

Section 232

The Somme

The 2nd Battalion 30th June to 4th July 1916

The 2nd Battalion were part of 25th Brigade within 8th Division. They were allocated to III Corps/Fourth Army for the Somme engagement.

The Plan for the Great Push

The 'Great Push' had been planned months before. Over a front of some 45 miles the French were to deploy 39 Divisions over 30 miles leaving the British to cover 15 miles with as many divisions as they could muster. The plan was for 25. The German attack at Verdun and the subsequent fighting caused considerable changes and forced the British to take the major role, attacking with 13 divisions over fifteen and a half miles from Maricourt to Gommecourt.

The details of the plan were issued as battalion orders on the 23rd June:-

Operation Orders by Lt. Col. A M Holdsworth, Commanding 2nd Royal Berkshire Regiment – 23rd June 1916

I) The 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment will form part of the assaulting line of the 25th Infantry Brigade in an attack on the German positions in which the 8th Division will take a principal part on 'Z' Day.

II) The attack is being preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment day and night for five days commencing on 'U' Day up to the moment of assault on 'Z' Day

III During the preliminary stages of the bombardment the Battalion will remain in bivouacs in Long Valley

IV) On the night Y/Z the Battalion will take up its assembly position in preparation for the assault as follows:-

'A' Company: Area enclosed by Broughton St – New front line Goosedubs – and a portion of old front line North of Broughton

'B' Company: Fire trench from left of 'A' Company to Rivington Tunnel inclusive and Furness St.

'C' Company: Front line Rivington St exclusive to Cartmall St inclusive and Ulverston

Battalion H.Q.: Furness St near junction with Ulverston.

Lewis Guns; with Companies to which they belong

V) The assault will be carried out with 'A', 'B' & 'C' Companies in front line each on a front of 1 Platoon, extended to three paces. Distance between platoons 50 paces. 'D' Company will follow the assaulting Companies at 200 yards distance, in line of Platoons, in columns of Sections. One Platoon – Brigade Grenade Company – will be on the right of 'D' Company.

VI) At (- 05) the two leading Companies of 'A', 'B' & 'C' will advance over our parapet and form up in front of our wire in



two lines extended to 3 paces facing their Objective, and at such distance as convenient. At Zero hour the remaining two platoons of each Company will form up in the same position and follow the leading waves.

'D' Company will be ready to move out of their assembly positions as soon as the two rear waves of leading Companies have advanced, moving 2 Platoons by Ulverston and 2 by Broughton St into the Fire Trench, forming up outside the parapet and will follow behind 'B' Company at 200 yards distance.

O.C. Companies must see that their Companies form up square with their Objective

If possible a tape will be laid out for the leading platoon of each Coy to form on. Platoon bombers will be on the right of their platoons except in the case of 'D' Company, where they will lead their platoons.

Lewis Guns, with the Companies they belong to, will be with the 2nd and 3rd platoons of the assaulting Companies. The Lewis Guns of 'D' Company will follow in rear of the Company.

VII The first intermediate objective of the Battalion is the enemy trench between points (78) and (44).

'A' Company will advance with their right on the following points: (17)-(57)-(68)-(92)-(56)-(66)-(78)

'B' Company: (09)-(20)-(52)-(63)-(95)-(27) to 1st Objective. All three points are inclusive to 'B' Company.

'C' Company: (03)-(45)-(97)-(29) to 1st Objective. All inclusive to 'C' Company.

'D' Company on the front from Point (09) to Point (13), both

inclusive

The 2nd Lincoln Regt will advance on the left of 'C' Company with their right on

the line (05)-(46)-(88)-(10)-(44). All these points are inclusive to 2nd Lincolnshire Regt.

