

Section 234

The Second Battle of Fromelles

The 2nd/4th Battalion 1st to 19th July 1916

The 2nd/4th had not been long in France when the Somme battles erupted. They were in billets at Laventie just south of the Belgian border. They were not called upon to participate in the battles in the Somme area but saw their first major action in what was very much a side-show at the same time. Continued from section 224.

The Strategic Position

The 2nd/4th was part of 184 Bde under Brig Gen Charles Carter. This was part of 61st Division (Maj Gen Colin J McKenzie) XI Corps (Lt Gen Sir Richard Haking) and 1st Army (Gen Sir Charles Monro) The XI Corps were holding the Fleurbaix Sector with 5th Australian Division to the north and 61st Division to the south) 184th Brigade part of the line was to the left of 61st Division with 15th Australian Bde on their left and 183rd Bde on their right.

Their role in the Somme offensive was to hold their line but to give the Germans the impression that an attack was pending. By the 13th July 13 German battalions had been withdrawn from the sector to reinforce the Somme area. In order to keep as many German troops in position as possible Lt Gen Haking proposed a three division attack on a 4600 yard front against Aubers Ridge. To this end 31st Division to the south, 61st Division in the centre and 5th Australian Division to the north were allocated. The attack was scheduled for 17th July. When Haking learned that the only artillery support he was getting were from 4th and 5th Australian Divisions, he scaled down the operation by excluding 31st Division. His orders to his Divisional and Brigade commanders were:

Each Division will attack with three brigades in line. each brigade with two assaulting battalions and each battalion on a front of about 350 yards. The remaining battalions of the division will be kept in reserve and will not be used for assaulting the position without orders from the GOC XI Corps.

He did however allow each brigade to allocate half a battalion from the reserve to act as carriers.

A seven hour bombardment was planned for the 16th and during the planned intervals each waiting battalion was instructed to

show their bayonets over the parapet; dummy heads and shoulders will be shown over the parapet, officers will whistle and shout orders in order to induce the enemy to man his parapet. At the end of each of these lifts the artillery will shorten onto the enemy's front parapet and continue the intense bombardment of the front and support line.

Most of Haking's subordinate commanders were unhappy with the plan and made representations to Monro on the 13th. The Germans knew quite well that they were faced with a weak and inexperienced force that had seen no action before and from Aubers Ridge they had a birds eye view of the preparations. Nevertheless Haig confirmed the plan on the 15th.

The German forces consisted of the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division made up of the 17th, 16th, 21st and 20th Bavarian Infantry Reserve Battalions. Among them as a runner in 16 BRIR was Lance Corporal Adolf Hitler.

Meanwhile the 61st Division continued to hold their part of the line, launching eight raids in the month preceding the attack

Waiting

1st to 5th July 1916

On the 27th June command of the 2nd/4th Battalion had been taken over from Lieut.-Colonel Wheeler by Lieut.-Colonel John. H. Beer, 2/8th Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

On the 1st July the battalion were in trenches near Laventie and were relieved by the 2/6 Glosters on the 3rd. They marched out of Laventie at 08:30 and were in their billets at La Gorgue at 09:35.

They spent the next two days cleaning up with a kit inspection and on the 5th went for a six mile route march which caused 8 men to fall out.

6th July 1916

They had an 8 mile route march on the 6th, this time with only one drop out and then at 1500 they received orders to move as soon as possible to Croix Barbee and await orders.

The orders were for them to relieve the 1/1st Cambridgeshire in the left front sub-sector at Ferme du Bois. The 2/1st Buckinghamshire were on their right, 2/7th Royal Warwickshire on their left, with the 2/5th Gloucestershire supporting the 2/1st Buckinghamshire at Richebourg St. Vaast.

7th to 9th July 1916

The 7th was spent in cleaning up and repairing their trenches and that evening two patrols were sent out resulting in one man being wounded.

The morning of the 8th was quiet and A Coy changed positions with C Coy. Enemy artillery and Machine Guns were active at night and a patrol under 2nd Lt RDH Bowles was sent out to examine the enemy's wire. They found it uncut so a second patrol under 2nd Lt Skene was sent out to cut some gaps.

On the 9th another patrol went out, this time under 2nd Lt G S Abbott at 18:25 to examine some buildings but there were no signs of recent occupation

10th July 1916

C Coy on the left took over an additional run of 500 yards of trench from the 2/5 Warwicks. and A Coy moved back into reserve at battalion HQ. There were two more patrols that night under 2nd Lt Skene and Worlock with one casualty. 5 2nd Lts were attached to the battalion from the West Surreys, they were HE Bingemann, GH Allen, FW Bush, FDC Williams and GC Millis.

11th and 12th July 1916

During the morning of the 11th they shelled the enemy's line and in the afternoon the Germans retaliated, aiming at battalion HQ

At 01:00 on the 12th there was heavy bombardment on the right and one man [5279 Frank Marshall] was killed and another wounded.

At 15:00 they were relieved by the 2/4th OBLI and marched to billets west of Croix Barbee to clean up and get ready for a raid the next day.

Raid at Ferme du Bois

13th July 1916

On the 13th, a raid on the enemy trenches was carried out by Captain E. P. Lucas, Lieutenant O J. Dowson, and Second-Lieutenants J. H. Skene and G. A. Brooke, with one hundred other ranks of A Company.

