

## Section 218

# The Battle of Loos

## The 8th Battalion (September - October 1915)

*After all their training the New Army Battalions were at last deemed ready for action - continued from section 208*

### The 8th Battalion Get Ready for Battle

#### 1st - 23rd September 1915

During the first fortnight in September 1915 the battalion practised for the forthcoming attack at Loos, using trenches specially dug on their arrival. They were to be taking part in a battle which was planned as the British contribution to an Anglo-French offensive, with the French attacking on the British right at Vimy and Arras but making their major effort in the Champagne country further south. Haig's First Army, consisting of the I, II and IX Corps, was to attempt a breakthrough in the coal mining area between Lens and La Bassee, where they would have to operate across open ground against German defensive positions in villages, slag heaps and coal pits. Two features of the British offensive were to be the employment for the first time of poison gas and the involvement, also for the first time, of the New Army battalions.

On the 21st September the battalion marched by road to Bois Marquet and bivouacked there. Col Walton read to all officers the battalion orders for the attack. The first task allocated to the 1st Brigade was the capture of the southern portion of Hulluch village. The second objective was the German second line trenches running south-east of the village. The attack would be preceded by an artillery bombardment and a discharge of gas alternating with smoke from the trenches along the whole front. This would last for forty minutes before the assault.

The following day the battalion marched to Gosney where all packs were stored in the brewery. Men were given blankets which they fixed to the back of their belts, carrying in addition haversacks containing a cardigan, mess tin, iron rations and a waterproof sheet.

### The Battle Plan

The overall battle plan called for four Corps (I, IV, XI, Indian) with 14 divisions in total to assault the German lines between Lens and La Bassee. This is more fully covered in section 210.

The 8th Royal Berks were part of 1st Brigade, 1st Division, IV Corps and they were to be the most northerly of VI Corps battalions with the Vermelles to Hulluch Road on their left which was the Corps boundary with I Corps. These two Corps were to launch the attack.

IV Corps was under the command of Lt Gen Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1st Division under Major General A Holland, 1st Brigade under Brigadier General A Reddie.

The Times correspondent reported the role of the 8th Royal Berks in his report which was reproduced in the Berkshire Chronicle of 26/11/15:

"I shall confine myself to recording the achievements of the 4th Corps whose good fortune it was to carry the bulk of the enemy lines and to make the greatest advance that has been made on any one day since the fighting in the West settled down into a war of entrenchments

On the morning of September 25th the 4th Corps was in a position on the front that ran roughly from. South East of Grenay, passed between that village and Loos and extended up the Vermelles-Hulluch road that had been designated to be the dividing line between it and the first Corps to the north.

The first Division including battalions of the Royal Berks, the 8th Gloucester's, Royal Munster Fusiliers and Royal Sussex was on the left. The 15th Division, a Highland Division of the new armies, comprised battalions of the Black Watch Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Royal Scots and other famous regiments was in the centre opposite the Loos road redoubt and the 47th Division contained brigades of London territorial troops was on the right

The task of the First Division in general terms was to advance by way of Lone Tree and the Bois Carree. The 15th Division was ordered to take the Lens to Loos road and we doubt the village of Loos. The attack of the 47th Division was to be directed against the Double Crassier which lies east of Grenay and south-west of Loos and then to push up towards Loos. Two brigades of the First Division including the eighth Royal Berks were thrown at one since the fight while a third was held in reserve.

## Getting into Position

23rd-24th September 1915

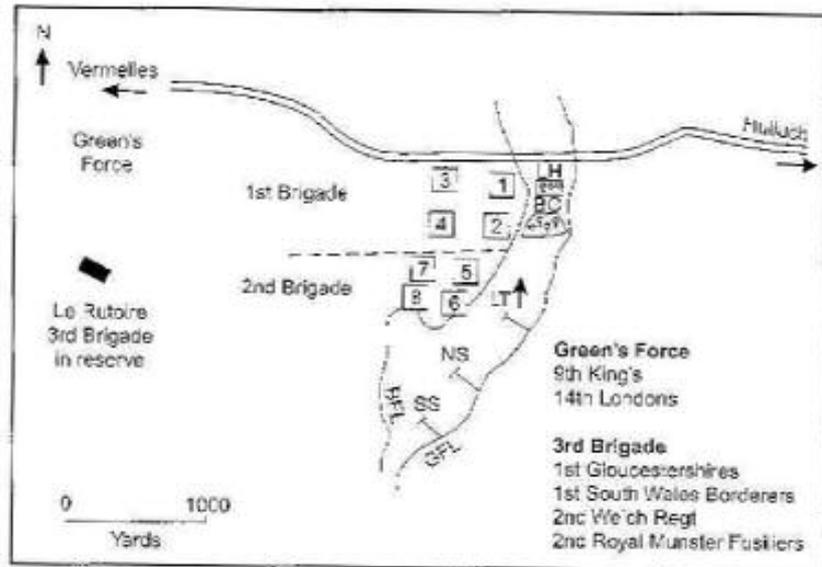
From Gosney the 8th Battalion moved to a wood between Vaudricourt and Verquin where they bivouaked before taking up positions in the trenches on the evening of the 23rd. A and D companies went into trenches at Sailly la Bourse and B and C at Noyelles les Vermelles. On the 24th September they moved into the front line trenches: C Company half in the fire trench, half in the second line; B Company in the third line; A and D Companies in the rear.

Private H Rowland of Clewer told of the Berks' approach to the battle and the mood of the men in a letter home from hospital.

We advanced 6.30 Thursday night (Sept 23rd) from the reserve trenches into the second line of trenches which were a foot and a half deep in mud. We were all wet through but we Tommies did not mind that. We were all cheerful. After remaining in the second line until the following evening we went into the firing line. .. We all heard that the following morning there was going to be the biggest charge of the war made and we were to help the first line of attack. After we had settled down to the best of our accommodation (it was about 12 midnight) we managed to get a little sleep, having our blanket to roll in, taking sentry duty in the trenches by turns. It was 3.30 the next morning the order came along to 'stand to arms' meaning every man had to be on the look out. The day of the great advance had arrived and we were all ready and cheerful waiting for the order which would make the great difference to the war. It was at 6 o'clock that the order came to 'fix bayonets' which was done in great silence and was broken by a terrible bombardment of the enemy's trenches which were 250 yards away from ours. Then the enemy replied. The din was fearful: shells dropping everywhere; shrapnel flying; gas shells bursting. It was really indescribable. We were all wound up to kill all Germans in the world. A few of our men were dropping here and there in the trenches. About ten minutes before the attack a few of us gave messages to our chums to send to our homes in case we were killed. [RM 27/11/15] [TX01721]

Lance Corporal Smith in a letter home on Sept 29th wrote:

Our part was to make a feint attack so as to draw



The 1st Division order of battle

reinforcements and big guns away from the flanks, thereby assisting the French who were attacking away on our right. The move was quite a success. These feint attacks are all very well in a way but the troops engaged in doing the trick get a hellish lean time of it. Last Saturday was no exception to the rule. Our artillery had been shelling their trenches for four days so we took it for granted that we were in for a fairly easy time of it. At 2.30 in the morning of the 25th we left our fire trench to go forward and lay in a ditch, a lot nearer the German lines and await the bombardment at dawn. As it had been raining for the previous couple of days you can bet things were not too comfortable but the troops didn't worry much about that. At 4.25 our artillery opened a barrage on the first German trenches and we crawled forward a bit nearer. The bombardment which lasted only five minutes was the finest exhibition of artillery fire one could wish for. Not one falling short and all direct hits. At 4.30 they lifted and shelled the Hun's second line. [RM 16/10/15]

Signaller W A Ayres (14328), a member of the GWR Temperance Society, recalled:

On Saturday morning the 'stand to' came at 5.20 am and also the rum of which I do not partake. I had had two biscuits on the previous day, but owing to us losing ten men getting up rations, we had little or no food and water was extremely precious. [RM 2/10/15]

For Corporal SV Read of Henley the waiting was

agonising.