VIII In delivering the assault the two leading waves of the Battalion will not

stay to occupy or clean up, but will push on to the 1st Objective

VIII a) The first two waves of the two leading platoons of the 3 Assaulting Companies must reach the line (88)-(95)-(82)-(02) without any previous halt but would not move beyond this line before 0.20 and will capture the 1st Objective at 0.30. at which hour the artillery barrage will lift off it.

b) The 3rd and 4th waves, except the 3rd wave of 'A' Company will move on the line (46)-(45)-(63)-(52)-(39)-(38) and will clean up these and be prepared to continue the advance at 0.20. or to give any support which might be required by the two leading platoons. The 3rd wave of 'A' Company will move onto the line (61)-(69)-(68) and will act as above.

c) 'D' Company will move direct into the enemy's front line between Points (13) and (09). At 0.20 the leading waves will advance to the 1st Objective and will be

followed into the positions which they have vacated, by the waves in their immediate rear.

d) 1 Platoon of Brigade Grenade Company will move on the right of 'D' Company and will be responsible for the right flank of the Battalion and will keep in touch with the left flank of 23rd Brigade

e) 1 section Brigade Machine Gun Company will move in rear of 'D' Company and will establish their guns as soon as possible in strong points mentioned in para 1X, (78) to (56)

IX The following Strong Points will be consolidated by the Battalion in the 1st Objective: Point (78) in rear of Point (56).

The 2nd Lincolnshire Regt will consolidate Points (44) 1st Objective, (10) in rear.

Point (05) will be consolidated by the Battalion on our right.

The leading waves of 'A' Company will immediately commence consolidating these two Points but the Right position of 'D' Company, on arriving at Point (56), will take over from 'A' Company and continue consolidating this Point. The garrison of each strong point will be 1 platoon, 1 Lewis Gun and 1 Vickers Gun

X On securing the 1st Objective 'B' and 'C' Companies will at once re-organise and be prepared to follow as a reserve to the 1st Royal Irish Rifles who will capture the 2nd Objective – points (22)-(31)-(28)-(46) & (43). These Companies on leaving the 1st Objective will come under the orders of the O.C. 1st Royal Irish Rifles.

'B' Company will be responsible for consolidating the strong points at point (43) and 'C' Company for Point (46). Garrison for strong Points as before.

XI Equipment etc will be carried as already detailed

XII A Brigade Signalling Station will be established in the 1st Objective ,about Point (44). This station will be in telephonic and visual signalling communication with Brigade H.Q. if possible, the station will be joined up with Battalion H.Q. It is most important that the messages should be as short as possible.

XIII The Regimental Sergeant Major with distinguishing flags

for dumps and a party of 1 L/Cpl. And 4 men per Company will move forward in rear of 'D' Company each man carrying one box of bombs and 1 box of rifle grenades and will establish a dump somewhere about (09) after which they will continue to get as many bombs ,boxes of ammunition, Very lights, pistols etc across as possible.

XIV Battalion H.Q. which will be marked by a blue signalling flag, will move with 'D' Company into the enemy's line to a Point N. of Point (09). They will, if possible advance along the line (20)-(63)-(95)-(16)-(17)

XV O.C. Companies will report to Battalion Headquarters a rough estimate of the number of casualties in their respective Companies every two hours.

XVI In accordance with Divisional Orders the following Officers will join the transport on Y night, and not accompany the battalion to the trenches. They will be prepared to join the Battalion at short notice:- Capt S H Hugo, Lt H E W Prest , Lt, G W Lindley, 2nd Lt R G Green 2nd Lt B H Belchett, 2nd Lt G V R Owen

XVII The following Officers are detailed for special carrying parties and will work under instructions separately to them:- 2nd Lts G J H Walls, V A Humphreys & F M Masters

XVIII Officers and N.C.Os must see that the advance is not delayed owing to the desire of the men to secure trophies etc. Any N.C.O. or man found looting from dugouts or from dead bodies will lay themselves open to severe punishment. Two men in the Battalion will be specially detailed whose duties it will be to collect papers and identity discs from enemy casualties. These papers etc will be put in sand bags and sent back with prisoners.