The operations order read:-

Operation Order 988, 12-7-1916, by O.C. 2/4th R. Berks Regt.

A - Intention: To raid enemy trench between S.11. c. 1. 9.75. and S.11.a. 1.5. and occupy front and support trenches.

B - Object:- To capture prisoners, wounded or unwounded: to kill Germans: to collect all marks of identity, papers, maps & to destroy or capture enemy Machine Guns and Trench Mortars.

C. - Force:- 4 Officers and 100 Other Ranks, subdivided into 8 parties.

Party 1. 2nd Lt. J.H. Skene, 6 O.R., 1 R.E. Sapper, to examine gaps in wire, taking with them, a Bangalore torpedo.

Detail: 2 Bayonet men, 2 bombers, 2 carriers armed with butcher's cleavers. 1 R.E. will assist the 2 carriers to place torpedo in position and fire it.

Party 1a. 1 N.C.O. [Sgt Arthur Tallant], 2 bayonet men, 2 bombers, 2 carriers, who will join Party 1 on passing through wire and bomb to the right, along front line, to first communication trench and block at that point.

Party 2 1 N.C.O., [Sgt Tutt?] 5 bayonet men, 2 bombers, 2 carriers, 3 blocking men, to bomb to left along front line from point of entry as far as La Bassee Road and block it at that point.

Party 3 Lt. O.J.Dowson. 1 N.C.O. [Sgt Harvey Bennett], 2 Bayonet, 4 Bombers, 4 carriers to go right from point of entry and thence down Communication Trench at right of point of entry S 11 c. 1. 9.5.

Party 4 2nd Lt. G.A.Brooke, 1 N.C.O., 2 bayonet men, 4 bombers, 4 carriers, 6 blocking men, to cross front line trench, turn half left and bomb down C.T. on South side of La Bassee Road to Support trench: leave blocking party at junction and remainder, clear support trench to the right and deal with small C.T. running S.E.

Party 5 1 N.C.O., 2 bayonet men, 2 bombers, 2 carriers, 2 R.E. to clear dugouts to Right of point of entry. The R.E. will

carry mobile charges.

Party 6. As Party 5, to deal with dugouts on left of point of entry.

Party 7 Capt. E P Lucas, C.S.M. [Arthur Graham], 5 Bayonet men, 2 stretcher bearers, with stretcher, 2 signallers, with telephone and 2 reserve bomb carriers, to remain at point of entry.

Party 8a 1 N.C.O., ten men: covering party to remain outside wire, till raiders return, to pass back prisoners and to clear the road through wire to facilitate a quick return of the raiders.

Party 8b 1 N.C.O., 10 men: to lie on parapet about point of entry, to be prepared to support ant point.

D - Equipment:- Steel helmets, S.A.A. in bandoliers or pockets: no equipment. Officers will carry revolvers, 2 bombs and electric torches. Other ranks 6 bombs each.

Bombers - 16 bombs and knobkerries.

Carriers - 20 bombs and Knobkerries

Bayonet men - Rifle, bayonet, 50 rounds S.A.A.

Blockers - Rifle, bayonet, 50 rounds S.A.A., and 1 pick

N.C.O.s will carry electric torches in addition

2 streamers of white tape 6" long will be tied on right shoulder.

E - Precautions: - Broad white tape will be run out from our trench to point of entry, by Party 8a, to guide Raiders back. This will be brought in on return.

All Officers and N.C.Os. will carry luminous watches, which will be synchronised with Divisional time.

Faces and Hands will be blackened and bayonets dulled.

All ranks will be warned against damaging their comrades with their bayonets, when crossing the enemy's line.

All distinctive badges, identity discs, pay books and letters must be left behind.

A password will be communicated to all ranks just prior to the operation.

F. - Operations:- The Raiding Party will file out from Sally port at 00 - 30 and form up in groups in No Man's Land, 70 yards in front of our wire, with 6 yards distance between lines. Each group will be connected with that in rear by a cord carried by the left guide. At 0.5. the whole Party will move forward preceded by Number 1 Party who will be 15 yards in front. If a gap in the wire is found, the party will at once go in: if wire is found to be uncut, the torpedo will be used, the remainder of the force lying down till it has been exploded. They will then go in and carry out the programme.

G. - Communications:- Signallers will run a wire from Battalion H.Q. as early as possible, and thence forward to Brigade H.Q.

H. - Prisoners:- Prisoners will be sent straight back to Battalion H.Q. as early as possible and thence forward to Brigade H.Q.

I. - Artillery Support:-

00 - 30 Desultory fire on usual points

00 -05.Rapid Fire on Point of Entry and other gaps

00.5 - 0.50.Barrage round section to be occupied, with additional guns on C.T.

00.50 - 00.60 (or on given signal that Raiders are clear of the trench) Firereduced by half on barrage lines.

0070 - 0.80 Drop onto front line trench with three Batteries

0.80.Cease firing and stand by

0.112.3 batteries fire 1 round on last target, and, in addition, 3 sections fire salvo on road junctions - S 17 c 0.3.5, S 17 a 8.5, S 11 d 7.5. 2.75.

