

## Section 223

# Interval I - Sept 1915 to June 1916

## The 1st/4th Battalion

*The 1st/4th had been at Hebuterne since July 22nd. Capt Cruttwell's account continues (from Section 203)*

### The Move from Hebuterne Sept 3rd 1915

On September 3rd, Captain (now Major, O.B.E.) Porter, Secretary of the County Association, spent a night with the Battalion in the trenches, and was thus able to assure the people of Berkshire, if such assurance was needed, that its Territorial Battalion was doing its fair share of the laborious task of holding the British front line.

Next day, after a month's continuous residence in Hebuterne or the trenches, we were relieved by the 144th Brigade. The relief was carried out in daylight, both Brigades marching boldly along the Sailly road, the crest of which was in clear distant view of the enemy. The two intermediate communication trenches, Larrey and Jena, some 2,500 yards long, were not yet sufficiently repaired for our passage. This labour of love was accomplished by the 5th Sussex, who were attached to the Brigade as Pioneer Battalion, and lived at Sailly.

### Authie 5th to 17th September 1915

We marched to Authie, 7 miles back, and remained there 12 days; this village was until January to be the rest billets of ourselves and the 4th Gloucesters for alternate periods. It lies in the valley of the Authie River, between downs of chalk, beech-covered, which put on beautiful colours as soon as the first frosts of autumn touched them. The whole countryside is indeed strangely remin-iscient of the Chiltern Hills of Oxfordshire and Bucks. Battalion Headquarters were at the Chateau, a substantially-built, comfortable house under the southern slopes of the hills, belonging to a widow, Madame De Wailly, who lived there with her two daughters.

Most of the best billets were occupied by the elderly heroes of the A.O.D. and the Ammunition Column, but it is a roomy village, and accommodated us without difficulty. The measure of its prosperity may be gauged by the fact that whereas before the war there were three shops, there were now 27.

Our principal work was to make thousands of hurdles in

the Bois de Warnimont, which greatly to the men's disgust mysteriously disappeared as soon as made; for when we indented for them in the trenches we received no more than 17 for the whole Brigade. Presumably they went to beautify the corps line, which was such a model of perfected trench artistry that it seemed almost a pity that it was never likely to be used.

### The Navvies Battalion

In the Bois de Warnimont in company with a few fallow deer, a Navvies' Battalion lived under canvas, who performed most useful work in digging flints and repairing the roads. In age they ranged from 40 to 70, and were a cheery crew, mainly from Wales. Their notions of military discipline were, as may be imagined, singular, and it is credibly reported that on one occasion, when General Fanshawe rebuked a navvy for not saluting him, the offender beckoned with his thumb towards a pal and exclaimed, '*Ere, Bill, come and 'ave a look at this.*'

### Pte Wheatley' Diary

Pte Wheatley (2677) was stil keeping his diary

#### Sunday 5th September

Came out of the trenches and marched back to Authie for first time about the best place we struck so far. Found mail had arrived

Letter and parcel from home. Nice weather.

#### Monday 6th September

Resting and cleaning up.

### Inspection by General Monro Sept 7th 1915

On September 7th General Monro, G.O.C. 3rd Army, inspected the Battalion, who were drawn up in old quarter-column formation with 12 paces interval in the Berkshire field on the west outskirts of the village. He was greatly pleased with the appearance of the Battalion, and in his subsequent address thus expressed his satisfaction

'After hearing what your Divisional General has said of you, I expected to see a very fine body of men on parade to-day, and I can assure you I say so straight out that I

am not in the very least disappointed. Your bearing as well as your order and steadiness in the ranks, and the way in which you put your equipment on, all go to show that you know the right thing, and prove the high standard which you set before you.

I am well acquainted with your 1st Battalion, and have served with them in this present war. They have lived up to the high traditions which attach to the regiment, and to the good name which they have won in the past. You are proud to belong to such a regiment; you have already reached a high standard, and I hope and believe you will continue to retain that high standard.

I hear from your Divisional Commander that you have conscientiously carried out all the work allotted to you. In the sentry line your vigilance has been beyond all criticism. You have done good work in all that pertains to the work of the trenches, digging and so on. Moreover, your conduct in the village and in billets has been uniformly good.'

During this stay at Authie rumours began to be active. It was persistently reported that the 'great offensive' would be in full swing before September was out. Some of the A.S.C., who had been buying coal at Marles-les-Mines, reported that the country round Bethune was incredibly thick with guns, while a similar and more detailed forecast was brought back by officers who had dined with the 4th Divisional Headquarters. Then leave, which had been on more or less regularly since the beginning of June, was indefinitely stopped. Thus, though no one yet knew the date arranged for the opening of the battle, expectations were abroad, and each morning the significance of any unusual cannonade was eagerly discussed.

## Back to Hebuterne

Sept 17th - 1915

Amidst such an atmosphere of uncertainty we relieved the 4th Gloucesters at Hebuterne on September 17th, making the passage from Sailly over the brow of the hill for the first time by the longest Boyal Arrey. For a few days we lived our ordinary trench life, and helped to instruct a company of the 13th Manchesters.

Pte Wheatley

Left Authie for Hebuterne. Relieved Gloucesters and Manchesters (Kitcheners).

**Tuesday 21st September**

Went in trenches nights getting colder and longer.

On September 21st the bombardment from the sea to the Vosges opened in our sector, with short fierce bursts of fire on the enemy villages and roads.

**23rd September 1915**

On September 23rd, at 7.30 a.m., a squadron of 21 aeroplanes, spread loosely over the sky, flew over Hebuterne to attack the station of Valenciennes; throughout this day the roar of the guns to north and south was continuous; as the sun set a fierce thunder-

storm came up, and the rival rumblings and flashes of nature and machinery in the dusk made a sufficiently lurid prelude for battle.

Lt Sharpe wrote his diary for the 23rd

23 Sept. 1915, Very wet day. I bombarded Huns' wire. Other platoons of 'B' Company went into trenches. Very wet!

## Missing Loos

24th September 1915

On the 24th it became generally known that in certain contingent events, carefully kept secret, the Brigade would attack between Gommecourt Wood and the Puisieux road, with the Berks and the Bucks in the leading waves. Accordingly, the gunners got to work, and the 18-pounders cut three narrow lanes in the enemy wire (which each night patient Hun carefully repaired), while the howitzers played on the forts and beehive structures in Gommecourt Wood and near Ferme Sans Nom. It was far and away their biggest show up to date, but the number of rounds fired by the Divisional Artillery in the three hottest days was only 5,006, an amount which, by present-day standards, appears ludicrously small.

Meanwhile, two platoons of 5th Sussex, cursing the fortune which had brought them up again to the trenches, were packed into the battalion sector to look after our belongings, if we went over.

Pte Wheatley:-

Heavy shelling.

Lt Sharpe

24. Sept. Bombarded Huns. Brought my platoon & No. 7 into trenches. Very muddy & wet!

**Saturday 25th September**

Saturday, the 25th, broke wet and misty; the lovely autumn weather of the past fortnight had gone for good. The gunners were unable clearly to see their targets, or to mark by the spurt of dry earth the exact strike of their wirecutting shrapnel. Through the mist on that most inappropriate morning appeared a herd of cows and men harvesting between Rossignol and Puisieux, not much more than a mile from our lines. During the day a notable series of messages came through from G.H.Q., and it seemed at first as if the attack had broken the German lines, as we identified on our maps those names then unfamiliar Loos, Hill 70, Hulluch, Cite St. Elie, and Cite St. Auguste which successive messages announced as having passed into our hands.

Then came the reports from Champagne with their impressive and ever-growing lists of guns and prisoners. The men were in high spirits, and some of B Company were heard making bets as to who would take the first German prisoner. Towards evening, however, the mes-

sages spoke only of violent counter-attacks and ground lost, while it was announced that the attack of the French Corps on our immediate left had failed completely. When this message reached Major Hedges in the Keep just as he was turning in, he summed up our general feeling by his remark: *'Well, I think I can take my boots off now.'*

Pte Wheatley:-

Heavy shelling again today. Inclined to be wet by Way of a change.

Lt Sharpe

25 Sept. Very wet night. Bombarded wire "8/62"

### Sunday 26th September 1915

Throughout the whole of Sunday expectation was at its highest pitch, for all believed that if the general advance was coming it would come quickly. But there was little positive news beyond the short French statement: *'We have taken Souchez.'* Yet in the evening all the last preparations for attack were hastily carried through. A Berks and a Bucks dump were dug in the trenches, in which were collected all the engineering material required for an assault-tools, sandbags, trench bridges and flags for marking out positions in the captured line.