XIX Miscellaneous

a) Any captured guns that are in danger of being lost must be rendered useless by damaging the sights and breach mechanisms. This is best done by damaging the thread of the screw. If the breach can not be opened a bomb should be dropped down the barrel. Captured Machine Guns must be collected or broken.

b) No papers or orders are to be carried by Officers or men taking part in the attack except the new 1/5000 German Trench Map and the 1/20000 Map Sheet 57 D S.E All messages or reports will refer to one or other of these maps.

c) Care should be exercised that bombs are not thrown indiscriminately

d) Prisoners will be passed back under escort to the Battalion immediately in the rear. Escorts should not exceed one man for every 10 prisoners. These escorts will rejoin their Companies immediately they have handed their prisoners over to Battalion in rear.

e) No N.C.O. or man must leave the ranks for the purpose of assisting wounded men to the rear

f) Aid Posts have been established in Rivington St.

Signed ? 2nd Lt. A/Adj 2nd Royal Berkshire Regiment [TX01078]

Brigade orders were fairly simple:-

1st July 1916, Map Sheet 57 D.S.E. – Offensive Operations will be carried out, by the 8th Division, as part of the operations of the 4th Army. The 8th Division will attack with all 3 Brigades in the front line – 23rd on the Right, 25th in the Centre and 70th on the left.

The first objective of the 8th Division is on the line from X 5

c 0.5. through the eastern outskirts of Pozieres ,about X 4 b 7.5, R 34 c 4. 8., R 34 a 4.3., R 34 a 3.4. R 34 a 3. 5.to about R 28 c 2. 0..

Of the above described line the 25th Brigade front extends from X 4 b 30.85 to R 34 c 4.8.

The 25th Brigade assault will be delivered by two Battalion - the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regt on the Right and the 2nd Battalion Lincolnshire Regt on the left. The dividing line between these two Battalion is the sap at x 8 a 1.4.

2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regt. – 8 Platoons in new and present front line from Goosedubs to Cartmael St.. 8 Platoons in Furness (North of Goosedubs), and in present front line between Broughton and Goosedubs , and in Broughton and Ulverstone. Each Battalion will assault with three Companies in the front line, in depth, on the front of one platoon per Company. Platoons to be at not less than 50 paces distance. At -0.5 minutes the assaulting Battalions will, if circumstances permit, commence getting out of their trenches and into 'No Mans land' in front of our wire. The leading two waves being out by zero hour.

Battalion H. Q. Furness near junction with Ulverston [TX01079]

Secret Reconnaissance 24th June 1916

The Allied bombardment opened on the 24th June and while it was in full cry the Battalion organised a night raid against the German trenches. They made a silent approach and were surprised to find the Germans in good heart, singing quite happily deep down in their dug outs. The matter was reported to higher authority who took no action, still maintaining that the bombardment was fully effective. [FDOS p 98]

On the 28th Major Hanbury-Sparrow paid a visit to his battalion from Corps Headquarters. He was dismayed by the state of morale:-

It had rained on the 28th and 29th of June and, visiting your battalion that was then under canvas, you had found that one company mess had paved the muddy floor of its tent with gramophone records, for they " wouldn't want them again." This distressed you, for it meant something was wrong with the morale, and it made you realise once more how wrong you had been to go on the staff. Such an incident wouldn't have happened if you'd been adjutant. [TX00788C]

The Order of Battle 30th June 1916

The 30th June 1916 was the eve of the commencement of the Battle, and during the night of the 30th June - 1st July the battalion left Long Valley Camp, where it then was, to take up assembly positions for the battle of the 1st, in which its objective was the village of Ovillers, north of La Boisselle. On the right of the 2nd Royal Berkshire was the 2nd Devonshire, on the left the 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment. These three were the leading battalions of the 25th Brigade; the 1st Irish Rifles were in support, and the 2nd Rifle Brigade in reserve. During the night of the 30th June - 1st July the front and

support trenches were shelled by the enemy.