J. - M.T.M.B.:- Will open intense fire from 0.0. to 0.5. on Point of Entry, S 11 a 1.1.

K. - L.T.M.B.:- Will open intense fire on A2, A5, A4, A3 from 0.0. to 0.5.,

From 0.5. to 0.60. will fire intermittently on support trenches in rear of Boar's Head and Fme DU BOIS

L. - M.G.:-Will sweep parapet and wire from DS 11 a 6.3 to S 10 d 88. from 10.00 - 0.5. Wire to be intense between 0.0. and 0.5.

M. - Lewis Guns:- Will traverse parapet from 0.0. till 1.10. from S 10 d 8.8. to the right and from S 11 a 3.2. to the left.

N. - Signals:-The signal from O.C. Raiders that he is ready to withdraw will be 2 white flares over the parapet.

O.C. Battalion will give signal for whole party to withdraw by sending up a bunch of 10/12/ white rockets.

O. - Withdrawal:- On O.C. Raiders seeing the signal to withdraw, he will bring his party out and inform O.C. Battalion that this is done by Telephone and runner. O.C. Battalion will pass on to Artillery. The Raiders will return and rendezvous at Lansdowne Post. Every effort will be made to bring out casualties.

P. - Report Centre:- Near Sally Port in dugout.

Q. - Casualties:- The M.O. will make all arrangements for dealing with casualties.

R. - Reports: - O.C. Raiders will make a brief report, on his return to the trenches, and supplement it with a full report in the morning.

S. - Co-operation:- 2/4th Oxforas, 2/5th Gloucesters and Royal Warwicks will co-operate with Lewis Guns and Rifle Fire and Rifle Grenades from 0.0. onwards

2/4th Oxforas will have Pioneer Junction and Fort Arthur Communication and Bays, from 59 to 49, empty for use of 2/4th Royal Berks from 8.0.p.m. to 3.0.a.m.

12/7/1916 Lieut & Adjutant [TX01479]

The raid, as planned, was rather an elaborate one, the raiders being divided up into no less than ten parties. The objective was the capture of prisoners, identification of enemy units, and the killing of Germans. A start was to be made between midnight and 12.30 a.m., forming up seventy yards in front of the British wire, with intervals of five yards between the lines.

At 20:45 the bugler called for A Company to fall in and Sgt Major Graham read out a list of names of men selected to take part. They were sent back to their huts to pack all their kit with the exception of rifle, bayonet, identity disc and balaclava. Thirty minutes later all kit bags were locked in the Quarter Master's store and the men were paraded in ranks facing each other. Each man had to black the face of his opposite number before applying the burnt cork to his own wrists and hands.

At 21:45 they were addressed by Captain Lucas who explained the mission and then they set off across country to take up position in the support trenches where rum and a pair of no 5 bombs was issued to each man. Strangely Pottinger recalled that the briefing had been given by Capt Blandy who, as the Commander of A Company, seems the more likely with Capt Lucas merely being in command of one of the parties. However the Battalion reports (below) put Lucas in command and make no mention of Blandy and it was Lucas who was awarded the Military Cross

The battalion orders were in fact somewhat different. This called for A Coy to assemble at 15:00 with a practice raid at 15:00 at Croix Barbee. They were then to go to Lansdown Post for tea and be ready to file out for the real raid at 21:50. A small party of B Coy were to carry the dixies. They had to be in position at Pioneer trench junction no later than 22:15 with 11:00 as zero time. At Lansdown Post magazines had to be charged with 10 rounds and faces had to be blackened with soot collected from chimneys. Code words were to be issued to each man and they were to be given a 6" white ribbon to attach to their shoulder strap. As well as bombs the men were to be armed with battle clippers, butchers' cleavers, electric torches, mobile charges, a ball of string and white tape.

They were supposed to start moving out through a sally port dug by the Royal Engineers at 23:00 but the start had to be delayed for 10 minutes as the REs were not ready. As they moved out of the sally port they were greeted by concentrated fire from two nests of Spandaus located either side behind the German trenches.

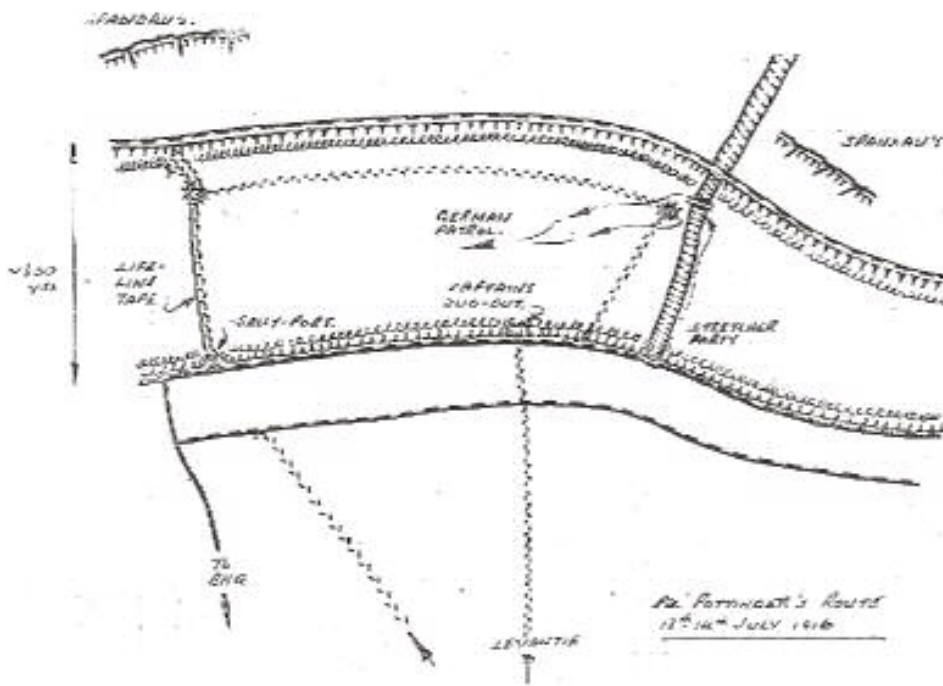
Pte Bill Pottinger [3281] who was the CSM's orderly and runner was tasked with laying out the life line which led from the sally port to the point of entry in the German trenches. The line was then laid parallel to the German wire to a shell hole where the CSM and Captain Lucas were sheltering. As Pottinger was laying the life-line parallel to the German lines he met several groups of men going in the opposite direction. He turned them around and by the time he got to Captain Lucas's shell hole he had collected nearly half the raiding party. Capt Lucas had been hit as he left the sally port. He had been struck by a bullet which entered at his shoulders, ran across his back and exited at the waist. (Another report gives him being wounded by shrapnel but this does not seem likely) The wound was not very apparent and the CSM kept the wounding from the rest of the men ordering Pottinger not to allow any others to approach him.