It was awful. Never shall I forget it! I can well remember looking at my watch about five minutes before we had to leap out of our trenches. Those remaining minutes seemed like years but they had an ending. The whistles sounded all along the line and over we went to meet the awful fire of the Germans. [RM 30/10/15]

## The Battle Opens - Gas

**05:50 to 06:30 September 25th 1915**

The new weapon to be unleashed was gas. This was a tightly held secret. Reuters correspondent reported

“one of the important tasks that preceded the action consisted in the arrangements for the gas and smoke with which the attack was to be cloaked. The troops formed up at 2 a.m. Two brigades were to make the assault the third being in reserve ready to move up as they were required. The gas and smoke were loose shortly before 6 o'clock. The weather was dull with the slight Rain and the wind light. Such conditions were not very favourable for the gas attack. [TX01719C]

The battalion diary records on September 17th the preparations involving helmets

The smoke helmets issued are going to be troublesome in the attack. I am arranging to have them pinned down to the coat behind with a safety pin and have some elastic let in to draw them close round the throat as there would not be time to let them down in a charge on to a trench and tuck them in the coat. [WD-8]

Mr Valentine Williams added

At 5.50 am the gas, a most jealously guarded secret, up till then was turned on although the wind was not entirely favourable. Mingled with smoke from smoke bombs it gushed forth in great dense eddies of white smoke over shaking the morale of the enemy. [TX01719D]

A sergeant of the 8th recounted later:

On the Saturday the order was given to release the gas. Unfortunately there was not sufficient wind to carry it to the enemy trenches and a number of our men suffered considerably. About 20 minutes was allowed for the gas to settle and then the order was given for the advance. [RM 20/11/15]

The war diary tells the story:-

5:50AM. The intensive Bombardment, preparatory to the attack on the German position SOUTH of the HULLOCH ROAD, began, the enemy's artillery at once replying, though they inflicted little damage and caused few casualties in our front-line trenches. Simultaneously with the bombardment, the gas company began to operate the gas cylinders which were in the front-line trench, and there then occurred several casualties from poisoning, caused it supposed, by leakages in the cylinders.

6:28AM. The gas now ceased, and smoke bombs were thrown from the front-line trenches, proving entirely successful in screening our Advance. [WD8]

Lt General Rawlinson was watching the gas release from a hill about three miles from the front line. He wrote later:-

The view before me was one I shall never forget. Gradually a huge cloud of white and yellow gas rose from our trenches to a height between 200 and 300 feet and floated gently towards the German trenches. It was a wonderful sight.

Unfortunately the wind changed direction and the gas began to drift back across the 1st Division trenches. One of the 10th Glosters, Pte W Jennings, reported

The gas caused a lot of trouble and men were lying in the trench bottom foaming at the mouth.

Lt Col C Russell-Brown, the CRE of 1st Division reported:-

In my opinion this chlorine and tear gassing of the 1st Division had a very stupefying effect on the troops engaged in the attack. The two brigades making the attack had distant and divergent objectives, and in my opinion this initial gassing did much to spoil the impetus of the attack and later to make the men slow in reforming.

## The First Charge

**06:30 to 07:15 25th September 1915**

At 0630 on the 25th September the Battle of Loos opened. The 8th Berkshires were immediately to the south of the Vermelles to Hulluch road with the 10th Gloucesters on their right and the 2nd Gordon Highlanders (I Corps) to their left. Their first objective was the southern part of Hulluch village, some 250 yards ahead.

Following the preliminary bombardment and the release of gas and smoke, these two leading battalions of the 1st Brigade advanced in three lines at fifty paces distance. Immediately ahead on the crest of a ridge were the remains of two small copses, La Haie in front of the Royal Berks and Bois Carre in front of the Gloucesters. The copses had been reduced to low scrub and they offered no obstacle in themselves, but machine guns had been placed there in saps leading out from the German trenches and these caused many casualties as the attackers crossed No-man's-land.

Private Bosley, a member of Newbury Town Band was with the engineer wire cutters, but thanks to the artillery there was not much wire left. [RM16/10/15]

A corporal of the 8th recounted:

Two platoons each of A, C and D companies were in the first line ... when the charge was made. We had orders to go over the parapet at about 6.30 am on Saturday,

this everyone mounted and went forward. The enemy did not fire until we reached the Firing Line. Then they opened a terrific fire with machine guns and rifles. For a short period the fighting was of a severe character, but our superiority was so pronounced that the Germans decided that further resistance was useless and they either tried to make good their escape or surrendered. A large number were taken prisoner. At this juncture I was wounded. The enemy appear to have been taken completely by surprise. [RM 2/10/15]

Other eye-witnesses gave their account:- L/Cpl Smith:

We crawled out from our trenches at 2.30 am and lay out in a ditch until 4.25 am, when we crawled forward to their barbed wire while our artillery bombarded their first line of trenches. ... At the end of that time we charged their trench and caught them napping and took it with hardly a casualty in our company. But the company on our right [10th Gloucesters] was hardly so successful being hung up on the wire .... As we got straight through we naturally caused a bit of commotion. This woke the Huns up. [RM16/10/15]

Pte Rowland:

Then came the order 'charge'. Over we went, hundreds and thousands of us, yelling like madmen. Then came my first sight of death in battle. A shell burst a few yards from me killing my officer and nine men. I felt a pang of sorrow go through me when my officer dropped; he was liked by everybody. My blood roused, I went like mad towards the first line of the trenches we had to capture, but the Germans had all fled, leaving their dead and dying behind them. [RM 22/11/15][TX01721B]

Signaller W A Ayres (14328):

At 6.20 am the men charged under awful machine gun and shrapnell fire. When they had taken the first line we ran across with a live wire. [RM 2/10/15]

A sergeant recounted later to the Reading Mercury:

Captain Paramore was the first officer to fall. He was killed outright, being shot through the head when we had gone about 300 yards and he had reached the other side of the German wire entanglement. He died like a hero, for he was leading on his men and encouraging them up to the moment he was killed. Lt Berlein was also knocked over early on. He was a very popular officer and full of daring. [RM 20/11/15]

The Royal Berks rushed towards La Haie and captured the German front trench, despite further heavy casualties incurred on the German wire which had been little damaged in the preliminary bombardment. The trench was found to be occupied only by machine gun crews, the rest of the garrison having been withdrawn earlier.

The 8th had now reached the German first line which was about 400 yards from their starting point.

The Times:-

This division [1st] as it proved had an exceptionally hard task for the enemy's trenches were protected by masses of concealed barbed-wire which could not properly be observed by our artillery officers and which in consequence could only be subjected to indirect fire. The result was that while First Brigade with the 8th Royal Berks on the left was able to penetrate without any perceptible check as far as the outskirts of Hulluch and to capture some gun positions on the way the second brigade was hung up by uncut wire to the south of lone tree

The War Diary:-

6:30AM. The fire of our artillery lifted, and Battalion advanced in quick time, to assault the first line Enemy Trenches, the 10th Gloucester Regt being on the right, the 2nd Gordons on the left. The advance was opposed by heavy artillery and machine-gun fire, while the wire in front of the German trenches was found to be scarcely damaged, and it was in cutting a way through this obstacle that most of the regiment's heavy casualties occurred. Shrapnel and machine-gun combined to play havoc in our ranks, and an additional disaster was the blowing back of our gas, by the wind, into our own ranks. However, after a struggle, the German first line was penetrated, and the trench found to be practically deserted, the enemy apparently, having deserted it earlier in the day, merely leaving behind sufficient men to work the machine-guns. Mainly overland, but with some men working up the communication trench, our line advanced successfully to the 2nd and 3rd German lines, and met with but slight opposition. From the 3rd line a further advance was made, and an Enemy Field Gun was captured. A 4th line German trench was seized, but being in so incomplete a state that it afforded little cover from rifle fire and none whatever from shrapnel, COLONEL WALTON ordered the line to be withdrawn to the 3rd German line trench, and this position was occupied until the Battalion was relieved.