Major Hanbury Sparrow was to be Divisional Observation officer - his job was to keep an overall view of the battle and the 8th Division's part in it. He recalled:-

you climbed up to your observation post in the trenches on the evening of the 30th of June. The front which the division was to attack extended on either side of the low crest of downland on which stood the remains of Ovillers. To the south it ran nearly down to the fortified promontory of La Boisselle, which stuck out into No Man's Land and enfiladed the whole of our right. On the left the front terminated abruptly in the high bastion of Thiepval which, like La Boisselle, was held by the enemy. With the possible exception of a couple of hundred yards in the centre along the crest of the Ovillers ridge, there was no part of No Man's Land that was not enfiladed from one flank or the other. [TX00788D]

The Opening Attack 1st July 1916

At 06.35 on the 1st July the British barrage opened. During the barrage it was necessary to send out parties to open passages in the British wire, which had not been sufficiently cut.

At 07.30 the attacking troops went forward. Three companies of the Royal Berks were involved. The moment the attack started the battalion encountered a terrific rifle and machine-gun fire from the German trenches in front of Ovillers, which effectually prevented the waves reaching the enemy line. A small group on the left of the Royal Berkshire did succeed in getting into it, but was eventually bombed out again.

By 07.45 both the Officer-Commanding (Lieut.-Colonel Holdsworth) and the Second-in-Command were wounded, in the sap on the left front of the advance, and the former handed over command to Second-Lieutenant C. Mollet (acting adjutant), who at the end of the action was the senior officer fit for duty, and wrote a brief account of it. He said that

by 7.45 the British parapet was swept by such a storm of rifle and machine-gun bullets that exit from it was impossible. The Germans had put down a barrage on the front line since 06.35

No news was received from the neighbouring battalions, which were evidently, as shown by their casualty lists, suffering at least as heavily as the Royal Berkshire. Lt Col Holdsworth died from his wounds on the 7th July.

At dawn Lt Col Reginald Bastard of the 2nd Lincolns, the other Battalion from 25th Brigade, found himself in command of remnants of the two battalions who had joined together having captured 200 yards of trench and got a foothold in the next trench. They were joined shortly afterwards by some men from the 1st Irish Rifles, giving Bastard under 100 men from 3 battalions. The trenches on either side were held by Germans so he ordered the flanking trenches blocked off as a defensive measure.

By 09:00 the Royal Berkshire could muster but two and a half platoons. They had gone into action with a strength of twenty-four officers and eight hundred other ranks. So terrible had their losses been that, by 09:00, they had left only four officers and three hundred and eighty-six other ranks. They had lost 53 per cent., the Lincolnshire had lost 62 per cent., the Irish Rifles 64 per cent., and even the Rifle Brigade, in reserve, lost 18 per cent. Before this war it used to be said that no troops could stand a loss of over 25 per cent. of their numbers, and that figure only applied to the very best.

They searched the German dug-outs for survivors and especially for grenades as British supplies were dwindling rapidly. The wounded were collected together and made as comfortable as possible under the circumstances and the remnants of the Brigade tried to hold on until re-inforcements arrived, with casualties mounting and ammunition running short as the Germans pressed their counter-attack. [FDOS p143]

The 8th Division History recounts:-

In the centre opposite Ovillers both attacking battalions of the 25th Infantry Brigade went forward to the assault with three companies in the front line and one in support. The 2/ Royal Berkshire on the right were at once met by an intense rifle and machine-gun fire and only a small party on the left of the battalion succeeded in entering the German trenches. They were too few to hold their position and were eventually bombed out. By 7.45 a.m. both the Commanding Officer, Lieut -CoJonel A. M. Holdsworth, and the Second in Command, Major G. H. Sawyer, D.S.C., were wounded (the former mortally), and the Acting Adjutant) 2nd Lieut. C. Mollet, took over command. But the battalion had lost too heavily to be able to renew the attack; by 9 a.m. its available fighting strength was little more than a couple of platoons. [TX01093]

At 11:00 the order came from Brigade to 'stand by and await further orders'. The further orders arrived at 12:30 with news that the Brigade would be relieved. They had to wait until 15:00 when the 2nd Rifle Brigade under Major, the Hon R Brand arrived to take over and the Brigade was withdrawn to Ribble Street.

Writing on the 18th August following an enquiry from the sister of Pte E G Gillespie, 2nd Lt C Lloyd-Davies noted:-

I have made enquiries concerning your brother no 18305 Pte E G Gillespie and deeply regret to inform you that on July 1st he was seen dangerously wounded in a shell hole and must have died shortly afterwards; When these men returned they tried to find the hole but failed.

