved from Rupprecht to Wilhelm that Foch began to insist on taking away Tenth Army and units from the DAN, leaving the British to create their own reserve and to prepare to supply more British divisions. As a result, Haig appealed to London, as the Beauvais agreement permitted him to do, on the grounds that Foch's orders put the British Army at risk. That ploy failed when Milner and Wilson went over to France and confirmed Foch's authority.

The French Army's intelligence service had failed to give a timely warning. It was only a few days before the German offensive began that it became clear that the Chemin des Dames was indeed the principal target, rather than being a diversion or disinformation. Yet, in Foch's defence, it has to be said that he had read the German intentions correctly. Despite all the criticisms from politicians and military of his decision to keep French reserves in the north, it was undoubtedly more important to prevent the separation of the British and French armies, and to safeguard the port and railway communications there, than it was to allow the enemy to advance in Champagne. Foch knew that there was no strategic advantage to be gained by progressing southwards from the Aisne and, assuming that Ludendorff knew this as well, judged the greater threat to lie in the north. Ludendorff allowed himself to be tempted by the breakthrough on the Aisne into removing materiel and divisions from Rupprecht's armies, with the result that HAGEN had to be postponed and was never carried out. In contrast, Foch maintained fixity of purpose in the face of all the criticisms, and was proved correct. His British liaison officer at Allied headquarters said that he had never admired Foch more than in the crisis days at the end of May 1918.⁹⁷

Sanctions were imposed. The commanders of XI Corps and 157 DI, and also Duchêne and Franchet d'Espèrey lost their jobs. General Degoutte replaced Duchêne in Sixth Army; General Maistre took over from Franchet d'Espèrey and the army group renamed Centre Army Group. Pétain had defended Duchêne, saying that he had insufficient men for defending his front because of the costs to the French Army of defending the British front in March and April, but was overruled.⁹⁸ Pétain also lost his chief of staff, Anthoine. Although not directly responsible for the failure on the Chemin des Dames, Anthoine had made too many public, pessimistic statements, and Foch took the opportunity to get rid of him. He appointed General Edmond Buat to GQG in his place.

Clemenceau asked Pétain for a succinct report on 12 June. He instituted an enquiry into events as a means of quieting the politicians, some of whom were asking why there was no legal procedure to charge generals with incompetence, especially since lower levels were liable to trial by military tribunal. He set up a three-member commission on 25 July, like the one that Foch had sat on in 1917 about events in the same sector, with the two presidents of the Senate and Deputies' army commissions and General Guillaumat in his capacity as Military Governor of Paris. Guillaumat had been recalled from Salonika during the crisis days as the only possible replacement for either Foch or Pétain, and Franchet d'Espèrey was banished there as his replacement. The commission's purpose was to investigate 'in particular' whether any general officers had committed any 'serious error' during their command. It began its work on 30 July, but Guillaumat stated that they would only consider events at the level of Sixth Army command and below. Clemenceau confirmed this decision later, thus preventing any discussion of the role of either Pétain or Foch. The commissioners held six meetings before the end of September, but were held up by the rapid flow of events as the war came to an end. It must have seemed that their work had become irrelevant when the Armistice was signed. Nonetheless, they sent out questionnaires to the generals concerned in December 1918, and reported eventually that the cause of the collapse was the overwhelming enemy superiority of men and materiel, compounded by the 'excessive' length of front held by Sixth Army and the lack of general reserves. This lack was due to high command's judgement that no more terrain could be ceded in the north, whereas a retreat could be accepted and repaired elsewhere.⁹⁹ Clearly, this was a fair assessment, but before Clemenceau had even set up the commission the next two German offensives had begun.

The first of these, operation GNEISENAU, was launched on the western side of BLÜCHER. Ludendorff's failure to stick to his original plan had given the Germans a huge salient to defend and insufficient means of supplying the troops holding it. The western mole of the salient contained the thick woods around Villers-Cotterêts where the French could mass preparatory to a counter-attack, and Ludendorff needed some space to the west to free the area around Soissons and its railway line to Reims. Moreover, a successful attack to the west would eliminate the ground between the bulge around Montdidier created in March/April and the new Champagne salient. Thus Ludendorff could straighten out his front, hence free up some forces. However, conditions were less favourable than in May. The nights were shorter, leaving less time for the accumulation of men and materiel, and there was less cover than

there had been north of the Ailette. The operation had been planned for some time as a supporting attack for BLÜCHER, but BLÜCHER's failure meant a couple of days' postponement for GNEISENAU. The direction of the attack was towards the river Matz (which gave its name to the battle), pivoting on Montdidier, thence towards the Montdidier–Compiègne line. Compiègne lies on the Oise, and that river has long been the main invasion route to Paris. Although Ludendorff had no intention of getting mixed up in a siege of Paris, a threat to the capital could only increase the nervousness of its citizens and politicians.