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during the night of SEP- 25th to 26. [TX01719A]

The German counter attacks

Describing the subsequent fighting Mr Valentine Williams says heavy rain came on at nightfall the night brought a series of heavy German counter attacks right along our new line.

A hostile attack launched against the 15th Division at Hill 70 about 12:30AM was repulsed and a more determined assault just before daybreak on Monday morning met with the same fate. But to the north however the Germans were able to force us back from the quarries. In all these attacks the German losses were extremely severe. On Sunday morning the 15th division helped by part of the 21st also a new army division (which with the 24th New Army division) had at last arrived as reinforcements

during the night, was ordered to attack the Germans on Hill 70. After the usual artillery preparation which lasted an hour the first assault was launched at nine am but failed to make a good. It was a critical moment in the fights for an officer who reached the enemy's trenches on the reverse slope of the hill found the Germans preparing to evacuate the redoubt their stronghold below the crest. The attack was renewed again but without success and about noon the failure of an attack on the left last us pit 14a. Nevertheless the Scotsmen held on to their positions on the hill throughout the day until at five P M they were reinforced. On Sunday afternoon the 6th Cavalry Brigade came up to garrison Loos which has been tremendously shelled and for a time the village was held by cavalry, London Territorials and it the of the 15th Scottish Division. Ultimately the whole of the Third Cavalry Division was brought up into Loos, some of the cavalry being sent up to reinforce the troops on Hill 70. Of the attack as a whole the Times correspondent says there are many points which are still obscure and many also which if not so obscure are not yet ripe for publication and discussion. But at least the broad outlines now stands out tolerably clearly and we can see that if we failed permanently to pierce the German front we came within an ace of so doing and that we gave the Germans a shock from which even now and nearly two months afterwards they have not fully recovered and to which as yet they have attempted to make no really serious reply. [TX01719B]

## The Second Charge

**07:15 to 10:00 25th September 1915**

Having taken the German first line trench fairly easily they pressed on to take the second line; but the 10th Glosters found the wire in front of them almost untouched by the artillery.

Another member of the battalion takes up the story:

Immediately the first line of the enemy was taken, the Berks and other regiments supporting them made a charge to the second line. As soon as we got over their parapets the Germans started retiring down their communication trenches as fast as they could. The line was captured without experiencing much difficulty. [RM 2/10/15]

The advance continued over the second line without serious opposition and by 0800 the third line, Gun Trench, had been reached. The men were now over 1200 yards from their starting point.

To some of the Berkshires it seemed they were fighting giants. Private F O Steward of Newbury wrote:

They were the Prussian Guards we were dealing with and I can tell you some of us looked a little small against

them. By 10 o'clock we had every one of their first set of trenches and soon afterwards the order came to advance. We took the first line of their second set alright and I went up with the second line to take their support trenches. Just as we were getting busy with our 'toothpicks' a bullet hit me in the right thigh, passing straight through and I toppled over like a shot rabbit. [RM 16/10/15]

However the Berkshires were more than a match for the Germans. Corporal S V Read:

On we went till at last we reached the first German trench. We did not stop there - oh no! we went on to the second line and as our motto was 'Forward' we did not stop. On we went till we had left the last trench behind. Didn't we just about give it to them? - not half! Hundreds of them gave in. [RM30/10/15]

Private Rowland had got into the mood and was quite sure what he was fighting for:

On we went like a wave, sweeping everything before us.. Then we came to the German second line and we were under heavy fire from their maxim guns. Though our men were falling fast, on we went. About 20 yards from the Germans the curs threw up their hands saying 'Mercy good English Comrades' but no! did the devils think about the helpless women and children on the Lusitania or in London who they had killed in cold blood. No! the brutes. Our blood boiled. We cleared the second trench of the cowards and still advanced till we captured all the trenches. On we went till we got to Hill 70 when we checked ourselves, being very few in the front line left and Hill 70 is a strong fortified post. A gas shell burst and I remember no more till I came to in hospital. . [RM 27/11/15]

However Private Rowland got it wrong they were nowhere near Hill 70

Lance Corporal Blake of Newbury had a near miss:

While taking the second line of trenches a bomb from the enemy exploded behind me. Twelve of us fell and I felt a freezing sensation as I made for the bomb thrower. However I was forced to seek shelter in a dugout and later arrived at a dressing station where my wound was attended to. [NWN 4/11/15]

A sergeant told of the exploits of Capt Tosetti.

Captain Tosetti was worthy of high praise. He kept his men together and held the trenches till night time though he was wounded.

Capt Tosetti had been badly injured in the leg. Despite this he led his company close to Hulluch, captured a trench and beat off all comers until he was forced to seek medical attention. He won the MC. [NWN 20/11/15]

## Confusion

**10:00-15:30 25th September 1915**

The Royal Berks found the third line trench more difficult to take as it was more resolutely defended. But there was another problem, men were losing their sense of direction amid the smoke and fog.

One of our previous eye-witnesses who was very proud of the Berks' achievements:

But on reaching the third line the Germans put up stubborn resistance. They replied with heavy fire and the fighting was very severe, but by the aid of our re-inforcements we were able to become masters of the situation. By this time their casualties had been very heavy. There is no doubt that the 8th Berks made a very fine charge and we had earned encomiums of many who were in a position to judge our excellent work.

[RM2/10/15]

His sentiments were echoed by an unnamed Sergeant who recalled:

The Berkshires showed great dash and tenacity. We were met with terrible machine gun fire and the 'Tower Bridge', a German strong point on our right, played the deuce with us. It was enfiladed fire that we had to endure and some of our men say we were fired on from the back. However we achieved our objective, though many of our comrades fell during the day. [RM20/11/15]

Owing to the very thick fog and smoke it was impossible to see anyone ten yards off. Consequently the Colonel found himself alone with only a few men. They joined the Gordons for a time and advanced, taking over 50 prisoners. When the Berks took the trenches they at once dug themselves in. Only the Colonel and about 180 men were there, but about noon they were joined by 2nd Lt Lawrence with a machine gun. Later Lt Gentry-Birch joined them with 27 men who had linked up with the Black Watch.

The unnamed sergeant:

The officer of my platoon was Lt Gentry- Birch, who is very popular, hard working and a good commander. We were all glad to hear that he came through unscathed. 2nd Lt A R Rouse had a terrible wound in his right arm, but I saw him drag one of our fellows into safety. One of the signallers, whose name I do not know deserves recognition for his bravery. He stood on the parapet, coolly doing his work in spite of the hail of German bullets. I think it was about 10 o'clock when, owing to the mist and smoke, a part of the regiment became separated from the main body. I and others joined with the Gordons who were immediately on our left. ... The Germans were cowards when it came to close quarters and cried out 'Bon comrade' It was of course necessary to bomb out of the trenches those who would not

surrender. Lt W G Hobbs was our bombing officer. He was killed during the day. [RM 20/11/1915]

Lt C Gentry-Birch's report was included in the war diary:-

6:30PM circa. The following is a report by Lieut C. GENTRY-BIRCH:- "At this point (i.e. when the Battalion was negotiating in German wire) about 50 of the 8th R. Berks R became separate from the remainder of the Battalion and attached themselves to the Gordons advancing and taking the German guns in the 4th line German trench. They then advanced and occupied the road WEST of HULLUCH. We were unable to advance further owing to our artillery fire, which was falling short. We waited for support to come up, in the meantime starting to dig ourselves in." [WD8]

RSM Lainsbury (10307) of Reading rallied about 60 men and fought his way through to Hulluch, organising as he advanced, parties for the supply of ammunition. Though the village of Hulluch bristled with enemy guns. The 8th Berks actually seized some of the houses in the western suburbs. Hand to hand fighting took place and the enemy yielded ground whenever the Berkshires could come within reach of them. But again and again the Berkshires were swept back by a tempest of bullets.