The Brigade Signallers were busy putting up directions everywhere for the Bucks, who were to take over the left of our line: and new maps were issued to come into use at midnight. The night was very disturbed with bursts of rapid fire, and once a great cheer from the Warwicks at Fonquevillers, who were simulating an attack; while thousands of spent bullets from the 37th Division in the loop north of Gommecourt came wearily to rest in our trenches, several of which struck sentries in the sap-heads without doing them any harm.

Lt Sharpe

26 Sept. Patrol from 5th Glos. went out 1 a.m. One officer & 1 Cpl. killed. Very wet night! Very tired.

### Monday 27th September 1915

Early next morning a British aeroplane flew very low over the enemy trenches and, as desired, drew heavy fire, thereby proving them to be full of men, a matter in doubt before, as they had not responded to our attempts at provocation. But during the day it became increasingly clear that the great scheme had failed; for, although a message came from 3rd Army saying *'that in view of the great Allied successes both north and south it is possible that the Germans may evacuate their trenches, and in that case you must be prepared to slip quietly into them at a moment's notice,'* its effect was more than discounted by a simple message which read: *'Work may now be resumed as usual in the trenches.'*

The enemy, meanwhile, appeared to be well acquainted with our plans, for voices were heard calling out, *'Come*

*on, Bucks, come on, Berks'* and *'The Royal Berks will lead the attack,'* while a humorist shouted from the fort at Gommecourt, *'Run away, English; go away home.'* The enemy had indeed good reason to be confident in the strength of these positions, which twice next year were to defy capture after the most elaborate preparation. The turmoil of the last few days was now succeeded by a complete calm in which scarcely a gun spoke.

Pte Wheatley:-

Told that we were going over in the morning for the German trenches.

French on the left failed - the attack did not come off.

Lt Sharpe

27 Sept. 7 p.m. "Wind up" opposite "Buck". Huns shout: "Come on, Gloucesters, the Royal Berks led the attack!" Spy reported caught in village, dressed as English officer. Cold night but fine

### 28th September 1915

Lt Sharpe

28 Sept. Awful night & very dank. German in front of our wire! Huns "wind up" at 4.20 a.m.

## Souastre

Wednesday 29th September

Pte Wheatley

Relieved by the 4th Gloucesters and marched to Souastre.

Lt Sharpe

29 Sept. Relieved & came to Souastre. Nice billet. 30 Sept. Delightful sleep in bed - the 1st I've seen since I left England. Had bath!

### 30th September 1915

Capt Cruttwell:-

On September 30th we were relieved in due course by the 6th Gloucesters, but went not to Authie, which was considered too far away, but to Souastre, a village in the area of the 37th Division, five kilometres west of Fonquevillers. As we approached we were played into the village by our band of drums and fifes, which had just arrived from England.

Pte Wheatley:-

Resting and cleaning up. Wrote home.

Here the Battalion remained for six days in readiness to move at half an hour's notice, with baggage and transport reduced to a minimum, before we returned to Authie and resumed for many months to come our customary alternation of trench duty and rest, though the respective periods were in future lessened from 12 days to 8.

By our next return to the trenches autumn was already

merging into early winter in this chilly tableland, with sharp night frosts and thick white mists. For days on end it was almost impossible to distinguish the hostile lines; and so the guns maintained their silence, for it was unprofitable to fire where you could not observe, and our own people had the strictest orders to economise rigorously until the expenditure of the Loos' battles had been again made good.

Such weather gave the finest opportunity for patrols, whose wanderings were made easier by the apparent indifference of the enemy. His saps and barbed wire were examined more than once, but though hares were started constantly in the thick tangled grass, only once were his patrols encountered.

On this occasion a party of ten, moving in a dense fog and pitch darkness along the enemy wire, was challenged, and a lively fight ensued for a few minutes with rifles, revolvers and bombs, in the course of which Private A. Gibbs, of D Company, a huge, stout-hearted soldier, specially distinguished himself. As generally happens in these blind affrays, there was more noise than damage, and our patrol, which was considerably outnumbered, made its way safely back. One man who became separated from his comrades remained, uncertain of his direction, in No Man's Land for eight hours, until sunrise showed him his bearings. An officer and sergeant of the 10th Royal Irish Rifles, who formed part of the patrol, were spending their first tour of instruction with us in the trenches.

Pte Wheatley:-

**Thursday 5th October**

Marched from Souastre to Saily-au-Boir for bath and then to Authie. Fumigated on arrival. Received papers.

**Friday 8th October**

Pte Wheatley

Went to Doullens to see Bn team play the M.J. Saw Charlie Hill and had tea with him.

**Monday 11th October**

Pte Wheatley

Left Authie 8 am marched to Hebriteene. Went to old barn in the Rue-d-Sac.

Lt Sharpe

11 Oct. Back to trenches. I rode "bike" up to Hebuterne - awful thing! Slept at "Poste Cambron"

**Tuesday 12th October**

Lt Sharpe

[sic]. 12 Oct. Day's rest on Keep. Saw 18 aeroplanes bomb Achiet-le-Grand station!

**Wednesday 13th October 1915**

Lt Sharpe

13 Oct. Relieved in trenches. Wet - in support trench "Biron"

**Thursday 14th October 1915**

Lt Sharpe

14 Oct. Up in fire trench. Collins (10th R. Irish Rifles) with me. Rats & mice in dug-out; crawled over me!

**Friday 15th October**

Pte Wheatley

Went in trench Sassale today with team. Received parcel and letter today from Mrs Richell. Getting a bit cold and misty in mornings.

**Saturday 16th October 1915**

Lt Sharpe

16 Oct. Working party in afternoon. London Territorial RFA to tea & lunch, I had lunch early tho'. Lilian sent me a lavender bag.

**Sunday 17th October 1915**

On October 17th the general calm was rudely broken by the performance of the Bavarian Circus, a travelling siege. train of 5.9's with a few heavier pieces, which retaliated effectively from the Bois de Biez for our September bombardments. The first day's firing was directed on the forward billets, Hebuterne, Sarny and Colincamps, with short fierce bursts from six or seven batteries firing simultaneously.

Pte Wheatley:-

Received orders to trench ("Gudin") after much cursing and grumbling did so.

**18th October 1915**

Next day it was the turn of the Trenches. On the left of the battalion sector part of D Company held a little salient position which enclosed a thicket standing steeply some 12 feet above the Bucquoy road. The enemy apparently believed it to be used for observation purposes, and frequently directed fire upon it, but in point of fact it was untenanted by day.

On this salient and on its approaches, a total trench line of about 150 yards, the Bavarians threw during an hour about 400 5.9's, not to mention smaller shells, while two field guns galloped into Gommecourt Park and unlimbering in full view fired obliquely at the wire from point-blank range. They were harassed and eventually forced to retire by the action of Lieut. Coombes, of the Bucks, on our left, who gallantly got a machine gun into the open and took them in the flank. Our own guns were not available at the time, as they were themselves engaged in a 'shoot' and busy on pre-arranged targets.

Although the trenches were cut to pieces and the thicket levelled by the fire, which was of extreme accuracy, not a single serious casualty was incurred.

Captain Thorne had his Company Headquarters just behind the salient, and his dugout received several hits, and bulged ominously, but did not give way. All wires were cut, but were promptly repaired by the Company Signallers in the heat of the bombardment.

Meanwhile, the Oxforas had been assailed with much greater violence, and over 2,000 shells fell in their lines; while their communication trenches were barraged with lachrymatory shells. It almost seemed as if an infantry attack might be imminent, and colour was lent to this theory by an aeroplane message saying that what appeared to be gas cylinders were observed along the enemy trenches between Gommecourt and Serre.

Accordingly we stood-to all night repairing the shattered trenches and re-erecting the wire. The hostile infantry who probably disapproved of their artillery's activity as likely to bring future trouble upon themselves, made no attempt to hinder with rifle or machine-gun fire our all-night task. This was by far the heaviest and most concentrated bombardment which the Battalion had yet sustained.

Pte Wheatley:-

Heavy bombardment by Germans on trench "Gudin", trench blown in and dug out smashed longing for tomorrow to come when we get relieved. Worst bombardment I ever was in. Shall never forget the 18th October 1915

#### Tuesday 19th October

Pte Wheatley

Relieved this morning by Gloucesters and marched back to Authie. Resting in Authie.