This time the French knew the attack was coming. In the line of fire was General Humbert's Third Army, one of the two armies in Fayolle's Reserve Army Group. It held the front between the Oise and Montdidier with seven divisions. Ever since taking over the front at the end of the March/April fighting, Third Army had been preparing the counter-attack that Foch wanted, but now that it faced an attack itself and now that resistance on the first defence lines had been proved dangerous even when those lines were as strong as those on the Chemin des Dames, the situation had changed. Consequently, from the beginning of June, Pétain ordered Humbert to halt studies of the offensive and to prepare the line of resistance in front of the army's second position, which had scarcely been sketched out. Fayolle kept a close watch on Humbert and the progress of the defences, especially since army corps commanders were not entirely convinced, as Duchêne had not been, that abandoning the first position was necessary.¹⁰⁰ Fayolle's action is a clear example of learning from experience.

Pétain had accumulated what reserves he could to resist the forthcoming German offensive. He inserted Tenth Army between the Third and the battered Sixth to ensure the defence of the western mole of the German salient. He grouped the three divisions that Foch had agreed to release from the DAN and the three divisions released from the Eastern Army Group when five barely trained American divisions took over their quiet sector, together with the Reserve Army Group's own five remaining reserve, to make an eleven-division reserve force ready to intervene to support Third Army. The two French cavalry corps were pulled out of the Champagne fighting and ordered to re-group behind Third Army as well. Foch too did his best to get British divisions out of Haig, but Haig was unwilling to accept that the German preparations were more than an attempt at deception, such as had happened in March. He believed that 'serious attacks' were to be expected in the north and that the bulk of the German reserves remained on Rupprecht's front.¹⁰¹ As noted above, finally Haig appealed to London but was told to conform to Foch's orders. The French intelligence

reports between 1 and 8 June fluctuated between fifty-nine and sixty-four for the numbers of German reserve divisions. The majority of these were considered fresh, and the whereabouts of fewer than half were known.¹⁰² So both the British and French CinCs were obliged to juggle resources as best they could, while Foch had to deal with complaints from both. As Barescut put it, 'we are walking a tightrope'.¹⁰³

The German attack was launched on 9 June following the same principles that had brought success on 27 May: an early morning artillery barrage, fired in the dark because unregistered (1.4 million shells were fired of which a third were gas); the infantry assault a short time after the three-and-a-half-hour barrage, at 4.20am. This time, however, there was no surprise, and the French intelligence service made up for its previous failure. French aerial observers had spotted the build-up and German deserters gave away the date and the time of the offensive. Moreover, in late May the Mont Valérien listening post, in western Paris, picked up a German radio transmission which Captain Painvin was able to decipher very quickly. It ordered the German units north-west of Compiègne to press on with their preparations. This gave the French the location of the next offensive in good time, but the radio message was treated with some suspicion because it was the only time during the war that only a single listening post had picked up a radio transmission. Normally several posts heard it.¹⁰⁴

Once again, the German infantry did break through Third Army's front because of the weight of guns and men (thirteen divisions), but it was not a rout. The French fell back and the enemy reached the Matz, but Humbert had not packed the front lines as Duchêne had done, and he ordered the French guns to begin firing before the expected German barrage. Although the Germans began firing ten minutes earlier than the prisoners had announced, which reduced the efficacy of Humbert's counter-barrage by reducing its length, it was enough to disrupt the start of the infantry assault. Nevertheless, by 11am the enemy occupied about 12 kilometres of the French second line – there simply had not been enough time or labourers to create Pétain's elastic defence in depth.