By this same time both Captain Lucas and Lieutenant Dowson (3rd party) were wounded, and touch with Skene and the first wave was lost.

On reaching the enemy's front the first party had found it difficult to locate a gap in the wire, and it was decided to use the Bangalore torpedo which had been brought for the purpose of blowing a gap. Unfortunately, however, some of the carriers had been wounded and had dropped the fuse, so that the torpedo was useless. However Second-Lieutenant James Skene, with the first wave, then found a partial gap in the wire to the right, and managed to cut a way through. Whilst he was doing so, the others lay down to wait.

Second-Lieutenant James Skene, who had behaved with great gallantry, was later found to be missing, and was believed to have been wounded. There was however a serious accusation made later.

All behaved well and held on until the signal for recall was given. Lieutenant RVC Freeth superintended the firing of one hundred and eighty-five grenades to support the raiders, and was afterwards killed in No-Man's Land when bringing in the wounded.



Private Pottinger's sketch of the ground of the raid on 13th July

The occupants of Capt Lucas's shell hole were all sent back when the recall was given leaving Lucas with the CSM (Graham), his orderly (Pottinger) and one other private (Howes). As they sheltered there they heard someone approaching and feared it was the Germans, however it turned out to be the second in command of the Battalion, Major Simmonds who had previously been the OC of A Coy and who was concerned for their safety. He took Pottinger and Howes to rescue a soldier who was seriously injured and unconscious on the German parapet. They brought him back to the shell hole and were then given directions by CSM Graham for the route back, unfortunately he got his directions wrong and the rescue party ran into severe machine gun fire from the Spandaus and had to find another shell hole to shelter in. It was about 00:15 on the 14th when they were forced to take cover. After over an hour with bullets whizzing just above their heads Major Simmonds set off back for help, leaving Pottinger with the private and the injured man.

At 02:15 Howes, convinced that Major Simmonds would not return set out by himself. A few minutes later there was a rifle shot and the explosion of two egg bombs so it was presumed he had been hit.

About half an hour later a German patrol passed quite close to where Pottinger and the injured man were sheltering but they remained undiscovered.

Around 04:15 Major Simmonds re-appeared with a stretcher party in charge of a Sergeant who promptly fell into a flooded ditch. The injured man was stretchered back to safety and Pottinger volunteered to go to the Sergeant's rescue but he was sent back to his billets where at 05:15 CSM Graham arranged for him to sleep for 36 hours. Graham had carried Captain Lucas back himself.

Captain Lucas's arrangements are considered to have been good, and he continued encouraging his men despite his wounds. The conduct of Sergeant AE Tallant, who led the way over the enemy's parapet, and that of CSM A Graham and Sergeant H Pocock, was also commended. Much gallantry was also displayed by several men in bringing in the wounded.

The casualties in this rather unfortunate raid were specially heavy among officers, every one of whom was either killed or wounded. They were:

Officers. Killed: Lieut. R. V. C. Freeth. *Wounded:* Capt E. P. Lucas, Lieut. O J. Dowson, 2nd-Lieut. G. A. Brooke. *Missing (believed wounded):* 2nd-Lieut. J. H. Skene. *Other Ranks: Killed 6, Wounded 15, Missing 11.*

The CWG list of those who died is:-

kia on the 13th

200528/2609	Leslie Ernest John Beard of Reading
6620	Charles Joseph Clark of Walthamstow

3353	Frank Doyle of Frankton
FR0004	Richard Victor Caustin Freeth of Maidenhead
6658	Fred McAllister of Liverpool
3955	H Mainwaring of Chilton
3198	Harry Kemp Marshall of Newbury
3809	Thomas Victor Meads of Reading
201632/5245	Arthur Parrett of Wokingham
3313	Leonard Sumner of Twyford
201246/3792	Arthur Evan Tallant of Ascot
202503/6578	Thomas Tavenor of Houghton Regis
201293/3968	William Stephen Joseph Watts of Maidenhead
201628/5237	Ernest Wicks of Reading