With losses such as had been suffered, it was plainly impossible to attempt a renewal of the attack, and the brigade remained in its old lines till night, when it withdrew, on relief by the 37th Infantry Brigade, to bivouacs in Long Valley. Even before this it had been necessary to withdraw the shattered battalions of the front and support lines and replace them (about 3 p.m.) by the less badly mauled 2nd Rifle Brigade. The casualties on this terrible day in the 2nd Royal Berkshire were as follows:

Officers. *Killed (4)*: Capt. RC Lewis, M.C. Lieuts. AJG Goodall, OG Payne. 2nd-Lieut. SF Schneider. *Died of Wounds*: Lieut.-Colonel AM Holdsworth. *Wounded (7)*: Major GH Sawyer, D.S.O. Captains R. Haye and JA Cahill. Lieut. WG Adams. 2nd-Lieuts. WS Mackay, RG Green, W Gale. *Missing (8)*: Capt. HT Rowley. Lieut. BS Robinson. 2nd-Lieuts. H Godfrey, BH Belcher, JVR. Owen, FG Shirreff, H Heming, SH Bedford. Total Officer casualties 20.

Other Ranks: *Killed or Died of Wounds* 73. *Wounded* 251. *Missing* 93. Total All Ranks 437.

The 8th Division had suffered appalling casualties. On the first day they had lost 5121 men while engaging only two battalions of the German 180th Regiment who lost only 280. [FDOS p 264]

The brigadiers of 34th Division, who were fighting next to 8th Division had had the Royal Engineers construct them an observation post so that they could see everything going on in the Ovillers valley. As the battle opened Brig Gen Ternan was furious to discover he could see not a thing of his own troops but he was able to note that only a few of the 8th Division had managed to cross the wide expanse of no-mans land to get within shooting distance. [S p72]

Some more grim facts emerged two weeks later when inspectors from a Tunnelling Company were doing a survey of German positions and found that almost all the British bodies in no-mans-land had been bayoneted through the throat and men hung on the wire had had their heads bashed in. It was apparent that German patrols had gone out to finish off the wounded. [FDOS p 247]

Licking the Wounds 2nd to 14th July 1916

After the disastrous losses of the 1st July it was necessary for the battalion to spend the period from the 2nd July to the 21st in reorganizing. It marched on the 2nd from Long Valley Camp near Albert to Dernancourt, and reached Ailly-sur-Somme by rail on the 3rd. It was now moving northwards, with the division, to a new area. Moving partly by march and partly by rail, it reached billets at Bethune on the 14th July.

The ground fought over by the 2nd Battalion was the same that the 5th Battalion was to face on July 3rd. As the 5th were preparing for their task they encountered many of their colleagues and friends at the dressing station. Then, as they advanced, they were often advancing over the bodies of men from the 2nd.

On the 4th command of the battalion had been assumed by Major (T/Lieut.-Colonel) R Haig, D.S.O., from the 6th Battalion Rifle Brigade.

Major Hanbury-Sparrow had escaped the slaughter as he

was serving at Corps Headquarters. He had been deeply unhappy there so when the outcome of the attack at Ovillers was known he got an immediate posting back to his regiment. He wrote home to his mother on the 4th July:-

My DEAR MOTHER,

"Once more I am back with my regiment. I joined it this morning as it has lost rather heavily. I haven't put the address on for that reason. Although on the staff, I am glad to say I was pretty well in the front of the battle and I missed the awful feeling of being in safety when others are doing the fighting. I was divisional forward observing officer and had to report on the progress of the fight. I am afraid we didn't do all that was hoped of us, but the men went magnificently.

"The battle began by a terrific bombardment which began at 6.30 and lasted for an hour. I was up in the trenches overnight and spent one of the rowdiest nights I have ever known. Guns were going off the whole time. The morning was naturally misty and the smoke and dust made it almost impossible for me to see what was happening. I could see men going forward and whole lines suddenly lie down, as I thought at the time to let the front line get on further. When the mist rose the lines were still there. They had all been shot down by machine-gun and rifle fire. In spite of the furious fire against them the men went awfully well.