On the second day, 10 June, the Germans managed to progress a little further, reaching the northern bank of the Oise, but the French had enough guns and aircraft to prevent their advancing any closer to Compiègne. That evening Foch arrived at Fayolle's HQ and supported Mangin's request to mount a counter-attack. Mangin had not had an active command since being sacked in 1917, but was a corps commander in reserve in First Army. If speed was vital, as it was, then Mangin was energetic enough to carry out the task. He was given command of XXXV Corps, with five of the fresh reserve divisions (although Pétain refused to

allow him to use the fifth), and 163 Schneider and Saint-Chamond tanks.¹⁰⁵ Despite having little time to assemble his forces, Mangin, pushed by Foch, was ready by 11am the next day, 11 June. With no preliminary artillery preparation to give warning of attack, and behind a dense rolling barrage, Mangin's forces surprised the Germans and progressed between 1 and 4 kilometres along a 7-kilometre front. Despite Mangin's success in capturing 1,000 prisoners and ten guns, the result of surprise and the tanks, Foch and Pétain knew that the German forces were still too strong and they called a halt on 12 June. Unlike Ludendorff, they were not tempted to bite off more than they could chew. Although two more German offensives were launched against the northern edge of Villers-Cotterêts forest and against Reims, neither made much headway. Effectively, the fighting in the Champagne area was over. According to the commander of a machine-gun company in one of Mangin's divisions, the French soldier now realised that he was not destined simply to receive repeated enemy blows, but was capable of giving them.¹⁰⁶

The cost to France's armies of operations BLÜCHER and GNEISENAU had been very heavy. Between 27 May and 16 June French casualties (killed, missing, prisoners and wounded) amounted to 139,160, and 212 guns had been lost, most put out of action before being abandoned.¹⁰⁷ Yet again deputies and senators were highly critical of both Pétain and Foch, and again Clemenceau was obliged to defend them both. The postal control commissions reported great pride in having stopped the German offensive and having 'barred the road to Paris', but the men knew they had suffered heavy losses in doing so. The 'dominant note' in Tenth Army's correspondence was fatigue, so the commission reported on 16 June.¹⁰⁸ Third Army was in a similar state. Physical fatigue, coupled with influenza and the effects of gas shelling had depressed the men already in May, an effect accentuated by the fighting in June. Leave had been stopped during the fighting and was re-instated at the end of June, although granted only sparingly. Given what had happened in 1917, this situation had to be monitored. Although calls for revolt were rare, some letters were seized by the censors for opinions such as this one:

Clemenceau has decided to fight on to the last man! It's true that he doesn't count as a man, he's a brute without soul or conscience ... everyone has had more than enough, especially with the leave situation.¹⁰⁹

The only bright spot was the arrival of the Americans. Although opinion had been hostile at first – the 'Sammies' were only prolonging the war, pushing up prices by spending too freely and having a great time with

French women – the entry of American troops into the front line had had a good effect. The two American divisions that had held the bottom of the Marne pocket and fought in Belleau Wood had impressed by their youth, their enthusiasm and their spirit.

A sense of renewed confidence enabled the French Army to prepare for the next onslaught. They had helped to stem the first two German offensives, and had withstood the second two, with Mangin's counter-offensive on the Matz compensating for the 'surprise' on the Chemin des Dames. A further component of the increased confidence lay in the ability of all the Allies to replace their lost materiel. The Allies had defeated the German submarine, so that ships were delivering supplies of raw materials for French factories as well as bringing American soldiers across the Atlantic. Although the fighting had diminished the Army's stocks of munitions, factory outputs were recovering from the strikes of May and would deliver in July some of their highest monthly figures. The production record for aircraft engines was set in July (4,490), and in the same month output of aircraft (2,622) was second, by 280 units, only to the August 1918 figure.¹¹⁰ Twelve battalions of light Renault tanks had been formed by 22 June, and another three by 20 July.¹¹¹ Also in May, French production of ypérite (mustard gas) began after several months of experimentation. By the armistice, the three private firms employed in the production of the gas had supplied 1,937 tonnes of it, enough to fill 2.5 million shells.¹¹²

Although the full complement of the 1916 programme of heavy artillery was never produced, yet by 1 July 1918 every division now had one battalion of 155mm howitzers (1,260 pieces in all) and every army corps had one or two battalions of 105s plus one battalion of 155s, all of the guns being horse-drawn. The General Artillery Reserve, created in early 1917 under the command of General Buat, was at the disposal of the CinC, so could be used wherever it was needed rather than being allocated to any specific army. More importantly it was mobile. The Reserve manned 327 heavy guns (some of them naval guns and/or mounted on boats), and a tractor-drawn division of heavy guns, consisting of forty battalions of howitzers (441 guns) and forty battalions armed mainly with the most useful heavy gun, the 155mm (480 guns).¹¹³ The newest version of this gun, the GPF or Grande Puissance Filloux, was produced in the government arsenal at Puteaux and under contract by Renault. It provided 35° of elevation and could traverse through 60° without being moved. It threw a 43-kilo shell a distance of 16 kilometres.¹¹⁴ The French Army would have had considerably more of these 155 GPF, if it had not been for supplying the Americans: 224 long 155s and 762 short 155 howitzers over the period of American fighting.¹¹⁵