Died on the 14th

6626	Thomas William Gay of Peasedown, Bath
3182	Reginald James Golder of Reading
3788	Henry George Nailor of Thatcham
SK0001	James Henry Skene

DOW later

6563	Frederick Mayes of Great Wrathing (5/8/16)
200319/2219	J W Hestor of Windsor (30/7/16)

The missing were listed in the Reading Mercury of 19/8/16 - All were shown under their original numbers and of those renumbered this was presumably after they had been reported missing and before they were assumed dead. They were:-

2609 Beard, 6620 Clark, 3182 Golder, 2219 Hestor, 6563 Mayes, 5245 Parrett, 3313 Sumner, 3792 Tallent, 6578 Tavenor, 3968 Watts and 5237 Wicks

The following are buried at St Vaast Post Military Cemetery:-

5279 Marshall, 3809 Meads, 3955 Mainwaring, Lt Freeth, 3198 Marshall, 3353 Doyle, 3788 Nailor

6626 Gay was buried in Merville Communal Cemetery and 2219 Hestor at Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery presumably near the casualty station where they died. 6563 Mayes died in England and was buried near his home at Little Wrathing in Suffolk.

The following are commemorated on the Loos Memorial:-

3968 Watts, 2609 Beard, 5245 Parrett, 6620 Clark, 3313 Doyle, 6658 McAllister, 5237 Wicks, 6578 Tavenor, 3792 Tallent,

The report by the commanding-officer on the raid included the following:

Owing to the heavy casualties amongst officers, it would appear that at this period a lack of leadership was apparent amongst N.C.O's, and consequently the first wave was not supported by the succeeding waves. Gallant attempts, however, were undoubtedly made to force a way through the wire under a galling fire from four or five machine guns.

Second-Lieutenant Skene and 11 other ranks, forming the first wave, very gallantly penetrated the enemy's first line under severe opposition. It is greatly to be regretted that the fine efforts of the party were not more substantially supported, in which case I consider the raid would have proved successful.

The Brigadier of 184th Bde wrote in his report:-

184 Infantry Brigade Report, dated 18-7-1916, on Raid carried out on the night of 13/14 July 1916 by 2/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment.

I forward herewith a report on a Raid carried out on the night 13/14th July 1916 by 1 Company 2/4th R. Berkshire Regt in the Ferme Du Bois Section in accordance with instructions (X 55 dated 11-7-1916) issued by these Brigade Headquarters

Summary of Event

At 10.30.p.m. Raiding party filed out through Sally port near La Bassee Road, and were in position in waves at 10.30.p.,.

At 11.0.p.m. Our Artillery opened fire in accordance with Programme

At 11.5 p.m. Raiding Party advanced. Enemy fired a Red Rocket opposite S 10.4.

At 11.8.p.m. Enemy fired 4 Red Rockets from BOAR'S HEAD followed, after an interval by 3 more.

From 11.15.p.m

to 11.25.p.m Hostile retaliation on our Batteries and Front Line Trenches.

At 11.35 p.m. Enemy retaliation diminished slightly

At 11.36.p.m. Communication severed between left Battalion H.Q. and Companies in Left Sub-Section, also with Advanced

Brigade Headquarters.

At 11.50.p.m. recall Signal (bunch of white rockets) was fired according to Programme.

At 12.4. a.m. Telephone message received direct from NO MAN'S LAND from Captain Lucas, commanding Raiding Party stating Raiders were returning.

At 12.10.a.m. Report received that 6 Raiders had returned

At 12.30.a.m. Report received that 30 Raiders had returned (1 Officer and 3 men wounded)

At 12.35 Report received from Captain Lucas in NO MAN'S LAND, that Lt. Dawson was wounded

At 12.45.a.m. Report received that 50 Raiders had returned

At 1.05, a.m. Report received that 70 Raiders had returned. Capt Lucas still out in NO MAN'S LAND - Lt Freeth was killed.

2. On reaching the enemy's front line, difficulty was at first experienced in locating a gap, it was decided to make use of a Bangalore Torpedo, but owing to the fuse having been dropped when the carriers of the torpedo were wounded it could not be discharged and this caused a setback to the assault. 2nd Lt Skene, with the first wave, then found a partial gap some distance to the right, and after considerable difficulty managed to cut a way through, meanwhile the remainder of the Raiders lay down and waited for a report from the 1st wave: at this period Capt Lucas and Lt Dawson were both wounded by shrapnel fire, touch was unfortunately lost with the 1st wave.

Owing to the heavy casualties amongst the officers it would appear at this period that a lack of leadership was apparent amongst the N.C.Os and consequently the 1st wave were not supported by succeeding waves, gallant attempts were undoubtedly made to force a way through the wire, under galling fire of 4 or 5 machine guns.

Lt. Skene and 11 other ranks forming the 1st wave very gallantly penetrated the enemy's front line under severe opposition. It is greatly to be regretted that the fine efforts of this party were not more substantially supported, in which case I consider the Raid would have proved successful.

It was an obvious mistake to carry the Bangalore Torpedo in two lengths instead of screwing up the 2-10ft lengths prior to the advance, a spare fuse with an additional lighter should have been taken.