Lt Sharpe

19 Oct. Awful bombardment. 450 Shells but 59 duds on us, on left corner of trench.

#### Wednesday 19th October 1915

Lt Sharpe

20 Oct. Left trenches. Saw German - missed him but Hesketh Pritchard & snipers had him. New billet - dirty!

### Winter in the Trenches

In spite of many rumours of a rest the 48th Division remained in the line throughout the whole of the winter, and, indeed, as we shall see, until the spring of 1916 was far spent.

#### Wednesday 27th October

Pte Wheatley:-

Relieved Gloucesters in trench Sassale. Bad weather and

wet.

#### Friday 29th October

Came out and went in reserve in village.

Winter set in early and in its most unpleasant form. During November there was only one day on which neither rain nor snow fell. The trenches began collapsing at once; after each heavy storm the unrevetted sides fell in, and liquid mud, reaching as high as the thighs made movement almost impossible; the sump-hole covers floated away, and in the darkness it sometimes happened that a man would be plunged in water up to his neck. Many of the saps were entirely blocked, and at one time it became necessary temporarily to abandon a portion of the the Battalion spent 25 days in the trenches and only front line. Things would have been better if the floor of the trenches had consisted of duckboards (for the bricks so elaborately laid proved mere labour lost), while a proper supply of revetting hurdles could, by the exercise of a little foresight by Corps staff, have been made available. The thigh boots, which gradually arrived in numbers sufficient for men actually in the front line, went far towards preventing wet feet; whale oil was rubbed in, and arrangements made in the village for drying 400 pairs of socks every 24 hours, while the R.A.M.C. provided hot baths in the factory by the pond.

Unfortunately, most of the dugouts, after a short resistance, succumbed to the alternations of frost and torrential rain. Sometimes the roof and sides collapsed, as the Oxforas found to their cost when an iron girder killed four men. Sometimes the pressure of water merely caused leakage, but in either case the result was eventually the same. The plight of the men without shelter was often extremely wretched. They lived in water and liquid mud, which mingled with their food and with the fabric of their clothes. However, it was found possible to hold the line more thinly, and during the eight days at Hebuterne no man (except the Machine Gunners) normally spent more than 48 hours in the front line, as only two platoons of each of the two Companies holding the line composed the trench garrison; the remainder stayed in the support dugouts. Platoons were relieved every 24 hours and companies every 48.

#### Monday 1st November

Pte Wheatley:-

Went in French Gudin with No. 4 Team. Wet and cold.

#### Thursday 4th November

Pte Wheatley

Relieved by Gloucesters and marched to Authie. Resting in Authie.

#### Friday 12th November

Re-entered trenches and went in keep.

**Sunday 14 November**

Went in Gudin cold as hell.

**Monday 15th November**

Snowed in early morning bitterly cold.

**Tuesday 16th November**

Relieved by No 5 team and went back to keep. Wrote home.

**Saturday 20th November**

Relieved by 4th Gloucesters and marched back to Authie.

**Monday 29th November**

Marched to trenches again. Went in on Piniatoski Gun position.

**Monday 6th December**

Went in trench Gudin things very quiet. Wet weather by way of a change.

**Wednesday 8th December**

Relined by Gloucesters again and marched back to Authie.

**December 14th 1915**

On December 14th a patrol of seven men, on reaching the east end of M hedge, were received with bombs and machine-gun fire from the sunken road which ran diagonally between the lines, losing one killed and three wounded. A search party was organised by Captain Blandy, which succeeded in recovering the body of the dead man. Lance-Corpl. Clayton (afterwards 2nd Lieutenant, killed on the Somme), a member of the patrol, though wounded, most gallantly volunteered to lead the search party and covered their withdrawal by throwing bombs.

Attached to the war diary is the following report:-

Battalion Report on Patrol carried out at 9.45.p.m. on the 14th December.

At 9.45.p.m. On the 14th instant, a patrol consisting of Sergeant Roberts, L/Cpl Clayton and Ptes Comely and Bowell, went out from trench Hoche with the following instructions:-

- 1) To patrol inside our wire as far as M Sap
- 2) To search the hedge in front of this Sap
- 3) To return, patrolling outside our wire to the right of our line on the Puisieux Road.

When the hedge was reached, two of the party patrolled each side of it. When approaching the end of the hedge nearest the enemy, rifle and machine gun fire was opened on the patrol, from a point well in advance of the enemy line. Four bombs were also thrown, but these appear to have fallen short.

Pte. Bowell was shot through the heart, L/Cpl. Clayton through the arm and Pte. Comely bruised by bomb fragments.

After consultation the three remaining men returned to our lines for assistance.

Captain Blandy organized a search party of 12 men and proceeded under the guidance of L/Cp. Clayton to look

for Bowell's body, 2 men including Pte. Comely, under L/Cpl. Clayton went forward to recover the body while the remainder of the party took up a covering position N. of the Hedge. L/Cpl. Clayton approached close to the enemy position which was estimated to be at K 10 d 8.8. and threw bombs to cover the removal of the body. The whole party returned at 12.15.p.m.

I beg to bring to your notice the conduct of L/Cp. Clayton, who, although wounded, wished at first to go to Pte. Bowell's assistance. He actually did go alone, and guided the search party. He also threw three bombs into the enemy's position, to cover the removal of the body.

Pte. Comely, who, although much bruised by the bomb fragments, alone went to his comrade's assistance, but was unable to save him.

Captain Blandy, who immediately organized the search party, going out with them himself and personally supervised all the arrangements.

15-12-1915 Signed R.J.Clarke, Major. 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment

**Thursday 16th December**

After 8 days so called rest we march to Hebuterne again G.M.C.O.s

**Sunday 19th December**

French Gudin once more. Kings Liverpool in for instructions. More rain.

**Wednesday 22nd December**

Relieved by Gloucesters marched back again to Authie.

**Friday 24th December**

Resting and cleaning up issued with waterproof capes and cap covers.

**Christmas 1915**

When we were back in reserve the various amusements and relaxations, which a stationary warfare permits, were elaborated for the benefit of the men.

Christmas Day was fortunately spent at Authie, and the various companies sat down in comfort in the estaminets to a splendid dinner.

Three pigs had been killed for the Battalion's consumption, a plum pudding was presented to each N.C.O. and man by the C.O., and others arrived from the Daily News Fund. A tin of cigarettes came from Messrs. H. and G. Simonds', a packet of cigars from the Maidenhead Fund. Each man received a shirt, muffler, socks and chocolate, the produce of a fund most energetically collected from Berkshire by Mrs. Serocold and Mrs. Hedges.

The officers spent an equally happy evening at the chateau, whose owner, Madame De Wailly, kindly provided a room and all other requisites.

A Divisional Football Cup was given by the G.O.C., which was competed for by all units of the 48th Division under Association rules. We were beaten in the first round by the 5th Gloucesters, who scored the

winning goal just on time, after an exciting game, in which Sergt. Hedges distinguished himself. The 'Varlets' of the 1st/1st South Midland Field Ambulance, and the Divisional Variety Troupe, of which. Private Cooter (B Company) was a well-known member, performed for our benefit, and perhaps most attractive of all was Major Barron's cinematograph entertainment, which was always sure of the warmest reception.

Pte Wheatley:-

Xmas Day. Dinner in the evening and concert afterwards plenty to eat and drink nearly all Section drunk.

## Drafts

The wastage of the Battalion was considerable, and was not made good by drafts, whose total number up to March 1st, 1916, amounted only to 103 men. Companies, therefore, with a fighting strength of from 90 to 110 men had to hold (under far more trying conditions) the same frontage (about 1,400 yards as a rule) which had been allotted to them when at practically full strength in the summer.

It is true that a company of some New Army battalion was constantly arriving for instruction, but during the two or three days of their visit they could not relieve our men of any of the burden. On the contrary, the work and responsibility, especially for officers and N.C.O.'s was considerably increased, and the difficulty of finding accommodation in the teeming hive of Hebuterne for an extra 250 men added to the general discomfort.

A certain amount of change, however, from trench routine was afforded by the courses now established at the various schools of instruction behind the line; for instance, one officer and 30 men went every fortnight to the Brigade Bomb School at Sailly, and in spite of constant shelling found reasonably comfortable billets.

## Changes in Command

Although casualties still, happily, remained light, and no officer had been killed since Lieut. Poulton-Palmer, considerable changes took place during the winter which it is convenient to summarise here.

Colonel Serocold left the Battalion on February 14th, 1916. He had served with the regiment for 32 years, and had commanded it for eleven and a half. All Berkshire people know of the affection and respect with which he was regarded by the regiment, which alone can fully appreciate the debt they owe to his training and personal example. He was succeeded by Major (now Lieut.-Colonel) R. J. Clarke, C.M.G., D.S.O.