Even the old 75s were still available: there were 4,824 75s in all armies on 1 July 1918. As General Herr summed up the position, on 1 July 1918 the French artillery now had 'a rational organisation', 'a large proportion of modern, rapid-firing long-range guns', and its personnel had received a high standard of training. They had been forced to leave their gun pits and re-learn the art of manoeuvre, whilst relying even more on techniques such as sound-ranging for opening fire without warning.¹¹⁶ It was ready for the next battle.

Disagreements between Pétain and Foch continued, over two matters in particular. Pétain believed that the British should no longer require French support on the northern front, because they had had two months of relative peace in which to reorganise; consequently he wanted French Army troops returned to his command. Second, Pétain refused to distribute to his armies Foch's note about German tactics and the best way to counter-attack. Foch brought the disputes to a head by reporting Pétain's refusal to Clemenceau. Clemenceau convened the comité de guerre on 26 June to discuss the situation, and he and the committee agreed unanimously to support Foch over Pétain. Furthermore they decreed that, while foreign CinCs had the right of appeal to their government, according to the April Beauvais accord, such a right was unnecessary for a French general. Henceforth Pétain would have to obey Foch's orders.¹¹⁷

In contrast to the now greater clarity of the relationship between Allied and French commanders, the German high command found itself in a cleft stick. It had to deploy troops to hold a much longer front, while still insisting that the main goal was to attack and defeat the British in the north. Yet the Marne salient had to be supplied or abandoned, and the latter option was inconceivable. In order to supply the salient, Reims had to be captured, and so another offensive was planned against the French front. It was to be a pincer attack, with *Seventh Army* driving into the salient, across the Marne and then turning eastwards towards Epernay where it would join *First Army* whose troops were to reach the town by advancing around the eastern flank of Reims. Reims itself was not to be attacked frontally, but cut off by the two German armies joining up south of the town and capturing its defences in the hilly and wooded Montagne de Reims. As usual, Ludendorff increased the scale and objectives of the double attack, which in turn increased the time needed for preparation. *Third Army* was to advance in Champagne as far south as Châlons on the river Marne to protect the Marne crossings for the neighbouring armies and, perhaps, to make a great success out of what was originally an operation to free communications to supply the Marne salient. Furthermore, the Germans were running out of guns as industry had been

unable to keep up with the wear and tear suffered during the intensive combat operations. They also lacked lorries and petrol to move men and materiel. The replacement manpower for the huge numbers killed and wounded in the four offensives was of much lower quality than the specially trained *Stosstruppen* of March. These were men combed out from the home front or more comfortable billets in rear areas, or they were returned prisoners of war from the Russian front 'infected' with Bolshevism, or they were industrial workers sent to the front as a punishment for striking. Such men could not be expected to do as well as those who had made such spectacular progress against the British in March or against the French in May. Nevertheless the forces arrayed against the French were substantial: twenty attacking divisions in *First* and *Seventh Armies*, with another seven in *Third Army* protecting the eastern flank of the offensive; then, another twenty-one divisions in the three armies' second and third lines; about 900 aircraft; 6,353 guns plus over 2,000 trench mortars.¹¹⁸ All this amounted to a front of about 110 kilometres, with troops suffering badly from the influenza epidemic.

The greatest disadvantage for the Germans was that all surprise had been forfeited, because the Allies knew when and where the next offensive was to come. Air reconnaissance and prisoner interrogations confirmed the French in their belief that a new German offensive was being prepared, but this time, they were ready: 'a defensive battle was never waged under more favourable conditions', Gouraud told his Fourth Army. Moreover, a German officer captured on 13 July was carrying a copy of his attack orders, and the next day a French trench raid captured twenty-seven German soldiers, one of whom gave away the date and time of the attack.¹¹⁹ Besides, the French had learned how to cope successfully with the German offensives, as their counter-attack on the Matz had shown. Once again Pétain insisted that he needed more reserves. Five American divisions were taken from the British divisions where they were being trained and sent to quiet sectors in the east so as to free French divisions. The DAN was returned from Picardy to Pétain's control and became Ninth Army from 6 July. (Ninth Army had been dissolved after the Battle of the Marne in 1914, when its then commander, Foch, became Joffre's adjoint.)