I consider that the conduct of the whole Raiding Party in this their first minor enterprise was worthy of the greatest praise. No man returned until the Recall Signal went up - their withdrawal under severe Artillery and Machine Gun fire encumbered as they were by many casualties was carried out with a fine soldierly spirit.

It is to be regretted that Lt. Freeth was killed, this Officer superintended the firing of 185 Grenades to support the Raiding party and was subsequently killed in NO MAN'S LAND bringing in the wounded.

Capt. E P Lucas Commanding the Raiders is especially worthy of recognition. He carefully organised and trained the Raiding Party and proved himself to be a capable leader, cool and resourceful. Notwithstanding his wounds, he encouraged his men to the last to renew their efforts to attain their objective.

2nd Lt. J H Skene (Now missing and believed wounded) displayed gallantry of a very high order throughout the Raid and by his fine leadership and devotion to duty, the enemy's line was penetrated by the first wave.

The following N.C.O. who went over the enemy's parapet displayed bravery of a high order:-

No 3792, Sgt. Tallant, Arthur Edward

The services of the following N.C.O's are worthy of reward:- They both displayed considerable grit and determination in the face of a severe fire, in attempting to cut through the wire:

No. 1479 Coy. Sergt Major Graham, Arthur

No. 3334 Sergt Pocock, Harry.

Major J H Simmonds and Lt. K E Browne, 4th Oxford & Bucks L.I. behaved very gallantly in going out into NO MAN'S LAND for 2 hours and superintending the evacuation of the wounded from same.

The following N.C.O's and men showed fine spirit in bringing back their wounded Comrades from the enemy wire:-

No. 3170, Sgt Tutt, William Benjamin,

No. 3316, Cpl. Box, James

No. 3760, L/Cp. Church, Frank Reginald

No. 3301. Pte., White, Victor Charles Thomas

No. 3276, Pte., Munnings, William

No. 3980, Pte., Street, Ernest

B.H.Q. 18-7-1916

Signed. C H P Carter Brigadier General Commanding

184 Infantry Brigade [TX01480]

The discrepancies in the various reports of this raid are obvious. Captain Blandy, Commanding officer of A Coy in

the 1st/4th is named in Pottinger's account in place of Lucas. The role of Lt Skene is described in terms ranging from extreme gallantry to treason. It is noteworthy that the fate of 11 other ranks was not known at the time and this is precisely the number in Skene's party. Major Simmonds does not figure in Petre's account either.

It would seem quite out of character for Skene to have acted as reported. To be fair he was not specifically named in Pottinger's report however as he was the only one missing, was the only officer to reach the German lines and led the first party there can be little doubt that he was the one identified by Pottinger.

CSM Graham was awarded the DCM and Pte Pottinger the MM. These were reported in the Berkshire Chronicle of 18/8/1916. It read:-

In the case of CSM Arthur Graham of 81 Catherine Street Reading the official record states that he displayed bravery and determination of a high order in reorganising the successive waves of the attack under heavy fire and in assisting the Company Commander who had been wounded early in the action, in exercising control and while in the enemy wire in organising repeated attempts to cut a way through. He also showed cool courage and resource in evacuating casualties and in assisting his Company Commander to get back to our lines after seeing that all his party had been brought in.

CSM Graham served for nine years in the 52nd Oxon and Bucks LI and holds the Indian and South African medals. He left the Army in the year 1902 and entered the service of the Reading Post Office, where he has served as a postman until he was called up, being at that time a drill sergeant in the Berks Territorials. He is native of Reading and went to the front in May. [TX01383]

Pottinger's role was reported in the Berkshire Chronicle:-

Private Pottinger resides in West Berks. He went out with Major J H Simmonds [2nd/4th] and Private Howes [3261 2nd/4th] of 18 Queens Cottages Reading (now missing) to fetch in wounded after they had returned safely to their own lines following a raid. [TX01384]

This report mentioned Private Howes. An earlier report published 28/7/1916 said:-

PRIVATE A J HOWES HIS GREAT BRAVERY

Information has been received from Major J H Simonds Royal Berks that Private Albert Joseph Howes of 16 Queens Cottages, Reading is missing. And very little hope is held out that he is alive. The Major in a letter stated that a raid was made on the German trenches during the night but Private Howes and Private Pottinger returned safely to their own lines and subsequently went out to fetch in the wounded who were placed in a shell hole, the search party having, owing to the extreme darkness lost their way. Major Simonds left this place in order to find his way back. Being a considerable while gone Pte Howes left the shellhole with a view to finding the Major who in the meanwhile returned. A little later considerable shouting and firing were heard in the direction of the German trenches and Private Howes has not been seen since. Major Simonds in his communication says that if Howes has lost his life he died like a true gentleman having regard to the fact that being in a safe position himself, he risked his own life in order to find him (the Major). Private Howes who was 20 years of age enlisted in November 1914 and had only been at the front for three months. He is a native of Reading and was employed at Messrs Huntley and Palmers. He was in the signalling section and his officer paid tribute to the splendid work he has done in this direction. Two other brothers are in the forces, one who is also with the Royal Berks is suffering from Shell shock whilst the other is in the navy and fought in the Jutland battle. He is the third son of Mr Howes of the address given above and was a member of the football club which was founded by the late Mr Poulton Palmer. [TX00076]

Sgt Tallent's mother wrote to Sgt Snelling of the Machine Gun Section enquiring as to her son's fate. The reply, from Sgt White, published in the Reading Mercury of 12/8/16, was as follows:-

Re your letter to Sergeant Snelling, he has asked me to answer same as I was always with your son Arthur, and was the last to speak to him before he went through the sally port on a raid party with A Company.