"Charley's [Uncle, Lt.-Col., killed that day, the last of three brothers all killed in war] division was on our right. I am afraid they lost rather heavily also, but I have never seen anything finer than the way the men went. They were scrapping the whole of the first day and I never saw any hesitation on the part of the men.

"Later on, during the day, the Germans started using lachrymose shells and my eyes were rather hurt as I had to keep raising my goggles to look through glasses, but they are all right now.

"I don't think you need worry about me for some days anyhow.

"Whatever is the final result of the battle, we have caused very heavy casualties to the Germans, a great deal heavier than Loos. [TX00788A]

In his book, *The Land Locked* he spelled out some of the reasons for his unhappiness with Corps HQ:-

But over and above all this, there was the doubt whether the "G" (operations) work that was being done wasn't a complete waste of time. Sometimes you wondered if these staff officers and generals really understood the problem at all; at others, as when somebody on the corps staff declared a New Army division was worth three Regular ones, you thought they did. For you were definitely back once more at your old pre-Fromelles standpoint. If only the artillery would subdue the enemy artillery, the infantry ought to be able to fight their way forward. Those machine-guns, for instance, that Poster, ranker sniping officer of your battalion (D.S.O. and bar, killed on Aisne, May, 1918), had located below Thiepval should be dealt with by him and a few snipers. There lay those guns ready to enfilade the whole of the divisional advance north of Ovillers, but the staff were quite confident that the barrage would deal with them, or if not the barrage, then the single six-inch howitzer that you had at last persuaded them to allot for this task. In truth, thought was numbed by the contemplation of the terrific weight of metal that was about to be hurled on the Germans, so that it was difficult, if not impossible, to realise the potential destructiveness of a single clip of cartridges intelligently directed. We gazed open-mouthed at our

Alexander of artillery and forgot the mosquito of the sniper's rifle.

But indeed there was every excuse for such an attitude, for as day by day the fury of the British bombardment increased, it did seem impossible that anything could live under it. Truly it appeared as if the role of the infantry would be simply that of occupiers of ground conquered by the weight of metal. The reverberating thunder intoxicated the blood so that you were no longer capable of judging things dispassionately. You wanted the wire cut, therefore it was cut. Fortunately the G.S.O. i. didn't ask your opinion. He sent up on the fourth day an independent officer J who after a prolonged investigation reported that the wire covering the front line—a deep black belt — was not cut. So the eighteen-pounders were brought back on to it, for as the divisional commander remarked, it was no good cutting the third line if the first was uncut. Nevertheless the divisional objective extended far beyond the third line, and although they knew the programme of wire-cutting had been thrown out of gear, the objective was not altered. As things turned out it didn't matter, for the division never got as far. [TX00788B]

The 8th Division had been so totally demoralised that it was seen as incapable of fulfilling a further role in the 'great push'. It was not just the failure at Ovillers. Since Neuve Chapelle some eighteen months ago the Division had had no successes in gaining ground and yet had lost around 20,000 men. The men felt the failures deeply.

It would now spend three and a half months in the Loos area before returning for one final engagement on the Somme.

Major Hanbury-Sparrow's Account

Major Hanbury-Sparrow had been observing events. He was dismayed by the lack of success of 8th Division and compared their performance with their opposite numbers on the German side and a New Army Division close by.

Two hundred and eighteen officers out of 300 were lost and 5,274 other ranks out of some 8,500; 65 per cent. of the infantry destroyed and not a yard of ground gained. And the enemy, what of him? The whole division had been defeated by two battalions of the 180th Infantry Reserve Regiment at a cost of eight officers and 273 other ranks killed, wounded, and missing. And the cause? Fromelles, and the fact that the divisional staff had failed to appreciate that unit morale is not a mirror instantly reflecting the passing shades of opinion, but rather of the nature of the electric battery that accumulates, stores, and discharges, slowly changing its contents. The division could not succeed until the taint of Fromelles had been eradicated. The lead poisoning of Fromelles! Or take another metaphor. Age that imperceptibly slows down the pace of the runner. Try as he will, let him run himself to a standstill, yet no man can at thirty-five run as fast as he could at twenty. It was not a question of pluck or courage. The division, as you said in your letter, went magnificently, yet because of Fromelles it couldn't do it. It attacked with all three brigades in line, and it is worth noting that the only brigade to get in was the left-hand one, a New Army brigade which had been exchanged for one of the regular formations and which had not experienced Fromelles. This is an extract from the divisional history:

"The course of affairs on the left brigade front had proceeded in a very different and, at first, more hopeful fashion. The hostile barrage opened with less intensity and the assaulting battalions had comparatively few casualties in their first dash across, except on the extreme left, where

machine-gun fire was heavy [as you had prognosticated]. The German wire was found completely cut, offering no obstacle, and within a few minutes of zero the German first line trench was captured along the whole front of both battalions. On the extreme left the attacking troops were unable to get further forward owing to intense machine-gun fire, but in the centre and on the right the attack continued to make progress. The second or support line was taken in due course and in the centre our troops reached the enemy's third, or reserve line, in considerable numbers."

The lie of the land did not permit you to witness this attack, but this account may be taken as accurate except for one particular, the implication that this brigade was up against less difficulties. The statement about the barrage is almost certainly inaccurate, for during the actual assault and the hour preceding it our counter-battery work was so effective that the enemy's artillery fire was not heavy. Your own impression was that the other two brigades were not up against a proposition fundamentally more difficult than that of the New Army brigade.

But it's impossible to be sure, for after a night in which the burr of soft Devon voices came soothingly through the clanging din, the dawn broke over a mist-swathed countryside. The increasing artillery fire that sent up clouds of pulverised chalk, black smoke, and red brick dust from the rubble heaps of the villages, merely served to thicken this mist to fog. The uproar was tremendous, a rushing roar so stupendous that even when the great mine of La Boisselle exploded, leaving a vast crater that can be seen to this day, the sound was no more than a slightly deeper shudder. All you could see were shadowy figures disappearing into this thunderous fog, and then through it came, first slowly, then rapidly, the irregular staccato of rifle fire, but never so intensely as had come that fence of steel that overwhelmed "A" company at Bois Grenier. The lines lay down, as the letter said, but yet dim ghosts seemed to be going on over the German front line.

Then the rifle fire stopped. "Aren't they over the first two lines?" you asked your signallers. They said they thought they were, and you rang up division to that effect, adding that you were going on, but division told you to remain where you were. So perforce you waited, straining your eyes, trying to see what had happened.

The mist lifted quite suddenly, the barrage was bounding up the slopes of Pozieres. The German front line system seemed still and lifeless. And there in No Man's Land, with the survivors in shell holes, lay two brigades of the division. Had that rifle fire really done this? Why, you could hardly credit the enemy had shot enough bullets to achieve this slaughter, even if each bullet had found a billet. The scene was so utterly incredible you could hardly believe your eyes.

There's an Urdu word to express stupefied dullness which the British have corrupted to "puggled," and you were still in this mood of utter puggledom when a gunner colonel appeared on the scene. "Don't you see they're shooting on our wounded?" he exclaimed crisply. "Shoot at them!" and, seizing a rifle, he and two of your signallers fired a single volley, just three rounds in all, at a couple of Boches that were firing from a point where their parapet had been partially demolished by a shell.

The range was round about eight hundred yards. The signallers, anyhow, were practically untrained shots. To your manner of thinking the whole proceeding was not only useless, but wrong, as it might give away the position of your O.P. "Fire!" barked the colonel. The three rounds rang out and lo! the two Germans disappeared. They weren't hit; but they were not prepared to stand up to rifle fire. Nor did they or their fellows show up again, although No Man's Land was full of survivors, wounded and unwounded, who

had taken refuge in shell holes.

You were astounded, that three bullets should have saved the lives of - how many men? But at the time you were too "puggled" to take in the full implications.