The adjutant, Captain G. M. Sharpe, had already left in the previous October, and was afterwards to command his first Battalion. In losing him we all felt that we were losing not only an ideal adjutant, but a personal friend. He was succeeded by Lieut. L. E. Ridley, who was

killed next August, near Pozieres.

The two commanders of A and D Companies, Major F. R. Hedges and Captain HUH. Thorne, came home through sickness about the end of 1915. Captain Thorne afterwards won distinction in command of the 12th Royal Scots, and was killed in the Battle of Arras, April 9th, 1917, leading the first wave of assault '*in the old chivalrous way*,' as his Brigadier wrote. Captains W. E. M. Blandy and R. G. Attride assumed command of A and D Companies respectively.

R.S.M. Hanney also left, to our great regret, and received a commission in the 1st Battalion, where he afterwards won an M.C. His place was filled by the C.S. M. (now QM.) Hogarth, of A Company.

In fact, after a year abroad, the Battalion lost just a third of its original officers, and about 400 N.C.O.'s and men.

## The Weather Improves

But the spirit of the men remained unabated, and the rate of sickness surprisingly low; while the mild open weather of January and February brought about a considerable improvement in trench conditions.

On the other hand, as the winter drew on the hours of duty in the trenches grew longer and the rests shorter. For instance, during February the Battalion spent 25 days in the trenches and only 4 in reserve. Moreover, the former period was unusually exacting, as we held a more extended front, and the enemy's guns showed violent and continuous activity; while the rest billets, Sailly and Courcelles, were uncomfortable and frequently shelled.

It might have been expected that fighting activity would diminish during this period, but this was far from being the case. Both sides gradually brought up and permanently established in this sector large numbers of big guns; the 9.2-inch and 8-inch howitzers, whose first advent was signalled in the autumn, fired with increasing frequency as stocks of ammunition accumulated.

### 8th February 1916

For several consecutive days in February, Hebuterne received a ration of several thousand shells, and cases of shell shock made their appearance. During one of these bombardments Company-Sergt.-Major Lawrence, B Company, was blown to pieces as he came up from the cellar of the sergeants' mess in the Keep. Although a man of nearly 45 he made light of every hardship; his constant cheerfulness and devotion to duty were an inspiration to all.

Intense bombardments of short trench sections also became more common, as the art of raiding, first practised by the Canadians at Messines, developed. The 6th Gloucesters were the first Battalion in our division to indulge in this amusement in November,

1915, when they successfully penetrated the German lines at south-east of Gommecourt Wood. Our Battalion took neither an active nor a passive part in such operations during the winter; their turn was to come, as will be related, on May 16th.

Small encounters between patrols, however, were not infrequent, as the enemy showed increased enterprise, and was no longer willing to surrender tamely command of No-man's Land.

An officer going on leave at the end of February vividly remembers his experiences on the frozen roads, and the sight of a column of French troops of all arms 20 miles long, making their way painfully along the great 'Route Nationale' to Amiens to join in the defence of Verdun.

## March 1916

### 17th March 1916

On March 17th, 1916, Lieut. Goolden and Corpl. V. H. Taylor had the satisfaction of shooting two Germans in a mist, who were trying to get back through their own wire; and on returning the patrol picked up an odd assortment of articles, which sound like an extract from some mad auctioneer's catalogue: (1) a glass globe full of liquid with a string net round it; (2) a strong case with powder inside it; (3) six hand grenades; (4) a shoulder strap, silver braid on red cloth, 169 in gilt; (5) a pair of gloves.

Scarcely a night passed without fresh ground being covered and new information acquired, which was sometimes of a whimsical character. Once, for instance, an enemy working was heard conversing entirely in English, with such phrases as '*Dig that hole deeper,*' '*Bring those stakes along*'; one would imagine them to have been a waiters' battalion.

Among the most active patrol leaders were Lieuts. Gathorne-Hardy, Lund, Downs, Calder and Teed; the two last-named distinguished themselves by a daylight reconnaissance lasting three and a quarter hours in the course of which much information of value was collected.

Nor must we fail to remember with gratitude the three cavalry officers who were attached to us during the winter for periods of one month: Captain A. L. Friend and Lieut. Ansell, of the 7th Dragoon Guards, and Captain M. Simmonds, Indian Cavalry. All did their best to relieve the short-handed company officers, while Captain Simmonds, although a senior captain, took charge of a platoon, and shared all fatigue duties with the subalterns of the Battalion.

Thus the first winter passed in the normal alternations of trench warfare. The spring of 1916 was slow in coming. The German attack at Verdun had coincided with a long spell of deep snow and bitter cold. But towards the end of March the weather grew warm and genial and the

wild daffodils began to appear in all the fields around Sailly.

## Preparations for the Somme Offensive

Meanwhile the preliminaries for the Somme offensive became increasingly significant. The forward villages such as Sailly and Bayencourt were cleared of the civil population, and handed over entirely to the Army. Still more monstrous guns came crawling up, and in place of the old battery of 60-pounders, the orchard at the western outskirts of Sailly, in the angle of the Bayencourt road, harboured two 15-inch howitzers. Gun-pits and enormous new dugouts were constructed in Hebuterne.

The single-line railway which served the 48th and 4th Division with railheads at Acheux and Louvaincourt was supplemented by numbers of light lines.

Troops grew thick upon the ground; the 56th Division appeared upon our left, the 31st on the right, and in May the front held by the Division scarcely exceeded that allotted to a single battalion during the winter. A 4th Army had been formed, of which the 48th Division was on the left in X Corps.

Conferences were held by the G.O.C. with C.O.'s and Adjutants two or three times a week, while parties were constantly detailed to witness demonstrations of gas, smoke and flame throwers.

At last, also, the drafts:so badly needed and so long overdue appeared in fairly adequate numbers; in March alone 202 men joined the Battalion for duty, which brought our total strength up to 874.

## Digging a New Trench

Meanwhile the G.O.C. was planning for the execution of the 145th Brigade a task, which sounds prosaic enough on paper, but which demanded for its success minute organisation and a high state of discipline in all concerned namely, the digging of a forward trench in front of our own wire.

Our line between Hebuterne and Serre sagged back in a westerly direction from Trench Hoche to Trench Bouillon, thereby interposing 800-900 yards between ourselves and the Germans, with an intervening rise in No Man's Land. This configuration of the ground presented three obvious defects for offensive operations. It was impossible for the gunners to get direct observation on the sector of enemy trench opposite; it meant that troops deploying for the attack would get out of trenches facing in three directions, and would have to cross an unnecessary depth of shell-swept ground before getting to the assault. It was, therefore, determined to straighten out the line between the two points mentioned above.

The battalions concerned assiduously practised wire-cutting, filing silently through the gaps, and night-digging. Our Battalion, which was to find the covering parties, took over the part of the line affected (J Sector, from Serre road to Trench Lassalle) a week beforehand, and every effort was made by means of patrols, two or three of which went out each night, to locate any forward posts or rifle pits from which the enemy might get wind of or interfere with the digging of the new trench.

### 9th April 1916

On the night of the 9th-10th April the scheme was carried out under the direction of Major Clissold (1st/1st Field Company, South Midland R.E.'s), an unfailing friend of the infantry, who was killed in the autumn of 1917. About 1,500 men in all were engaged; the digging was done by the 4th Oxforwards and the 5th Gloucesters, while covering parties and fatigues were provided by the Bucks Battalion and ourselves.

About six hours were allotted for the completion of the work, from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. The moon, which was near the full, shone brilliantly, though at times obscured by clouds, so that there was no fear of the confusion which arises from darkness, but rather of detection by the enemy's posts.

Soon after 8.30 p.m. A Company, who were responsible for the protection from the right to the Puisieux road, strung themselves out into groups of three, some 20 yards apart, about 70 paces in front of the tape which marked the course of the proposed trench.

While Captain Crouch, of the Bucks, was similarly employed on the left, some of his men, losing touch, ran into the vision of Hun sentries at the Poplars and were received with shots and bombs, which caused uneasy anticipations of discovery, happily unfulfilled. The diggers got to work behind their screen, and ate into the ground with remarkable speed, for stray rounds of shrapnel, intermittent sniping, and the constant discharge of Verey lights throughout the night, suggested that the Hun had some uneasy suspicion that all was not quite as usual; and indeed it seems almost incredible that the clash of the tools, the whispered orders, and the movements of the wiring parties should have entirely failed to strike the ear of a vigilant sentry at 250 yards.