Now that intelligence on the extent of the forthcoming operation had become clear, Foch knew that it would be impossible for the Germans to launch another attack quickly on the British, and so he felt justified in asking Haig for some British divisions. The final disposition of French forces was thus: the three armies in General Maistre's Centre Army Group deployed, in Fourth Army, fourteen divisions (thirteen French and one American) in the front line or in reserve; Fifth Army had eleven

such divisions, two of them Italian; and Sixth Army had eight, two of them American. These divisions were ordered to halt the German offensive. Ninth Army formed the general reserve with another eight infantry and three cavalry divisions, together with General Godley's British XXII Corps with two divisions and a further two due to arrive. General Fayolle's Reserve Army Group had the task of mounting the counter-attack, with the left flank of Sixth Army and Tenth Army (now commanded by the promoted Mangin), a total of twenty-four infantry (four of them American) and three cavalry divisions supported by 2,000 guns and 520 tanks. The rest of the front, from the Argonne to Switzerland and from north of the Oise to Belgium, had been stripped almost entirely of French troops. Some fifteen American divisions were undergoing instruction, and the British and Belgians retained some twenty or so of their own divisions. The French CinC of the Allied armies intended to strike back with all the forces at his disposal.

First, however, the next German offensive, *MARNESCHUTZ*, had to be resisted. On the right of the German action, Gouraud's Fourth Army, east of Reims, was ready. After their successful trench raid they knew the start time of the German artillery barrage (ten minutes after midnight on 15 July), and they opened fire themselves forty minutes earlier so as to disrupt the enemy's preparations. The infantry assault began at 4.30am behind a dense rolling barrage, but the French defenders in the lightly held front trenches had warned the main body of troops behind them, using messenger pigeons and the telephone lines which had been buried deeply enough to withstand the shelling. Held up by the French front defenders, the first and second German waves became mixed up, and they lost the protection of their rolling barrage, because they could not keep up with it. By the time that the German infantry reached the main French position of resistance, the French gunners were mowing them down in the open, as well as the German gunners attempting to advance their batteries to support them. French pilots reported that the disorder in the enemy camp was so great that there was unlikely to be any further attack the next day.¹²⁰ So it proved. For Rudolf Binding, 16 July was 'the most disheartening day of the war'. The French 'had put up no resistance in front; they had neither infantry nor artillery in this forward battle-zone . . . Our guns bombarded empty trenches; our gas-shells gassed empty artillery positions; only in little hidden folds of the ground, sparsely distributed, lay machine-gun posts, like lice in the seams and folds of a garment, to give the attacking force a warm reception.'¹²¹ Nine experienced German divisions plus their reserves had taken part in the attack, but the French did not need to engage their own reserves, because the success was complete.

West of Reims, in the Château Thierry/Marne salient, the Germans did much better. Despite the French artillery's counter-preparation which interfered greatly with the units attempting to bridge the Marne, by midday Fifth and Sixth Armies had been pushed back beyond their position of resistance and the Italian II Corps was struggling in the Ardre valley. Fifth Army suffered large losses that day, and by evening the Germans had made a shallow bridgehead south of the Marne along a front of about 14 kilometres. General Maurice Pellé's V Corps in Fifth Army had been outnumbered two to one, and his report asked for two of his divisions to be relieved immediately, because of their great losses. One of his regiments in 8 DI (317 RI) had been wiped out completely, as it had been manning the forward posts.¹²² Sixth Army, however, had suffered mainly on its right where it was in contact with the Fifth, and its artillery, supported by bombing raids by the Air Division, was able to punish the German sappers trying to construct and maintain more bridges and gangplanks across the Marne. On 15 July, the Air Division flew 723 sorties, shot down 24 enemy aircraft and dropped 46 tonnes of bombs. A captured German message called the bombardment a 'veritable hell'.¹²³