One of the most thrilling moments of the day had been the capture of two German field guns. Capt H K Cassels was the machine gun officer but he had been killed and his deputy, 2nd Lt Lawrence took over and proved himself a most capable leader. He rallied the machine gun teams and, at the 4th line of German trenches, near Hulluch brought two of his machine guns into action. They had spotted two German field pieces and rushed and surrounded them. The German gunners were either laid low or begged for mercy. He was awarded the Military Cross for his valiant efforts. [RM 29/1/16]

Private G Strong of Steventon was wounded in the foot.

When we got to their first line of trenches we found that they had evacuated them. We were driving them back and, with amazing rapidity, we got to their communications trenches. Continuing to press on we ultimately arrived at the village of Hulluch when we were reinforced. Our artillery were playing havoc with the enemy. Then continuing our charge we drove them back towards Hill 70 and the town of Lens. Major Brakspear was wounded as we got to the second line of enemy trenches. A shell burst near to him and his leg was shattered. He was a brave officer who knew no fear. I may also say the same regarding Lt Berlein who was killed when leading his men as soon as we had left our first line.

Major Brakspear later died of his injuries. His leg was amputated but he gradually faded away and died on 1st October. [RM 20/11/15]

Mr Valentine Williams added more details in the Berkshire Chronicle of 26/11/15

The left-hand brigade of the First Division advanced steadily notwithstanding the fact that its right was exposed and got into the precincts of Hulluch, a tangle of red houses in some woods, along a small stream. This delay however with the second brigade had enabled the enemy to collect reinforcements and the position could not be held.

The Times:-

This situation as Sir John French has remarked was one of some danger but by a brilliant piece of tactics the very unfavourableness of the position was utilised to our advantage. The gaps that had been created by the check to this brigade was seized upon as a means of an advance. Accordingly a force was pushed around to the north and another to the south and suddenly between 2 and 3 in the afternoon the Germans in this sector were surprised to find themselves out flanked and taken in the rear. By this stroke some 700 of the enemy were compelled to surrender. In the meantime however the delay had enabled the enemy to call to collect his local reserves behind his second Line and eventually our men swung off in the direction of the Bois Hugo and Puit XIV where they maintained themselves successfully until relieved by the 21st Division which had been ordered up the trench and certainly contributed a great deal towards

## Counter-Attack

**15:30-18:30 25th September 1915**

The first German counter-attack came at 15:30. The war diary noted:-

At 3.30PM the Germans counter-attacked, driving in our flanks and as the support had not yet arrived we were compelled to retire, holding a position about 100 yds WEST of the road. The Berks numbers were reduced to about half. On receiving news that the supports were coming up we again advanced to the road which we proceeded to place in a state of defence."

Private L Bucknell of Windsor wrote:

We got a long way through their lines, but they got reinforcements up. They opened a most murderous fire on us, both with artillery and rifles. The former inflicted heavy losses on us. One stream of Jack Johnsons coming over and stopping all supports coming up. The shells were bursting all around us; the ground shaking continually with the terrific explosions. It was terrible seeing one's pals falling all *around us crying for help*. *Some of the wounded* being dressed in our lines were blown to atoms by a shell. The roar of our guns massed behind our lines, the shells bursting and a huge mine of ours seemed to throw the ground from under our feet. Great masses were flung high into the air and blew that part of their line to smithereens. They used their gas against us, but with the latest smoke helmets, few

casualties occurred from it. Though we lost heavily they lost very many more, their dead lying about everywhere in masses. It was the Prussian Guard opposed to us and there were plenty of helmets lying about. But we had our packs on and they were more than we could properly manage to carry or else I would have got a helmet. [RM16/10/15]

## Digging in in Front of Hulluch

Over 1200 yards of ground had thus been gained and the Lens-La Basse road running in front of Hulluch lay only some 500 yards ahead. Further progress was made as far as the road where a halt was called and from where small scouting parties were sent to reconnoitre Hulluch village. By this time the remnants of the two attacking battalions had been joined by troops of the 1st Cameron Highlanders who had come up in close support. This mixed force now faced the village but were not in sufficient strength to carry the advance further. As there was no existing trench along the Lens road, the troops were pulled back for the night to form a line along Gun Trench and Alley Trench, a former German communication trench. It was from here that the Royal Berks were relieved.

Col Walton was sent to hospital suffering from the effects of gas poisoning and 2/Lt T B Lawrence took command. He was only 20 years old at the time and only a few months before had been a private. However all agreed he proved equal to the occasion. [RM 29/1/16]

Signaller W A Ayres (14328) described his experiences-near the village:

We had captured three lines, most of the enemy not waiting for the bayonet. We signallers had two wires across to the almost captured village of [Hulluch]. Corporal Giddings (14341) and Shirley took another wire across. We were in sight of the village and they were trying to stop us; three men with a quick fire gun. The shells did not hit but the sniper did and put one through my shoulder, mess can, coat and everything. My two mates dropped down, put a field dressing on my wound and ran on. I believe they got the wire across. I lay low till the sniper in the trees had wasted most of his ammunition and then I made a bolt for it and got to the field dressing station. [RM2/10/15]

Sergeant Giddings told his version:

I was in the second line and, being in charge of some signallers, we reeled out our telephone wire. I saw one poor fellow waving his hand after we had gone some distance. When I reached him I found that he had his leg broken above the knee by shrapnel. I called two men of another regiment and we lifted him onto a blanket and took him back to the trenches. This was a risky job for we were under heavy rifle fire and bursting shrapnel. I started off again and caught my men, but we missed the Battalion. On finding out the direction in which they had

gone we started off, but we had not gone far before we found that a sniper was having a pot at us. So we lay low for a time and then crept about 300 yards on our stomachs. I thought that we had dodged him but on standing up to make a bolt for it I found out my mistake. As we were running one man [Ayres] was shot in the right shoulder. A bullet went clean through his mess tin and into his shoulder, lodging there. I bound him up as best I could and then we had to lie there till dark before we could get back to the field dressing station.. During the time I was doing my mate's wound, the other fellow [Shirley] had a bullet hit his ammunition pouch. But luckily the bullet did not explode any of the cartridges. We crawled away again and got to the trenches our men had captured. We got it hot from shell fire the whole time and during the night we stood to arms expecting the enemy to counter attack, but they did not come. [RM30/10/15]

L/Cpl Smith:

The whole thing was quite a success though, the idea being to attack the trenches and show a big fight so as to draw their big guns and reinforcements thereby assisting the French on our right. By the number of Germans who eventually turned up I would say it was extremely successful. ... It ended up in a bombing duel .. which lasted about 8 hours and then we retired. The people we were up against in the trenches were the Prussian Guards and it appears that they were reinforced by a Bavarian Division who were reported to have been knocked about sadly by our artillery. Afterwards they were reinforced by Saxons. [RM 16/10/15]

## Lucky Escapes

Private F Andrews of Reading was lucky to survive.