Arthur was Sergeant in charge of the first wave and his chums all reported that he was the very first man to reach the German trenches. He was only a yard or two away from his officer Lieutenant Skene who was killed. Arthur was very confident as to the result of the raid and just before he went he said to me 'Well Frank, the DCM has been promised to the first man who enters the German trenches' I was in charge of a volunteers party of five machine gunners who were going out to the German wire to try and find Arthur the next night, but as the Germans had three patrols out we could not make any headway.

You ask if there is any hope. Well I agree with all who knew him that he was far too good a soldier to be captured unless he was wounded and unable to defend himself. I am afraid that it is the one hope left. [TX01344]

In the same edition there is the letter from Tallent's Captain to his wife:-

It is with the greatest regret I have to inform you that your husband is missing. He was one of a raiding party which attacked the German trenches on the night of the 13th and from this he did not return. One officer, Lieutenant Skene and one man, thought to be your husband, was seen to disappear over the German parapet - the only two who reached it - and we all hope that the gallant pair were taken prisoners. Mr Skene was my greatest friend and he thought - as did we all - as highly as possible of your husband. That he stuck to Mr Skene endears his memory to me for ever. He was a most gallant man and I sincerely hope he may still be alive.

The Reading Mercury of the 2/12/16 carried a report of the raid.

Sergeant Harvey Bennett gave his account to a reporter of the Berkshire Chronicle which was published 4/8/16

RAID ON THE GERMAN TRENCHES

READING MAN'S EXPERIENCES

Sergeant Harvey Bennett of Oxford Road Reading, a well known footballer, and son of Mr T J Bennett, for many years organist at Burghfield, gives a graphic description of his experiences. He was in a Berkshire battalion [2nd/4th] which took part in a raid on the German trenches in the middle of July and a few days later with the Australians and other battalions, made a strong attack on the German position the first and second lines being carried. The colonel of the Berkshires and other officers were killed while there were many casualties amongst the rank and file.

Sergeant Harvey Bennett writes:- On Thursday night we had a certain portion of Fritz's trenches to attack in many waves. I was in the third wave and we all crawled out into no-mans-land just like a parade with no casualties and all lay down. Fritz was very quiet all this time and then our artillery started and they didn't half 'whop' something over. We advanced some way while this was going on and then Fritz sent up a ----. Then his reply came in the shape of shrapnel 'whiz-bangs' trench mortars, grenades etc and my God it was hell!. The ground honestly shook and what with our shells and theirs (and it is a job to tell which is which sometimes) words failing to express the experience. Well all this time we were crawling forward, machine guns on us some were killed, others wounded and their cries and groans were awful. I just came to the German wire when some squib went off and something copped me on the temple and after going dizzy for a moment my mind was blank. When I came round I found one of our chaps (Barker) by the side of me shaking me and he had dragged me into a shell hole. He told me our signal for return had gone and by degree I understood things and found the guide to our lines and started on in the baby style to get there. On the way I passed poor old Doyle with his head shattered. He had taken one wounded in and was returning for another but to his cost - death. Then I came to one of my own men shot through the thigh and unable get along so I carried and dragged him in as far as I could which was less than 25 yards from our lines and a deep ditch at that and went in for help. They would not let me go back and ordered me to return to rally post which I did with some difficulty. The man was got in all right. Poor old Tallant was last seen on the German parapet unwounded, but as he did not return we do not know whether dead or prisoner. Golder's end was not witnessed by anyone and he is also counted missing. Such pals as these cannot be forgotten. My officer was wounded.

Writing of the subsequent fighting Sergeant Harvey Bennett says "The facts are however that on top of the smash I had last Thursday which I had hardly got over we had to go through a terrible bombardment. First of all a big shell burst about 10 yards away from where I was and drenched all of us with nasty green water. That was near enough for anyone and then about 7.30 at night I had to go with a party of 12 to fetch ammunition. I sent 10 of them on their way and was bringing up the rear with the other two when another big one dropped close to us, blowing the other two up, ammunition and all and I remembered no more till I found myself in hospital. I must bear a charmed life as I was evidently stunned but I am not scratched though I feel very stiff about the neck. I have got shell shock my nerves are all anyhow and I am very shaky [TX00994]

He had previously been reported in the Berkshire Chronicle of 28/7/1916:-

SERGEANT H BENNETT

Sergeant Harvey Bennett, the well known Reading footballer, son of Mr and Mrs T Bennett of 303 Oxford Road Reading is lying in hospital in France suffering from shell shock. He had some marvellous escapes and terrible experiences – two men and some ammunition were blown up at his side and he was taken to hospital. In a letter since received by his parents, Sergeant Bennett says that he still feels the shock very much and does not feel like doing much for some time.

Sergeant Bennett says "Captain Lucas was hit through the shoulder, Poor old Tallent was last seen on the German parapet, unwounded but as he did not return we do not know whether he is dead or a prisoner. Golder's [3182] end was not witnessed by any one and he is counted missing. I passed poor old Doyle [3353] with his head shattered. He had taken one wounded in and was returning for another but to his post – death.