### 10th April 1916

By 2 a.m. the work was almost finished; nothing remained but to strengthen the parapet of the new trench and to fill up the spaces between the kniferests, which defended it some 40 yards in front, with screw pickets and loose strands of wire.

By 3.20 all the diggers had returned to the old line, and the weary covering party, who had lain out for seven tedious hours, came home to get a hot drink, which they had well earned. Only 15 casualties were reported from the whole Brigade, none of which fell to the share of our

Battalion. The trench was held by a few posts until dawn and then evacuated.

About noon next day an enemy aeroplane flew along it, and the observer could be plainly seen leaning out and taking photographs of this mushroom growth. Almost immediately every battery from La Brayelle to Serre began to register upon it, and for weeks it was rendered unwholesome by the constant attention of artillery and mine-throwers. A poem of Lieut. Downs' preserved the air of mystery in which the whole scheme was so fortunately conceived and executed.

## Sailly

### 12th to 25th April 1916

After these excitements the Battalion moved back on the 12th, half to Sailly, half to the huts in the park of Conin Chateau, which were leaky and surrounded by a pathless morass of mud several inches deep. Here the Battalion was reinoculated, as 18 months had elapsed since the original dose was injected in the autumn of 1914, and spent its mornmgs in Platoon and Company Drill, until its return to J Sector on the 20th.

There was plenty of work and little comfort in the line that tour. The conditions resembled those of the winter at their worst; in the new trench, hastily dug and unrevetted, water and mud engulfed the passer-by to the waist.

One afternoon a German was reported to have got in, and the Adjutant (Lieut. Ridley) who happened to be on the spot, at once organised a bombing party to deal with him, but after wading laboriously to the point indicated, found that the bird had flown.

Meanwhile, the Huns showed their displeasure by sending- into the sector 500 - 1000 shells every day, and casualties were naturally higher than the normal, including Lieut. Duff seriously wounded, and Lieut. Calder shell-shock.

## Authie

No one was therefore sorry when on the 25th we returned to Authie, after an interval of three months, to the great delight of the inhabitants, and enjoyed the spring for a short while in that pleasant valley.

Before returning to the line the battalion spent a few days at Sarny and Conin, furnishing working parties for H-uterne each night and day.

## Back to the Line

### 8th May 1916

On May 8th we relieved the 4th Oxforwards in G Sector on the extreme right of the Brigade front. This tour was destined to be memorable in the history of the Battalion.

The ground was entirely new to us, and extremely difficult. All rations and supplies had to be brought up from Hebuterne by communication trenches more than a mile long and in bad repair. The whole sector had been the scene of a fierce battle in June 1915, for the possession of Touvent Farm and the outskirts of Serre, and was everywhere cut up by old disused trenches, French and German, and shell holes, and was still littered with bones and skulls. Nor was the front line more attractive; it formed a sharp salient projecting towards Serre, held by disconnected posts, ill defended, close to the enemy, and joined to the support line by only two communication trenches, one at each side of the salient. So vague and difficult of identification was this line of posts that Captain Cruttwell, when visiting them for the first time, nearly walked into the German lines while trying to establish connection with D Company, until warned of his mistake by a shower of rifle-grenades.

The whole sector, indeed, closely resembled the crater areas, which the experiences of the Somme were to render familiar. The first week in this dreary spot passed uneventfully; the enemy guns and minnenwerfer, the latter of the largest calibre, whose explosion was deafening, were active, but not unusually so, and up to the 15th the Battalion could congratulate themselves on an absence of casualties during the tour. They were to be relieved next day, and it seemed that the trouble always expected here would be reserved for others.

### 15th May 1916

During the 15th, however, the usual shelling seemed to the two Company Commanders in the front line—Captain Cruttwell, of B, and Captain Attride, of D, to be more methodical and to suggest a registration on all tactical points. Still this impression was not definite enough to cause serious foreboding.

## Under Attack

### 16th May 1916

Up to midnight all was quiet. Then a heavy bombardment opened upon the 56th Division on the left; our divisional guns, who were helping to cover that sector, opened at once in response to the S.O.S. The two anxious Company Commanders felt convinced that if a raid was intended they would not be the victims of it. But as soon as our guns were securely switched off on to a false target, the enemy showed his hand. His guns ceased to play on the 56th Division and were directed with extreme violence against our front.

It was then 12.30 a.m. on the morning of May 16th; the raid had begun. It is now necessary, in order to understand its course, to describe minutely with the aid of the map, the dispositions of the two Companies affected.

The length of the line was approximately 1,200 yards; on the right B Company had two platoons in the front line strung out into seven posts between Nairne and Wrangel, each containing from six to nine men. Two sections and a Lewis gun team were in Jones Street, which had been chosen as the main defensive line in case of attack. The remaining two sections with another Lewis gun were in Caber, and the fourth platoon in Worcester Street. Company Headquarters were established some 800 yards behind the front line, at Pimlico, where a platoon of A Company was placed in dugouts at the disposal of O.C. Company.

The line of D Company on the left stretched from Wrangel to Jena, and was similarly held by two platoons furnishing eight posts. The supporting platoon on the right was equally divided between Trench Dominique and Oxford Street; that on the left was located in the forward end of Jena. Company Headquarters were in Vauban, and Captain Attride disposed of a reserve platoon of C Company in Vercingetorix. Further two platoons of C Company which were returning from a working party in Wrangel when the bombardment started, were placed in dugouts near Pimlico.

The plan of the bombardment, which was a master piece of method, was as follows :- From 12.30 to 1 a.m. the whole of our front and supervision line was bombarded with field guns, 5.9inch howitzers and mine-throwers ; but the chief intensity of fire was directed at B Company between Nairne and Chasseur Hedge, with the object, which was practically accomplished, of destroying or burying all the posts included therein. At 1 a.m. a red rocket was shot up from the enemy lines, and the fire from Nairne to Wrangel lifted, but fell with redoubled fury on the support and reserve lines, where every communication trench and dugout was deluged with shells. At Pimlico, in particular, 5.9-inch shells were thrown at the rate of 100 a minute, enveloping it in a dense fog of smoke and fumes, and the supporting platoon of A Company lost nearly half its strength.

Meanwhile the fire on either flank covered both front line and support, rendering lateral communication impossible. Thus B Company was isolated, and the enemy infantry immediately entered. Post No.7 opposed their entry, but was overpowered - none of the nine men who composed it were ever seen again, but the ground about was afterwards found littered with exploded and unexploded German bombs, showing that they had fought a good fight. The Germans then divided into two parties with separate tasks. One party worked along Jones Street towards the right, some moving in the trench, some along the parados. They destroyed the left post in Jones Street, but were eventually checked by Lance-Corpl. Cooke with his Lewis Gun team, which, reflecting the coolness of its commander, kept up a steady rifle fire when the gun jammed. The Huns then retired and left Jones Street at the point of entry, after

fulfilling what was presumably their job of protecting their comrades from attack in the rear. For the other party, working along the fire trench, attacked Posts 6-2 inclusive from the rear. These posts were in sore straits. Their defences had been blown to pieces, their rifles damaged, broken or buried, and their bombs scattered: they had themselves been shaken or buried and were left defenceless. The story of a survivor from Post 2, who escaped, will serve as an example. As they endeavoured to extricate themselves and their weapons from the wrecked post, Germans appeared behind them and ordered them in English to mount the parapet or they would be shot. Private Chapman at once tackled an officer with his fists and, shot by the latter's revolver, died most bravely. Four men were taken, and one alone escaped. However, 12 survivors in all reached Post 1, which remained intact and resisted stoutly. Here Lieut. Ward, who was on duty, took charge, and reorganised the 12, only to find that some were wounded, and that the rifles of the remainder were useless. Accordingly he withdrew towards Nairne, and was fortunate to get them back safely, for at one point four Germans peered into the trench, which was a very deep one, close to the party, but made off when Ward loosed his revolver at them. Meanwhile, No. 1 Post, under Sergt. Holloway, a brave soldier from Abingdon, rear, drove back all the enemy who approached them with rifle and bombs, and effectively staved off their progress towards Naime, where the position was secured by a post of 13th West Yorks (31st Division) which was promptly moved to the left in answer to Lieut. Ward's request. The support platoon was organised for defence in Caber by Lieut. Field, who remained with his men though seriously wounded. Here he was found by Lieut. Gathorne-Hardy, who, with his usual contempt for danger, had volunteered to go up from Company Headquarters to re-establish connection, which had been broken within five minutes of the commencement of the bombardment.