I was in the first line and before we got to the second line I was the only one unwounded out of 50 He owed his life to an electric torch which he was carrying in his breast pocket. After being shot the torch was found to be completely doubled up and there is no doubt that this caused the course of the piece of shrapnel or bullet to be diverted. Private Andrews was wounded in the arm. [RM29/1/16]

Private John Brant of Littlewick had a remarkable escape. After the fighting he found no fewer than seven bullet holes in his puttees and yet he escaped without a scratch. Similarly Sergeant Jack Brown of Newbury had two bullet holes in his tunic. He was Mentioned in Despatches for his exploits.

Another lucky man was Private HG Waite. He owed his life to a bunch of letters and a field testament which he had in his left hand pocket. A shot penetrated them, glanced off and entered the muscle of his arm. He was hit when about four yards from a German trench. He fell to the ground and crawled into a hole made by a shell

where he waited until dark

So I lay in great pain till dark. Then I crawled on my stomach to our trench. As we were going back the cowards fired at us and killed a poor chap in front of me. Reaching our trench I saw sights I never want to see again. Poor chaps with legs and arms blown off and dying and wounded lying all over the trench. It was pitiful to see us limping to the dressing station. We were all covered in blood and mud. [RM12/2/16]

The stretcher bearers were kept busy and there were many gallant deeds. Private Allen, formerly a gardener at Aldbury House Newbury wrote home to say he had had to go down a mine to bring out a wounded officer and crawl with him for some distance. He carried a wounded comrade across the open with a hail of German fire directed towards him. Luckily he escaped injury and got his man to the dressing station. He also described the terrible slaughter which the British artillery had inflicted upon the German trenches which were piled with bodies and from which waggon loads of rifles were being retrieved. [RM 16/10/15]

Private H Rowland was gassed and in hospital when he wrote to his mother who lived at Clewer. His account includes his feelings towards the Germans, stimulated by the propoganda prevalent at the time. It was published in the Berkshire Chronicle of 26/11/15.

I am still in a hospital. Well I am just going to describe the great charge as far as I could get, for I was gassed. We advanced from 6.30 Thursday night September 23rd from the reserve trenches into the second line of trenches which were a foot and a half deep in mud. We were all wet through, but we Tommies did not mind that, we were all cheerful. After remaining in the second line until the following evening 6.30 we went into the firing line. I have reached as far as Friday evening now. We all heard the following morning that there was going to be the biggest charge in the war made, and we were to help with the first line of attack. After we had settled ourselves down to the best of our accommodation it was about 12 o'clock midnight. We managed to get a little sleep having our blankets to Roll in taking sentry in the trench by turns. It was 3.30 the next morning the order came along to stand to arms, meaning every man had to be on the look out. The day of the great advance had arrived and we were all ready and cheerful waiting for the order which would make a great difference to the war. It was 6 o'clock the order came along to fix bayonets which was done in great silence and was broken by a terrible bombardment of the enemy trenches which were 250 yards away from ours.. Then the enemy replied; the din was fearful shells dropping every where, shrapnel flying, gas shells bursting and it was really indescribable. We were all worked up into, a pitch to kill all the Germans in the world. A few of our men were dropping here and there in the trenches. About 10 minutes before the great attack a few of us

gave messages to our chums to send to our homes in case we were killed. Then came the order charge. Over we went hundreds and thousands of us yelling like mad men, then came my first sight to death in battle. A shell burst a few yards from killing my officer and nine men. I felt a pang of sorrow go through me when my officer dropped he was liked by everybody. My blood roused I went like mad towards the first line of the trenches we had to capture. but the Germans had all fled, leaving their dead and dying behind. On we went like a wave sweeping everything before us then we came to the German's second and we were under heavy fire from their maxim guns. Though our men were falling fast on we went. About 20 yards from the German the curs threw up their hands saying mercy good English comrade, but no. Did the Devils think about the helpless women and children on the Lusitania or in London whom they killed in cold blood! No The brutes. Our blood boiled; we cleared the second trench of the cowards and still advanced until we captured all the trenches. On we went until we got to hill seventy - where we checked ourselves being very few of the front line left and Hill 70 is a strong fortified post. A gas shell burst and I remembered no more until I came to in the hospital. Thank God I am going on well now. I should like to tell you a lot more but I must finish thanking God I am alive. How will I missed being hit I cannot say, bullets were like hail but it was a glorious charge the Kitcheners boys made - victory from beginning to end. [TX01721]

## Retrospect of the First Day

In his report, the Commander in Chief, Sir John French wrote:

The 1st Division attacking on the left of the 15th was unable at first to make any headway with its right brigade. The brigade on the left, the 1st [including the 8th Royal Berks] was however able to get forward and penetrated into the outskirts of the village of Hulluch, capturing some gun positions on the way. The determined advance of this brigade, with its right flank dangerously exposed, was most praiseworthy and continued with the action of divisional reserves was instrumental in causing the surrender of a German detachment some 500 strong which was holding up the advance of *the right brigade* in the front system of trenches. The inability of the right of the division to get forward had however caused sufficient delay to enable the enemy to collect local reserves behind the strong second line. The arrangements, the planning and the execution of the attack and the conduct of the troops of IV Corps were most efficient and praiseworthy. [RM 6/11/15]

IV Corps' report read:

The task of 1st Division was to advance by way of Lone Tree and Bois Carre. The 1st Brigade was able to

penetrate without any perceptible check to the outskirts of Hulluch (a tangle of red houses in some woods alongside a stream) and to capture some gun positions. The 2nd Brigade was hung up by uncut wire, in unseen depressions in the ground to the south of Lone Tree, not covered by the artillery bombardment. A force was pushed round to the north with one to the south and between 2 and 3 pm. the Germans in front of 2nd Brigade were outflanked and taken in the rear. Some 700 Germans were compelled to surrender. The delay however enabled the enemy to call up its local reserves behind the 2nd line. Eventually our men swung off in the direction of Bois Hugo and Puits XIV. [rm 22/11/15]

When the Official Historian, Brigadier General Sir James Edmondes was writing his account of the Battle of Loos in 1926, he sent drafts for comment to senior officers who had taken part. Colonel Walton's reply included the following observations on the 8th Battalion's objectives for the 25th September and on the progress of the battle:-

I did my best to find out what was our first objective, but the Brigadier told me that we were to go as far as we could and there were no orders regarding objective, except that each battalion was to be exploited to its utmost limit.

I obtained an air photo of the German trenches and asked him if he thought we should try to get to the communication trench in front of Hulluch and he said if we got there we should do extremely well and better could hardly be expected of us. With the help of this photo of the German trenches I had practised my battalion on attacking some old trenches which I found near out billets for a week before the battle and made up to be as nearly like the German trenches as possible.

At 6.30 am on the 25th I had ordered the bugle to sound the advance but the bugler was brought down wounded and his bugle torn by shell fire. I went up to see the men go over and was met by a rush of men coming down the trench to escape our gas. I struggled with them for a bit and thinking example better than precept got out and advanced and they followed me.

As my dugout was on the left of the front trench of the battalion, my advance with the men with me was on the left of the battalion and we were in touch with the right of the 2nd Gordons. Owing to the smoke I did not know what was happening to the rest of the battalion. When we got about half a mile from Hulluch and was on the Hulluch road and the smoke having cleared I left the Gordons on my left entrenching themselves on the north of the road as they were held up, as we were, by our own artillery fire. I moved to the right to find the rest of my men and eventually collected 180 in the communication trench and blocked it off and converted it into a fire trench. No other officer was there except myself. All my staff officers and men were casualties. I may say that during this advance my men and the 2/Gordons on our left took a party of

about 50 German prisoners. I shot two Germans with my revolver as we bumped them at close range owing to the smoke.