You were wrong in your first report of the attack. You were wrong on this point. In fact, the revelation of your ineptitude surprised yourself. But there was worse to come. Towards evening a gunner forward observation officer came along. "I thought," you said, still brooding over your wrongness, "that we had got over the first two lines. No he replied, "I knew it was hopeless as soon as I heard that rifle fire." There was a pause whilst you let this further confirmation of your inefficiency hammer in its humiliation. Then at length you said with a sigh: "Well, I suppose the only thing to do is to have another go at them." ("And have another massacre?" an inner voice demanded), for you went on: "As far as I can see, the only place we have got into at all is La Boisselle." "What?" exclaimed the F.O.O. "Didn't you see how we've got on down below Contalmaison? I've been watching the advance all day."

This was too much. It was indeed time you went back to your battalion. To lead a forlorn hope was about all that you were fit for.

The Divisional report

Report of the Action of 8 Division in the Somme Operations on the 1st July 1916:-

During the nights of the 29th/30th June and 30th June/1st July the infantry of the Division moved into their positions of assembly as follows:

25th Infantry Brigade in the Centre on the front - X 7 d 4.6. to X 7 b 2.8.

Front Line 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment on the Right 2nd Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment on the Left. 1st Royal Irish Rifles in Support 2nd Rifle Brigade in Reserve.

During the evening of the 30th June the enemy's wire, on the front to be attacked, was reported to be and sufficiently cut by the artillery.

At 7.22. a.m our Stokes Mortars opened a hurricane bombardment on the enemy's front line and continued it till 7.30. a.m.

The 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, on emerging from our front trench, came under heavy machine gun fire, and only a small party was able to reach the German trenches. This party was eventually forced to withdraw

On the Left of the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, the 2nd Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment were met by heavy rifle and machine gun fire, from their Left and Front. By 7.50.a.m. they succeeded in capturing about 200 yards of the enemy's front trench in the centre of their attack. The Right flank of the Battalion failed to get in. An attempt was made to advance against the enemy's Support Trench but this was stopped by rifle and machine gun fire. The Battalion held on and attempted to consolidate themselves in the enemy's front trench, where they were subjected to continuous counter attacks and to enfilade machine gun fire. By 9.0.a.m. what remained of the Battalion was forced to withdraw, it being found impossible to reinforce them sufficiently owing to the intensity of the fire.

The 1st Battalion Royal Irish Rifles moved in Support of the Royal Berkshire and Lincolnshire Regiments. One of the two leading Companies succeeded in reaching the enemy's front line, in spite of the intense fire which the enemy had brought to bear on 'No Mans Land', by that time. Some of them even pushed on to the German Support Line, but they were

forced back. The other Company failed to reach the enemy's trenches. The remainder of the Battalion suffered very heavy losses whilst moving up to our front line. Their progress was very slow owing to the wrecked condition of the trenches, which were also blocked by dead and wounded. It was past 9.0.a.m before the movement was completed. Their orders were to occupy our front line until a decision was come to regarding their employment.

Situation at 10.00.a.m:-

23rd Brigade - The remnants of the 2nd Battalion Middlesex Regiment, 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment and the 2nd Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment were fighting in the enemy's front line or had withdrawn to 'No Man's Land'.

25th Brigade - The remnants of the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, 2nd Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment and the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Rifles had been forced to withdraw from the enemy's front line to 'No Man's Land', except perhaps, small parties which still held on in the German front line.

The 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade were in our original front line.

70th Infantry Brigade was across "No Man's Land" fighting in the German Front and Support Trenches

All communication between our front line and our troops in front had been cut off.

The Division on the Right of the 8th Division had failed to capture the La Boisselle Salient, while the Division on the Left had been able to hold the point only of the Thiepval Salient. [TX01080]

Sources

The Royal Berkshire Regiment 1914-1918 *Petre* pp 80-83

The First Day of the Somme *Middlebrooke* pp 98, 143, 326 [FDOS]

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War Diaries 2 Bn, 25 Bde, 8 Div

History of 8th Division

The Land Locked Lake - *Lt Col Hanbury Sparrow*

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