While B Company was being attacked, fire was still directed with violence on the front line of the left Company, and continued until 1.40 a.m., when it also lifted on to the support and reserve areas. The damage here had been mainly confined to Posts 1-3, where all the men had been killed or buried; at Post 1 five men were saved by the systematic and collected courage of Private Appleby (4749), who dug them out one after the other. At Post 3, Captain Boyle and Sergt. Pitman dug out Lance-Corpl. Sargeant and the other men, being disturbed during the operation by the appearance of a German on the parapet, whom they shot and wounded. Lance-Corpl. Sargeant was no sooner extricated than he collected bombs, and returned to his post only to find two wounded comrades being hauled off by a party of Germans. They received his bombs into their midst and ran back into the darkness behind Chasseur Hedge, where their supports were waiting. Meanwhile, Posts 4 and 5 remained intact and full of fight. Singing in the

intervals between firing '*Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag, And smile, smile, smile,*' they held off the enemy, who could be dimly seen filing through their wire and forming up outside in three lines, distinguished by white armlets. Post 5 soon received a reinforcement of some 20 men under Sergt. V. H. Taylor, who came up from Oxford Street. They had been summoned by Corpl. Page, a most gallant Wokingham man, who volunteered to go back through the fiery curtain of the barrage, which task he accomplished without harm. No further attack was made upon D Company, which escaped with comparatively light casualties. Captain Boyle was afterwards awarded the M.C. for the skill and coolness with which he organised the defence of his sector, and Corpl. Sargeant the Military Medal.

The bombardment continued unabated until 2.45, and then ceased suddenly with the first light of dawn. The ruinous state of the trenches made daylight movement difficult and dangerous, as the enemy fired rifle grenades continually at broken points in the communication trenches, causing several casualties among men who were not quick enough in running the gauntlet. In spite of such difficulties all the wounded were evacuated by 10 a.m., though in some cases it took four hours to get the stretcher from the front line to the dressing station in the village. The losses had been heavy, amounting in all to 98, of whom 18 were killed and 29 missing; of these B Company supplied 60, thus losing half of its fighting strength. Many hours were spent next night by parties left behind after the relief of the Battalion in search of the missing, who afterwards were almost without exception reported as prisoners of war.

Attached to the War Diary was the following report:-

Battalion Report on the German Raid on 'G' Sector - Hebuterne on the night of 15th/16th May 1916 Map 14 A.

Dispositions of the 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment

On the night 15/16th May 1916, the Right of the Battalion Line was held by 'B' Company (Captain G HY W Crutwell).

The front line was held by two platoons furnishing, by night, 7 Posts in K 23 2, K 23 3, K 23 4 and K 23. 5. The only Communicating Trench from these Posts (except No. 7 Post) to the rear is NAIRNE on the extreme Right of the Line. No. 7 Post was entirely isolated.

The support consisted of two Sections and a Lewis Gun, and team of 1 N.C.O. and 6 men- all in JONES: two sections and a Lewis Gun and team in CABER and one platoon in WORCESTER STREET. In addition, one platoon of the Right Reserve Company (A) were in PIMLICO and would be at the disposal of O.C. Right Company in case of Attack.

The Left was held by D Company (Captain R G Attride). The front line was held by one Platoon in K 23. 6, K 23 7 and K 23.8. furnishing 5 Posts

The Support consisted of two Sections in DOMINIQUE with a Lewis Gun and a team of 1 N.C.O. and 6 men in Post GLISSOLD.

The other two Sections of this Supporting Platoon were In

the neighbourhood of OXFORD STREET. Another Platoon held trenches E 23. 9 and 10 with 3 Posts and a supporting platoon with a Lewis Gun and team of 1 N C O and 6 men in the forward end of JENA. In addition, one platoon of the Left Reserve Company, 'C', in VERCINGETORIX would be at the disposal of O.C. Left Company in case of attack.

On the night of 15/16th May, two platoons of the Reserve Company, 'C' had been working in WRANGLE but at the commencement of the bombardment they were returning and were put into dugouts in or near PIMLICO. About 12.45 a.m. I ordered the supporting platoons of 'A' & 'C' Companies to report to the Right and left Company Commanders respectively. No news could be obtained from the front line of the Right Company and the possibility of an attack more serious than a raid had to be considered. The remaining Platoons of 'A' & 'C' Companies were not moved. I take full responsibility for the dispositions and method of holding the line. The two Company Commanders concerned were only carrying out my orders for the arrangements of the Platoons and Posts.

#### THE BOMBARDMENT

At 12.30 a.m. the enemy commenced an intense bombardment on the front line with 77mm, 10.5 cm. and 15 cm guns.

Hostile minenwerfer, estimated at not less than six in number, and probably more, concentrated on our wire and front line trenches from K 23.2 to K 23.7. and the northern end of JONES. At the same time JONES, DOMINIQUE and the forward ends of the Communicating trenches were heavily shelled. This continued for about 30 minutes, and at 1.0 a.m. a Red Rocket was sent up behind the German Lines and immediately, in addition, a very heavy fire from fresh batteries of 15 cm guns from the direction of Serre was opened all down the communicating trenches on the Support Line, CABER-WORCESTER STREET-FOURIER-OXFORD STREET-BOYAU 140-FORT BRIGGS and GUINET, and further back on the next line. At the same time the guns were lifted from the front line K 23. 2 to K 23. 5 on to the Support Line and Communicating trenches, and the bombardment slackened on the front line of the 31st Division on our Right: about 1.40 a.m. it lifted from K 23. 6, K 23. 7 and K 23. 8 but was never lifted off the front line of our extreme left platoon in K 23.9 & 10. CABER - FORT BRIGGS and BOYAU 140 as (and) also that part of NAIRNE nearest to CABER were especially subjected to a bombardment of extraordinary violence and accuracy.

It was during this period the raid took place. The trenches, including the front line were so filled with dense smoke from bursting shells that in places it was impossible to see more than 10 or 15 yards. The damage done to our trenches was very great. Posts 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 of the Right Company were either obliterated or filled up with earth and sand bags. Many of the men on the Posts were partially buried, their rifles damaged or buried, and the bombs scattered, so that within a very few minutes of the commencement of the cannonade many men found themselves without any means of defence. Posts 3, 4 & 5 of the Right Platoon of the Left Company suffered in the same manner and the Sap and the Trenches held by the left Platoon were very badly knocked about. WORCESTER STREET, FORT BRIGGS and BOYAU 140 were deluged with 15 cm shells and suffered very material damage: CABER and BOYAU 140 being completely blocked in many places and a dense

smoke pervaded the whole area.

Many casualties occurred in these localities.

#### THE RAID ON THE RIGHT

About 1.0 a.m. a raiding party entered our Right Company Lines opposite No. 7 Post in K 33. 5. This party encountered considerable resistance at Post No. 7 but the Germans must have eventually overpowered them as all the nine men on this Post were missing. There were many unexploded German bombs found scattered about the ground and a German automatic Pistol and a fully loaded Omagazine for a similar pistol were picked up. This party then divided into two bodies: one proceeded along JONES and on the Parados of JONES. There were signs of considerable opposition having been made by our left Post here which must have been eventually overcome. Six men of the Post were missing.

The Lewis Gun team, who were on the Right of this Post, under Lance Corporal Cooke, finding their regular gun position destroyed, moved further to the Right of JONES where they took up a new position and opened fire. Two men of this team got detached and were never seen again. Owing to dirt having got into the mechanism the gun soon jammed. About the same (time) Lance Corporal Cooke observed a party of about 15 men moving in file along the parados of JONES. These, at first, he took to be reinforcements, coming overland, but afterwards he began to realise they must have been Germans and that they would have entered JONES near the Left Post in that trench. He therefore returned along the trench some way and then mounted the Parados near his original gun position and there he endeavoured to get the gun into working order while the men of the team kept up a steady rifle fire. It is undoubtedly due to the presence of this Post formed by the Lewis Gun team that the enemy did not attempt further progress in this quarter. This party apparently returned by the same route as they had entered. Great credit is due to Lance Corporal Cooke for his coolness in dealing with a difficult situation.

The other body, when the party divided, worked along behind the fire trench towards NAIRNE, taking Posts 6, 5, 4, 3, and 2 in (the) rear. These Posts had suffered severely in the bombardment, especially from 'Minnies', and many rifles had been broken and buried: the bombs which had been on the parapet for immediate use had been scattered and the boxes of bombs buried. About 12 of the survivors, finding themselves either without rifles or with rifles rendered useless for firing, and being unable to get at their bombs, edged along the trench towards our Right or No. 1 Post.