One of Sixth Army's divisions, 125 DI, was normally deployed in V Corps in Fifth Army, and its commander wrote to Pellé, V Corps, with an account of the German assault on his division and on Sixth Army. His division had been in the thick of it, he wrote, the third heavy fight in four months. Casualties were even greater than in the fighting of 9 June on the Matz, but his men 'had the definite impression that this offensive was a resounding defeat for the Boche'. All were hoping to take part in a general offensive against the enemy, but first 'we need time for training . . . we will come out of this testing time victorious, however hard our losses (275 officers and 10,500 other ranks in less than four months)'.¹²⁴

The next day, 16 July, Pétain supplied two more divisions to Berthelot's Fifth Army, which was enough to prevent the Germans making much more progress. In addition he inserted Ninth Army between Fifth and Sixth Armies to strengthen the point of junction and to leave the latter responsible only for the north bank of the Marne, where Degoutte was planning a strong counter-offensive to throw the Germans back into the river. De Mitry's Ninth Army was to take care of the German bridgehead south of the river, and that evening the German Crown Prince ordered all attacks there to cease. With the attack halted on the eastern side of Reims also, the only German objective left was to capture the city from the south, and orders were issued for 17 July to push along the Marne's northern bank. Even this limited objective

proved impossible. British and French aircraft and French artillery had destroyed 70 per cent of the German bridging trains and *Seventh Army* was ordered to go onto the defensive. The bridgehead south of the Marne was to be evacuated, and Germany's fifth and last offensive had been blocked.

Gouraud's successful defence of Reims has been lauded as the optimal example of Pétain's Fourth Directive instruction – the principle of elastic defence in depth. It has been compared to Fifth Army's difficulties south-west of Reims, and the distinction drawn between the defensive Pétain and the offensive-minded Foch/Berthelot. Professor Pedroncini wrote: 'The defensive battle of 15 July, won almost immediately on Fourth Army's front, no longer allowed any doubt about the efficacy of the tactical methods laid out in Directive #4. The battle confirmed with facts General Pétain's ideas.'¹²⁵ Yet to compare the situation of the two French armies on 15 July is to compare apples with oranges. Fourth Army had been occupying its Champagne sector since 1914, and Gouraud had commanded it for a year following his return to service after being wounded on Gallipoli, and then again from mid June 1917. On the other hand, Fifth Army had been pushed into its sector south-west of Reims after the 'surprise' on the Chemin des Dames, less than two months earlier, in order to prevent the separation of Fourth and Sixth armies. Consequently it had occupied for about seven weeks ground not fought over since 1914, and its previous commander, General Micheler, had been purged when heads rolled after that German offensive. His replacement, General Buat, was transferred to GQG after only four weeks to replace General Anthoine, judged too 'pessimistic'. General Berthelot replaced Buat on 5 July, just ten days before the German assault; he had been in Romania since October 1916, and then in June 1918 had been sent on a mission to the USA. Furthermore, Fifth Army's attention had been concentrated on preparing the counter-attack on both sides of the Château Thierry salient, and its role only became a defensive one when it was confirmed that the next German assault would be large and would come on both sides of Reims. In other words, Fourth Army knew the terrain, Fifth Army did not; Fourth Army had been commanded by the same general for a long time, Fifth Army had had three commanders in two months; Fourth Army had intelligence from trench raids, and Fifth Army's role had changed from attack to defence shortly before MARNESCHUTZ began.

By now, mid-July, France had borne the brunt of the five German offensives. After sending forty-seven divisions to support the British front during the first two, it had received, by comparison, minimal British and American support in resisting the last three. The fighting during the

period March–July 1918 cost the French army almost 400,000 casualties, of whom 187,749 had been killed or had disappeared, many of them taken prisoner.¹²⁶ All five offensives had been resisted successfully, however, and American manpower was finally arriving in great numbers. Pétain summed up his post-war account of 1918's defensive battle thus:

Since 21 March, alone of the Allied armies, [the French Army] had taken part in all the great battles which the enemy delivered despairingly to decide the outcome of the war. It had raced to the battle in Picardy with thirty-four divisions; it had sent eighteen divisions into Flanders; on the Aisne it had had to engage forty divisions, and then seventeen between Montdidier and Noyon a few days later. Finally, from 15 July, it fought in Champagne a gigantic battle with all its available forces, more than fifty-seven divisions; so, without ceasing, with no relief, in March, in April, in May, in June, then in July, it had led the struggle.¹²⁷

It was time to take back the initiative.