While we were consolidating about 150 of the Camerons came up in support on our left. On the left of them there was an open space of about 400 yards to the place where I had left the 2/Gordon party. On my right there was open country unoccupied by our troops right away to Loos. Under the circumstances a further advance on Hulluch seemed hardly wise or practical. When I came up to my men on my right I found them partly occupying a concealed gun trench where there were three field guns. I withdrew them so as to leave them in the communications trench and blocked the passage to the gun trench.

As far as I know, none of my men, or of the 1/Camerons went further towards Hulluch than this concealed gun trench. I must have known if they had gone into the village. Hulluch village could be reconnoitred from our position about 600 yards in front of it. There were two officers with the 1/Camerons on our left and one volunteered to go back with the report of our situation, and did so. I believe he was wounded on the way.

The 10/Gloucestershire failed to come up on my right as I expected. I cannot understand about this battalion having only 60 men left. The 8/Berks and 10/Gloucester were of practically equal strength. the former had 493 casualties in the advance and had 180 men left to occupy the trench in front of Hulluch. The latter had 459 casualties and never came up at all, and are said to have had only 60 men left. However this is ancient history, but the fact remains that these 60 Gloucesters did not come up to our firing line. I must have seen them if they had done so. There were no troops visible between my right and Loos until the 2/Welch came up on my right in the afternoon or evening.

I may add that the environment of south Hulluch bristled with uncut wire of great thickness. It seems to me possible that if a fresh brigade had leap-frogged through me on the 25th it might have got into Hulluch, perhaps!!

## Other Casualties on the First Day

All rank casualties for the first day of the battle were estimated at 493 for the Royal Berks, 459 for the Gloucesters and 387 for the Cameron Highlanders.

Lance Corporal William Charles Bushell of Reading was killed. A charm found on his body was returned to his parents by his platoon officer who wrote. *"He was one of my best NCOs"*

Private Rupert Cox (13200) of Bradfield was seen to fall while the charge was being made. He was alongside Pte Edward Johnson [13204] and was killed by a shell. Pte Johnson was severely injured in arm, a bullet smashing the bone. He ran for cover and at the field hospital was

told he would have to have his arm amputated but he objected and was eventually sent to Warrington hospital where a piece of bone eventually worked through and his arm healed although he had almost lost the use of it.

Lance Corporal W A Fletcher had a glancing blow from a piece of shrapnell, just after they began their attack on the German trenches. It made a large wound and he was evacuated to the military hospital near Shorncliffe.

Corporal Tom Gale of Newbury had to lie in the open for about four hours with rifle bullets and shells falling all round him and everytime he moved the Germans fired on him . He eventually managed to crawl back to the British lines.

## The Second Day

### 26th September 1915

The Germans launched a second counter attack on the evening of the 25th as the war diary recalled:-

"At 11.30PM the Germans again counter-attacked in large numbers driving in our right flank. We retired to the position we had before held in the afternoon. The Germans continued to push the counter-attack. Our support line then opened fire and we were caught between the two fires. WE then made our way as well as possible to our supporting line (the German 4th line). Only 6 of the Berkshires returned safely. The Germans continued to push the counter-attack, but suffered heavily and were driven back.

On the 26th September at 10:00 Col Walton re-joined the battalion which now numbered two officers and 184 other ranks.

The war diary read:-

10:AM. Although a counter attack had been expected all through the night yet the enemy was very quiet and the night passed off without event. It seemed that the front must have been held very thinly or they would never have missed such an opportunity for a counter attack. Four Officers who had been left behind with the 1st line transport on the night of Sept 23rd rejoined the Battalion which at that time consisted of one hundred and eighty four men and two Officers, the Commanding Officer having by that time rejoined his men.

Our unnamed sergeant recalled:

One of the finest sights was when our artillery came up. Despite losses they went about their work as if on parade. I was hit on the Sunday, being shot through the shoulder. Col Walton was at the head of the Battalion the whole day and luckily escaped. He was extremely popular with all ranks. We all deplore the loss of so many fine officers. Taking them as a whole they were a fine body of men and would do anything for us. [RM20/11/15]

Regimental Sergeant Major Lainsbury addressed the

problem of shortage of ammunition by crawling out from the trenches under heavy fire collecting ammunition from the dead and wounded. He was awarded the DCM.

The 2nd Brigade on the Royal Berks' right launched an abortive attack on Hill 70. War Diary:-

11:0AM. The Second Brigade, on our right attacked HILL 70 and the CHALK PIT after a heavy artillery bombardment of HULLUCK. We protected their flank by firing into HULLUCK. It was a splendid attack and seemed as though it must be successful, but less than an hour after the commencement of the attack we saw them coming back over the crest line. They were heavily shelled as they retired back to the trenches they had vacated and suffered heavy losses. They reported that they had been driven back by hostile machine gun fire from BOIS HUGO.

At noon the men were ordered to eat half their iron ration. They had had no food since the morning of the 25th. They had no water left in their water bottles and they suffered considerably from thirst. The rest of the day was spent in consolidating their position which lay near the original German lines east of Bois Carre.

War Diary:-

12 noon. Our men had had no food since the morning of 25th Sept and so were ordered by Col. Walton to eat half their iron ration. They had no water left in their water bottles and suffered considerably from thirst.

## The Third Day

### 27th September 1915

On the 27th September the ration party which had been sent to Le Rutoire the day before, lost its way and the battalion had no water or rations. An officer re-joining the battalion from the transport lines organised a party to go back and get water. Until then it had been impossible to send officers with ration parties because they were urgently need in the trenches.

Private John Pym of Reading wrote to his wife:

Our regiment took all the trenches we were told to take. I was carrying chaps back three days and nights without stopping. Just as we were being relieved a shell came over in the front line of the German trenches and I fell on a bayonet and got it through my right wrist. [RM16/10/15]

Sergeant Giddings was scathing about the German attacks on the men collecting bodies:

The Germans are dirty fighters. They run away or give themselves up rather than fight to the last and fire on our wounded and the men who collect and bury the dead. We were relieved after four days in the trenches and were glad to get out of the range of the big guns. [RM 30/10/15]

The Germans were quiet all night and it was quiet for most of the day. At 16:00 the Guards launched their attack on Hill 70 and the Royal Berks along with the other parts of 1st Division, threw out smoke bombs to protect their right flank from enfilade fire.

### 28th September to 11th October

On the 28th September at 1100 the battalion was relieved by the 1st Gloucesters and returned to the old brigade front line. On the same day Col. Walton left the battalion having been posted to Aden. Major C F N Bartlett assumed command.

Corporal S V Read:

I was in the trenches for about six days and you can guess what joy it was to hear the news one night that we were going to be relieved. We left the trenches with glad hearts although it was raining very hard. I have captured my longed for trophy - a German helmet. It is a beauty. I fetched it out of a German dugout. [RM 30/10/15]

Col Walton had been asked for his recommendation as to who should succeed him on his posting to Aden. He had recommended Major Bartlett whom he described as *a born organiser and he knows my ideas. He is a busy man and would make a very good C O... probably better than me.* This latter remark was a typically modest view of his own capabilities which no-one in the Battalion would have shared. He handed over command to Bartlett on the 28th September *but am sorry to say I left him looking poorly and he had got lumbago badly*

A few days later on 2nd October, Bartlett wrote to Col Walton updating him on the battalion's situation.

8/RBR Oct 2<sup>nd</sup> 1915

Dear Colonel,

Many thanks for your letter, like you I could not say much when you left but I never want to work with a better man than you and I hope we shall both live to talk over all this.