Lt D J Ward, who was on duty in the front line during the whole of the bombardment, took up his position in the trench immediately behind No 1 Post, which was in a 'T' Sap. Here he met the 12 men mentioned above. He quietly organised a party of those who had rifles and bayonets, to hold the Right of this trench, but on finding a few of these men without any means of defence, and wounded, he sent them back down NAIRNE. A little later he examined the rifles of those who had them and ascertained that they were useless, and, the trench being a very deep one, he decided to retire this party to NAIRNE. At this moment four Germans appeared looking over the parados close to him. He immediately fired at them with his revolver and one was seen to drop on his knees and the others ducked down. Owing to the depth of the trench Lt, Ward could not see what happened to them. Fearing that his party, of whom several were

wounded, might be bombed in the deep trench, he ordered most of them to retire to NAIRNE, whilst he himself went with one or two of the men to the Left Post of the 13th West Yorks (31st Division) and asked if they would move a Post to their left so as to protect NAIRNE. While this was happening, the men in No. 1 Post, under Sgt. Holloway, had kept up a steady fire to their front, but catching sight of some Germans behind the parapets they opened fire on them and threw bombs and the Germans made off.

It is certain that the progress of the Germans towards NAIRNE was stopped by Lt. Ward and the party he organised, assisted by the prompt co-operation of Sgt Holloway and No 1 Post when they found the Germans behind them. The greatest credit is due to Lt. Ward for his cool judgement in dealing with the situation in spite of the severe ordeal of the bombardment - also to Sgt. Holloway for keeping his men well together so that they were ready to make full use of the opportunity of driving off the raiders when they appeared at their backs. As soon as the bombardment ceased, Lt Ward went down the front line and found that ten men were missing from Post 2 to 6 inclusive.

At No 2 Post only one man survived and it appears that at an early stage the Post was blown in and the men partially buried. While they were endeavouring to extricate themselves and their rifles and bombs from the wreckage, Germans appeared behind them and ordered them, in English, to get up on the parapet or they would be fired on. Private Chapman, at once tackled a German Officer with his fists but was shot dead by the latter's revolver. One man got away but the remaining four of the Post were taken.

In the initial stages of the bombardment Captain G H W Crutwell sent Lt Gathorne-Hardy to locate the area affected, as telephonic communication with the front line was broken in the first five minutes. Meanwhile Captain Crutwell sent his support platoon of 'A' Company under 2nd Lt. Hampshire to FORT BRIGGS. Later as many casualties occurred in FORT BRIGGS. Two sections of this platoon were moved to BOYAU 140. Later Lt. Gathorne-Hardy made his way through the barrage to CABER, where he found Lt. G S Field, with his Support platoon. Lt. Field was seriously wounded at the commencement of the bombardment but he remained with his Command and organised the Support Line defence.

#### THE RAID ON THE LEFT COMPANY

The bombardment on the Right of the Left Company front line continued till about 1.40 a.m. when it lifted to the OXFORD STREET-GUINETT LINE. After about half an hour from the commencement Posts 1 & 9 were levelled and the men buried.

On Number 1 Post No. 4749 Private Appleby, though wounded, dug out the Lance Corporal in charge of the Post and found he was dead. He then dug out three others and helped to get out the remaining two men, all of whom were wounded. His devotion to duty and cool headedness undoubtedly saved the lives of these five men.

On Post No. 9 all the men were missing buried and the trench levelled. These men extricated themselves and moved to Post Clissold where they were later of considerable use.

On Post No. 3 all the men were buried. Captain Boyle who was on duty in this line and Sgt. Pitman proceeded

to this Post and commenced to dig out Lance Corporal Seargent and the other men. While thus engaged a German appeared on the parapet and Captain Boyle and the Serjeant shot at him and he was seen to stagger backwards. Other Germans appeared going in the direction of No. 4 Post. Thereupon Captain Boyle and the Serjeant went to No 4 Post and there organised a bombing party.

Captain Boyle also visited No 5 Post and found them alright. Great praise is due to Captain Hoyle for the way he organised his bombing party and generally handled the situation at this point in the very trying circumstances prevailing. Captain Boyle's coolness had no doubt a great influence on the men who remained steady and by their rifle fire prevented the enemy proceeding further into our lines.

Serjeant Pitman was with Captain Boyle and gave him most valuable help and is deserving of high commendation.

Meanwhile Lance Corporal Seargent collected some bombs from a little way along the trench on the left and, on returning to his Post commenced to throw them at a party of the enemy, estimated at 7 or 8, who had apparently been in the trench and had just left, taking with them two men from the Post, one of whom was badly wounded. Lance Corporal Seargent threw bombs at this party and at a supporting party of Germans who were in the CHASSEUR HEDGE. Corporal Hewitt, who had come up the South side of the HEDGE, from the supports, with bombs, saw both parties of Germans and the bombs bursting in their midst. He also saw a line of 8 or 9 Germans rush up to the party, with the prisoners.

When Captain Boyle reached No 4 Post, Corporal Page who was on duty in the trench, volunteered to go back for supports. He ran overland through the barrage and brought about 20 men from OXFORD STREET, under Serjeant V H Taylor, up to Post No. 5 where they supplemented the fire which Posts 4 and 5 had been keeping up on the HEDGE the whole time. This act of Corporal Page reflects the greatest credit on him for his courage.

No. 2834 Private Shaw is deserving of special mention. He took messages through the thickest of the bombardment from his

Company H.Q. to the front line. It was reported that some of the Germans were seen in Khaki with white armlets.

The left platoon of 'D' Company in trenches K 23.9 and 10., which had at that time no lateral communication with the Right platoon, was heavily shelled throughout the bombardment.

The men in the 'D' Sap were cut off and one man was killed and the others buried.

The Lewis Gun in JENA, under Lance Corporal Lodge kept up a steady fire on the enemy's front line throughout.

2nd Lt H M W Wells of 'C' Company, who was on duty in the front line, displayed great coolness, and visited all his Posts during the bombardment and handled the situation in a very capable manner.

The supporting platoon of 'C' company and 1 Lewis Gun team, which had been sent to Vauban in the early part of the bombardment were later moved by Captain Attride to GUINETT.

The two Company Commanders, Captain R G Attride and

Captain G H W Crutwell, were in constant telephonic communication with Battalion H.Q. They both dealt with the situation in a cool manner. From the Left Company in particular I received the information which I wanted to enable me to realise the position there.

Our Batteries

As the bombardment commenced I, through the F.O.C., rang up the two Gloster Batteries covering our front, who put up a good barrage on the enemy front line, and continued at various rates of firing till the bombardment ceased. Later, support was asked from the Heavies and Counter Batteries, which was given, though at the time they were firing on the 56th Divisional Front. The enemy bombardment on our trenches continued till 8.45. a.m., without slackening, when it suddenly ceased. No gas shells were reported.

Relief of Posts

As soon as the bombardment ceased, all the Posts were relieved by N.C.Os. And men from the Reserve Platoons, in less than an hour, the line being held in the same way as normally. All available men were also put on to clear the trenches and, where possible, repair the damage done. Fires were lighted in the cookers before 2.0.a.m. and hot tea was sent up to the men soon after 3.0 a.m

Casualties - I regret to report the following casualties:-

Killed ... .. 18

Wounded ... ..51 (includes Lt Field)

Missing ... .. 29

These were made up as follows:

	Killed	Wounded	Missing
A Company	5	12	-
B Company	9	24	27
C Company	1	2	-
D Company	3	13	2

Supply of bombs

The dispositions previously made for the supply of bombs in case of attack was as follows:-

The Battalion Bomb store was in Vercingetorix: another forward store was in Pimlico; three forward stores in the Company supply line, i.e. CABER, OXFORD STREET AND JENA (JUNCTION OF GUINET) (two of these stores had only been made in the last three days) 15 men from each of the Reserve Platoons on VERCINGETORIX & PIMLICO were to report at these stores respectively to be under the orders of the Battalion Bombing Officer and Bombing Serjeant. These parties were to carry forward to the three forward Posts - The support platoons were then to carry forward to the front line. The party at VERCINGETORIX also were to replenish their store from the Brigade store in the village. This system worked well. Seargent Evans, Battalion Bombing N.C.O., who was at the PIMLICO store, carried out his duties with ability.