Am up to my eyes in work reorganizing, as we expect to move up tomorrow night (Sunday of course) or Monday morning. We went back the night you left to our original lines where we were shelled for 24 hours. I was having an officers pow wow when a high explosive came plumb in the trench 4 ½ yds off but did not go off or there would not be a single officer left, the next night moved 3 miles back getting in wet through again at 3 am, moved on at 11.30 am 3 miles back where we are now.

Total strength 453 (for rations) Trench Rifles 317. I have 3 scouts out of 21, Bombers 53 out of 120, signallers 18 out of 32, Machine Gunners 28. One machine gun has been returned.

Our casualties are very bad and I gave your list Capts Oldman, Paramore, Cassells, Lieut Hobbs, Hicks, Peacock, Haynes, Keable, Berlein all killed Hanna missing probably killed, Rouse and Marsh wounded, Allen still missing but known wounded.

Generals Riddles & Holland have both been round and made the most complimentary remarks about the Battn.

Am terribly short of NCOs and am being harassed all round for returns. Poor Peacock took all parade states & returns into the trenches and they have not been recovered, so I had nothing to work on. Gen Riddle is a ripper. Col Punchard was sent home & Major Sutherland commands 10<sup>th</sup> Glosters. All the officers pockets were rifled before they were collected & buried, a cross on each as you mention. Then kits went off directly we got here yesterday. The Division dined then grouched because we had eaten our iron rations & wanted an explanation in writing it was as follows "Because we were without food for 36 hours and were hungry". Oh for some officers & NCOs. Thank God I have the Sgt Major & Barrow is keeping his head. Cloake is a topper and Edwards is getting his lot together, but the others are too slow for words & cannot yet know what they want to complete, so I am having a Battn inspection in fighting order this afternoon. I am just getting along but could do with a rest & wish we were going to have time to reorganize properly.

Cannot get any more smoke helmets, so am dipping the old pattern ones. Have made up all socks, shirts etc out of packs of missing. Cannot get enough blankets inly 100 new ones and 200 went which I stole. Have not yet made up my mind as to promotions, but must make some acting within 24 hours. Don't know your address so am sending this to Clevedon.

Our 1<sup>st</sup> birthday yesterday Oct 1<sup>st</sup> we drank your health. No time for more.

Love to the children, and do look after yourself, it has been the pleasure of my life working with you.

Yours very sincerely

C Bartlett.

The battalion moved to billets at Les Brebis on the 29th and next day to Noeux-les-mines and remained in billets until the 5th October when they relieved the 8th Royal Fusiliers in the old German front line. Casualties for the period 25th September to 4th October were: 17 officers 500 other ranks. (Officers 12 killed 5 wounded. The killed included Major Brakspear. Other ranks 56 killed, 176 wounded, 268 missing.) On the 5th October and the 10th October drafts of officers and men were received from the 9th Battalion. Four officers were also received from the 3rd Dorsets.

### 12th to 22nd October

It was not until the 12th October at 2330 that the battalion took up battle positions again, this time with the Black Watch on their left and the London Scottish on their right. They were now to the south-west of Hulluch astride the Grenay-Hulloch road. Their objective

was a new first-line German trench running northwards along the Lens road across about 300 yards of No-man's-land.

## A Second Battle

13th October 1915

The Berks were not expecting to be in action again so soon after the mauling they received on the 25th. Lance Corporal F Rivers:

After a short rest [we] returned to [the trenches] again. You see, there was another advance to be made and our Brigade had to be there. Of course it came rather as a surprise as we were expecting at least two weeks rest after such a time on the 25th September. We were up again on the [12th], our attack being made on the [13th] but I am sorry to say we lost a good many. The attack was only to have been a few yards but as I have told you we lost a large number of our boys so we have not a great many left now. We signallers stayed at Headquarters. [RM30/10/15]

On Wednesday 13th, the two leading companies of the battalion attacked, preceded by a release of chlorine gas and smoke bombs. The chlorine was released at 13:00 and the gas was carried towards the German lines. At 13:50 the gas discharged ceased and a team of smoke bombers and wire cutters went out under cover of the smoke but they got only about 75 yards beyond the British parapet and were then cut down by machine gun fire. Cpl Edwin King was one of the wire cutters. The Berkshire Chronicle reported on the 11th November:-

Mr W King, landlord of The Air Balloon Ock St Abingdon has received news that his son Corporal Edwin King of the 9th Royal Berks Regiment aged 20 has been killed whilst out with a party cutting barbed wire. He trained with the 8th Royal Berks and only went to France about three weeks ago. He was a member of the Abingdon Junior Imperial League and Social Club. [TX01533]

Heavy machine gun fire from a chalk pit on the right had held up progress and when the German wire was reached, it was found to be largely intact. The troops took cover in the long grass of No-man's-land and were withdrawn to their starting trenches under cover of darkness. The failure of the attack was attributed to the inability of the artillery to silence the German machine guns and the complete absence of support.

A Private of the Royal Berks writing home a month later said:

I have been in another charge and come through without the slightest scratch, but it does make you feel bad to see your chums picked off so. We went into the trenches on the Tuesday and the attack was supposed to come off the following Monday ... well Monday came and as something was not quite right it was put off till Tuesday.

That came and it was again put off so you can guess what our nerves were getting like, anxiously waiting in the trenches, nine days on three biscuits a day and very little water. Then the order came round that it was coming off on Wednesday and at last it was true. It was the same old cry 'Come on the Berks' and over the top we went. When we got over, there was something waiting for us in the shape of German machine guns. They were continually sweeping the ground with them from one end of our line to the other. They fire from 500 to 600 bullets a minute so you can see it was pretty warm. When I got to within 20 yards of the German trench, as it was a bit too warm, I dropped down into a hole where a 'coal box' had fallen. There I had to lay, not daring to move so much as an eye lash, or it would have been my last move as there was a machine gun at work in front of me and snipers all round. To make it worse they had spotted me, for they had taken several pots in my direction, but I kept a bit too low for them. I had to stay there for four hours till it got dark so that I could crawl back to our trench. When I did move I thought my back was going to break as I had been so cramped up. As soon as it began to get dark I started crawling. I went backwards for the first 100 yards, watching the German trench all the time and then I turned round and had a go head first, expecting every minute to be made a pepper box of by bullets because they kept sending up 'starlights' and these made night as light as day. It took me two hours to cover 150 yards. But I thank God that I got back safely. To make it worse I had to lay beside dead comrades, one dying quite near me. [RM 13/11/15] [TX1550]

Sergeant Giddings was again in the thick of things:

We had our second flick at the Germans last Tuesday. We had been in the trenches for seven or eight days before we made the attack. This was only our second time in the trenches and, on each occasion, it had been pretty warm. There was one continual bombardment and the Germans never failed to answer with shrapnell or 'Jack Johnsons' We had our rum ration in the morning and then after a little meal (called dinner in civil life) we were ordered to put on our gas helmets. Some smoke bombs were thrown well out over the parapet of the trench. Then after a few minutes interval the first line advanced. Each man carried a pick and shovell, so that he could commence to consolidate the first German trench immediately they got there. The line advanced well and they got from 50 to 80 yards without a man falling. Then the Germans in the front line trenches started pouring machine gun fire into them and they had to lay low. A good many men were killed but the greater proportion were wounded. I saw one of our officers who had been wounded in the throat, and who afterwards died from it, lying down, peppering the 'Germs' with a few revolver pellets. He did some good work and I know the boys of his company were sorry to lose him. Another

officer, a captain, was walking up the trench his company occupied and was heard to say 'Will you follow me Boys?' The men answered with one voice 'We will follow you anywhere sir!' The next minute they were over the parapet and rushing towards the German lines. But the poor officer did not get more than 50 yards before he was riddled with machine gun bullets. It put the devil into the men to see their captain fall and they went for it with the determination to kill the Huns or die themselves in the attempt. [RM 30/11/15]

Private J Max was distressed to see so many of his pals perish. He wrote later to the mother of two of them, privates Francis John Alder (13941) and William Charles Alder (13045) of Inglewood Farm, Hungerford. She had been enquiring as to their fate as they were posted as 'missing'

Well I was with them just before the attack. They were two of my best pals and William was my best man all the time in England. I wished them goodbye as they got out of the trench to attack the Germans. Another soldier reported that they were with the bombing party and were killed when the bombs they were carrying were exploded by a bullet. [NWN 6/1/16]

Private Roland Mortimer [14449] was first reported dead as his pay book was found in a tunic found on a dead body after the battle. His explanation is graphic. The account was published in the Berkshire Chronicle of 26/11/15

Private Roland Mortimer of Hatherley Cottages New Road Ascot and of the eighth Battalion Royal Berks regiment was wounded in the fierce battle in which the regiment was engaged on October 13th but has now practically recovered. A remarkable feature in the case is that a letter announcing his death in action was received from an officer of the 8th Battalion Royal Berk Regiment by Private Mortimer's parents but fortunately the news of their son's death is incorrect. The day prior to their receiving his communication Mr and Mrs Mortimer had a letter and a postcard from their son stating that he was wounded was in hospital and hoped to be back in his regiment in a couple of weeks.

Seen by our representative private Mortimer said the mistake very probably arose in this manner. He received his wounds when in front of the German lines and getting back to his trench his Wounds were dressed by one of the stretcher-bearers. His tunic was left in the trench and it must have ultimately been picked up by one of his chums who dressed himself in it. In the charge he must have fallen and his body been subsequently found in the pockets of the tunic were discovered private Mortimer's paybook his photograph and that of his sister

In his letter the officer paid a High tribute to private Mortimer's qualities and his prospects of promotion. He said that he was shot through the heart and must have died instantly and was buried in a village close to the

firing line.

Private Mortimer fought in both the fierce engagements in which the eighth Berks lost so heavily. Describing the Battle of 13th October he said first of all there was a heavy bombardment by our artillery for nearly two hours. The Germans replied vigorously and as the shells dropped in our trenches we had some extremely narrow escapes. One fellow in the trench next to ours was wounded. Then came the order for us to charge my company A together with B company being in the front line.

We got over the parapet and gallantly led by our officers we made a dash for the German's first line. Hardly had recovered half of the distance between the before the enemy opened a rapid-fire on us with their machine-guns. Several of our men were soon mowed down and in spite of that deadliness of the fiery we continued to advance and got on to the German parrot.

We then had the great misfortune to lose second lieutenants Bach tally who was shot been mortally wounded. Subsequently we began bombing the enemy. This lasted for some time the due all being the oven roasted desperate character. In my end we came out on top inasmuch as the Germans were driven back and the first line of trenches was captured.

Just prior to this I was wounded by shrapnel and of course did not witness the subsequent events. When one considers that we were greatly outnumbered and consequently had to face fear for lards fit the eight barks cannot speak too highly praised for description of all their great gallantry when we got near the German line weird ones realise the strength of the opposition but not a man flinched the officers setting a noble example by their great daring and bravery [TX01720]

## Casualties

Casualties from the 4th to the 22nd October were 11 officers and 142 other ranks.

Among them was Private Daniel Dyer of Brimpton. He was wounded on October 13th and suffered from gas poisoning. He died later in hospital.

William Henry Earl (16111) of Newbury. was in B coy. Missing later reported killed in action.

## Appraisal

The battle itself was finally abandoned early in November, no strategic gains having been achieved at the cost of some 60,000 British casualties. After the failure of the opening attack on the 25th and 26th September when ground was won, notably by the 1st Division in front of Hulloch and by the 15th Division's capture of Loos village, but when the necessary reserves

were either not forthcoming or were badly deployed, it was clear that only tactical advantages were to be gained. However the part played by the New Army battalions, making their first appearance on the battlefield, was significant.

Major Bartlett went home on leave in early November and was quoted in the Reading Chronicle of 11th November:-

Major Bartlett of the 8th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment recently returned on leave. He expresses his high appreciation of the splendid manner in which the battalion fought despite the heavy losses which were sustained and he states that the General Commanding the Division had also given high praise for the work which had been accomplished. [TX01540]

On 10th November 1915 the 1st Brigade was addressed by Lt Gen Sir HS Rawlinson, GOC IV Corps. In thanking the Brigade and especially the two battalions who led the assault on the 25th September, ie the 8th Royal Berkshires and the 10th Gloucesters, he said "

I have been over the ground since and standing the other day on the old first line of German trenches and taking into consideration the nature of the ground and the strongly fortified condition of the trenches, I must say it seemed to me a marvel how you managed to take the position. I can assure you no more brilliant feat of arms has been performed by any body of men during the present war, and I am proud to have such regiments under my command." [WD8]

On the 24th November 1915 the 1st Brigade was addressed by Field Marshal Sir John French C-in-C who said:

"It was with great pride I learnt that those two battalions of the New Armies (8th Berkshires and 10th Gloucesters) led that advance with the gallantry they did. It is a most promising thing to see the battalions of the New Armies behaving so splendidly." [WD8]

In his despatch Sir J French commented upon the performance of 1st Brigade. The Berkshire Chronicle reported it on the 5th November:-

### PRAISE FOR THE 1st Brigade

The dispatch from Sir John French published on Tuesday is concerned very largely with the offensive on the British Front from Ypres to Loos which was begun on September 25th in cooperation with the French and with the fighting between that date and October 8th when a German counter-attack against the whole of the British and french lines at Loos and the immediate neighbourhood was repulsed with a loss to the enemy reliably estimated at some 8000 to 9000 in dead alone.

Sir John French who incidentally justifies his report to the gas attack methods of the Germans pays an ungrudging tribute to the magnificent spirit, enterprise and courage initiative and resource of officers and men alike to the efficiency talents and skill of the artillery including that of the New Armies. The Royal garrison and the Territorial Force; to the splendid work and heroism of the Royal Engineers and the Tunnelling Companies and to the great services and daring of the Royal Flying Corps.

While regretting our heavy casualties in the Battle of Loos, though having regard to all the circumstances he does not think they were excessive. Sir John points out that the proportion of slightly wounded is relatively very large indeed

Some further light is shed on the fighting along the fronts in which the Berkshire Battalions were engaged. The 8th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment under their splendid commanding officer Colonel Walton participated in the main attack. Sir John French gives the following explanation:-

The general plan of the main attack on September 25th was as follows: in cooperation with an offensive movement by the 18th French Army on the right, the 1st and 4th Corps were to attack the enemy from a point opposite the little mining village of Grenay on the south to the La Basse Canal on the north [TX01542]

## **14th October to 13th November**

On the 14th October at 0200 the remnants of the battalion were sent to support the Black Watch. At 0800 they were back in the old brigade third line and at 1900 were withdrawn via Noex les Mines to Lillers.

Sergeant Giddings wrote on the 17th October:

We are now billeted in a nice large town about 15 miles from the firing line. It is a fine place, quite as big as Reading, and with just as large shops which sell articles of every description. [RM 30/10/15]

The battalion remained at Lillers until the 13th November. On the 15th command of the battalion was taken by Major TG Dalby, 1st Kings Royal Rifle Corps, and the battalion moved back to reserve trenches behind Loos. They remained in the Loos area until July 1916.

*Continued in section 228*