Telephones

Telephonic communications existed from the three sections of the front trenches to their Company H.Q., thence to Battalion H.Q. but the Right and Centre wires from Company H.Q. forward, were broken in the first five minutes and communication could only be maintained by

runners. Communication with the Left held good all the time. Communications from Battalion H.Q. to the Brigade was never interfered with. The Battalion was relieved in the afternoon of the 16th, according to programme, by the 8th Worcester Regt. Search parties from 'B' & 'D' Companies were left behind and spent many hours of the night searching for the missing men

Handling of wounded

The arrangements made for the handling of the wounded were excellent. In reply to a message stretcher bearers were sent up from the village and with the aid of our own bearers collected the wounded. Although it was a four hours journey to carry some of the stretchers from the front line to the Village dressing station, all the wounded were evacuated by 10.0.a., except three who could not be moved by day. Lt. Murray, 2nd Field Ambulance, who was attached to us while the Regimental Medical Officer was on leave, went to the Village dressing station. He, and Captain G Moore, 3rd Field Ambulance who was at the forward section stationed at Hebuterne were chiefly responsible for this work.

The Rev Meek, the Non-Conformist Chaplain came up from the village at dawn and was of great assistance to the wounded.

The steadiness and general behavior of the N.C.Os. And men were excellent and, in spite of the intense shelling and heavy casualties they never lost their Morale. One Post of the Left Company kept up their spirits, when they were not firing, by singing the chorus of the song "Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile" (After one of the 'curios' concerts, I suggested this song as a good tonic for the Battalion if ever they were in a tight corner). The example set by their Officers was worthy of all praise.

23-5-1916 R J Clarke ,Lt. Col. Commanding 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment [TX01254]

The Berkshire Chronicle published the following account in their edition of the 4th October 1916

Lieutenant (temporary Captain) S Boyle 1st/4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, Territorial Force - For conspicuous gallantry. After a heavy bombardment the enemy raided his trench. Captain Boyle displayed great energy and courage, shot the leading enemy as he appeared on the parapet, organised bombing parties, dug out buried men, cleared the trench of the enemy and handled the situation generally in a masterly manner.

This award of the Military Cross to a gallant Berkshire officer is the first official intimation of the German raid in May last on the trenches of the 1st/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment. For reasons which were sound from the military standpoint the name of the battalion could not be given at the time though it was fairly well known that the Territorials had sustained a considerable number of casualties. It has since transpired that several of the battalion are prisoners of war in Germany. It is only due to the 1st/4th Royal Berks that the facts should now be stated for some people still seem to be under the impression that they have been idle since they have been at the front

Soon after midnight on May 15th the Germans, following a heavy bombardment lasting 1 1/2 hours approached our lines in three parties. Two were driven back but the third was successful in penetrating our first line. B and D Companies were holding the trench with A and C in

support. Desperate fighting ensued and through the heavy shelling of the enemy's artillery many bombs and rifles were buried in the trench which had fallen in, with the result that several of the Berks had to fight with their fists. The Germans made frantic efforts to reach our second line but our men fought so gallantly that the enemy was completely foiled in his attempt and after about half an hour was driven out sustaining casualties heavier than the Berkshires, the artillery inflicting severe losses on them. There were many acts of bravery on the part of the Berks, especially during the fighting in the trench. Stretcher bearers, although wounded themselves continued their duties in picking up their wounded comrades once more demonstrating the pluck and courage of the British soldiers. The Colonel heartily congratulated the Berks on their splendid achievement in driving the enemy back and said their bravery was worthy of the highest commendation.

The experiences of the men under such conditions are emphasised in the following letter from one of the wounded "It was soon after midnight that the Germans started on their old games and they gave us 2 1/2 hours of the worst shelling we had ever known and we have had a good bit at different times. Well we lay down at the bottom of the trench in all the mud and filth and over came the shells, a perfect rain of them mostly shrapnel and high explosives. It was like hell let loose. Soon after the start a part of the trench I was in came down, this being due to the bursting of a shell close to me, but I managed to get clear of that. A little later down came practically all of the trench on me and I remember very little until I was rescued. The Berkshire Territorials both first and second line have nobly done their part in the present war. [TX01658]

This eventful night was the last spent by the Battalion in the trenches for five weeks; the 48th Division, which had established a record for an unbroken length of service in the line, was being withdrawn into Army Reserve. Thus the Battalion came through their first serious test, and were not found wanting. The praise which Colonel Clarke bestowed next day at Conin on their endurance, discipline and fighting spirit, was repeated by the Divisional General and the Corps Commander.

## Couin

The day at Conin was spent in packing and loading L up, a task rendered easier by the loan from our good friends, 3rd Warwick Battery, of two G.S. wagons. Early on the 18th we joined the Brigade at St. Leger and marched to Beauval. The day was very hot. The march was mainly through narrow valleys, dense with dust. The Battalion were short of sleep, and very weary, while the sun beat down upon their steel helmets, which they wore for the first time on the march. None the less, Sir A. Hunter-Weston complimented Colonel Clarke on the way in which they marched past him at Marieux.

## Beauval 18th to 31st June 1916

Beauval was reached at noon, a quiet little country town, with long shady streets; and the billets were very good. The fortnight here was spent in route marches, grouping practices at the range, and platoon and company training in general. The keen pleasure with which the men turned to drill and small company schemes after the months of trench monotony was very noticeable.

A splendid compliment was paid to D Company by the Corps Commander, who met them one day on the march. Stopping their commander, Captain Attridge, he said that he had never seen a finer body of men in France; that he was proud of them, and that they had every right to be proud of themselves, for their conduct on the night of the 16th.

### 31st June 1916

On the 31st the Brigade made an early start, rising at dawn and moving off at 4 a.m. in a bright, fresh, lovely morning, well-suited for the long march to the St. Riquier training area. The Battalion arrived at their billets, the small village of Maison Roland, some 7 miles north-east of Abbeville, before midday. The inhabitants, who had been unfortunate in the troops quartered on them just before, showed some hostility, closing their houses, and refusing to allow the men to enter. All ill-feeling, however, was rapidly removed. Colonel Clarke had warned the Battalion to do everything to create a good impression, and when we left the Mayor sent a letter thanking all ranks for their behaviour.

The whole neighbourhood was a mass of troops rehearsing the Somme battles on specially prepared areas, where officers remarked on the advantage of being able to move freely without fear of damaging the crops. Some days in succession were spent in Battalion, Brigade and Divisional Training, and all learnt by experience how much the inevitable stagnation and immobility of long-continued trench warfare dull the initiative and lessen the quickness of mind and body

The days were strenuous; reveille, as a rule, was at 4 a.m., and work began at 6 and lasted until 1, leaving the afternoons free, while the nights were twice begun with Brigade attacks, and finished in bivouac. But the men enjoyed their time; they grew hard for battle, with supple limbs and the indescribable thrill of perfect physical fitness. And in spite of the hard work time was found for recreation; cricket was played again for the first time since the summer days at Hebuterne in 1915, and a Brigade Horse Show created keen interest. In St. Riquier men from all the Division could foregather in the estaminets, one of which possessed a much-coveted billiard table, and sometimes it was even possible to spend a day in the pleasant town of Abbeville.

For the latter part of this training period the Battalion had moved to Gapennes, a village some 6 miles north of Maison Roland, where, as before, hostility shown at arrival was soon changed to friendliness and goodwill.

On June 10th the Battalion set its face again towards the east; and after two days' long and dusty marching we found ourselves agam in the huts of Couin; which next day were exchanged for an undesirable and filthy bivouac at Saily. The preparations of the last month had completely changed aspect of these forward villages, and it was clear that the time was at hand. Saily was full of camps and dumps; the bare and desolate slopes to the east harboured tier upon tier of guns. Reliefs from the Brigade worked day and night without a pause in Hebuterne and the adjacent trenches.

When the Battalion took over H. Sector on the 16th, they found every nook and corner of the trenches by night filled with parties digging new dugouts and Stokes mortar emplacements, bringing up gas-cylinders, smoke candles and all the diverse paraphernalia of the modern offensive; while the enemy's artillery and machine guns incessantly harassed these suspected activities. Otherwise, no incident of especial note occurred during this tour, except a forced landing by one of our machines in front of Puisieux, which drew immediately into the open a mob of inquisitive Germans estimated at several hundreds.

#### **24th June 1916**

The 24th found the battalion back at Couin, where they were to stay until the fateful 1st July. The damp, ill-ventilated and crowded huts were responsible for a good many cases of sore throat and rheumatism. But there was little time to be sick. In the interval between working parties, bayonet fighting and wire-cutting, the last and most significant preparations for attack were made.

### **Sources**

Cruttwell *War Record of the 1st/4th* pp 37-67

Petre pp 130-139

Berkshire Chronicle

Diary of Pte Wheatley

*Continued in section 233*