Bennett himself brought out a wounded man on the occasion of the raid named White. [TX00055]

Captain Lucas earned a brief report in the Berkshire Chronicle of 18/8/1916

Temp Captain Evelyn Lucas (Military Cross) whose home is at South Ascot was in charge of a party which raided the Germans. He was wounded early in the enterprise and is now in hospital in London. [TX01382]

Betrayal?

The raid at Ferme du Bois raises many interesting questions, especially in the light of subsequent events in the Second Battle of Fromelles. There are reports which state that the British plans for the attack on the 19th were known to the Germans, having been found on an officer who was either killed or captured.

Pottinger does not actually name Lt James Skene but it seems fairly obvious that it was he whom he meant. In his account relayed 20 years later to his son he first refers to an incident when the Battalion was guarding the coastline near Colchester.

On more than one occasion when there was enemy air activity overhead, signal lights were reported coming from the perimeter of the camp. Comprehensive searches failed to find their origin or initiator, if there was one.

The Battalion was employed for a short period in preparing anti-invasion defences on the east coast and Pottinger, as an officers servant, was a permanent fire picquet or performed guard duties. One evening he was advanced on by an officer who did not respond to his challenges and who was halted to produce identification only after having a fixed bayonet presented to throat and told "one more pace and this goes into you"

On the night of the raid it was this officer who asked to join the raiding party. Only he and the bulk of his party reached the German parapet where, observers reported, he turned and threw his two grenades amongst the party as he jumped into the front-line trench shouting "Have these you English Pigs"

Apparently he had made a special request to join the raid as he was an officer in D Coy. However the truth of this accusation seems to be in considerable doubt and quite out of character. Skene, a resident of Woking had enlisted 13/8/14 in the 5th Battalion as 10609 and had achieved rapid promotion to Corporal and given a commission in March 1915.

Of the fourteen men who were in the first wave, seven were in the main party and seven, led by Sgt Tallent in the follow up party. Eleven of these were reported missing in the casualty return and never heard of again, so presumed killed. All of these appear to have penetrated the German trenches and it is strange that not a single man was taken prisoner at a point when the Germans would have been desperate to gain intelligence - did they get it from Skene?

Back to Billets

15th July 1916

After this affair the battalion was again in billets at La Gorgue and Laventie.

16th July 1916

On the 16th the battalion was preparing for an attack next day. Some casualties were suffered in moving into trenches ready for it. Second-Lieutenant C. E. Cecil was killed and Second-Lieutenant H. J. Gale wounded, whilst of other ranks three were killed and seven wounded.

The ones killed were:-

- 6560 Arthur Brown
- 2Lt Charles E Cecil of Bournemouth
- 3320 Thomas Herbert Galbraith Semple of Bandon Co Cork
- 3614 David John Wellman of Reading

17th July 1916

Eight more men were wounded on the 17th as B Company was returning to its position of the night of the 15th-16th in the afternoon. The projected attack in the morning had been cancelled, owing to the mist which prevented artillery registration.

18th July 1916

Preparations were again made on the 18th for an attack on the evening of the 19th on the German front and support trenches.

2255 Nelson Cox and 5476 William Thomas Lovegrove both of Reading died on the 18th

The 2nd Battle of Fromelles

19th July 1916

The First Battle of Fromelles had taken place on the 9th May 1915 and included the 2nd Battalion (see section 192) The assaulting battalions of the 184th Brigade were the 2/4th Royal Berkshire on the right, the 2/1st Buckinghamshire on the left. On the right of the 184th Brigade was the 183rd with the 182nd beyond. On the left of the 2/1st Buckinghamshire was the Australian Division. To the 2/4th Royal Berkshire was assigned a front from Sutherland Avenue on the right to Piccadilly Avenue on the left, whilst the 2/1st Buckinghamshire continued the line as far as Bond Street.

The artillery preparation began at 11:00 though the attack was not to commence till 18:00 In retaliation the guns of the German 6th BR Division reinforced with those of the 50th and 54th Divisions battered the British observation posts on the Rue Tilloy and blew up several ammunition dumps.

The front British assembly trenches were much crowded, with the consequence that by 17:30 the Royal Berkshire had already lost about forty killed and wounded from the German artillery fire. This necessitated reorganization of the assaulting and consolidating companies.

The planned artillery attacks were a dismal failure, occasioned partly by inexperience of the gunners and partly by the observers view being obscured by dust and smoke. The report read

No effective destructive or neutralising of the Hun infantry, artillery or MGs took place. The total effect of our artillery preparation on the Hun resistance was nil.

At 17:45 the battalion filed out from two sally ports, and at once came under machine-gun fire which caused heavy

casualties. They had exited in full view of the German lookouts and 2nd Lt Holzfelder of the 3/16 BRIR roused his company from its shelter and his machine guns began their devastating fire. A certain proportion of the right company succeeded in getting out, but only in scattered parties. Some of them were reported to have reached the German wire, but finding themselves unsupported and suffering severely from machine-gun fire, they were compelled to fall back. They reported that the enemy wire was uncut.

Of the left company (A) only a few succeeded in getting out by their sally port, and they were at once forced to retire by the enemy's machine guns.

It was whilst directing these men from the parapet that Lieut.-Colonel J. H. Beer was killed. Several other officers were killed or wounded whilst endeavouring to organize a forward movement. The battalion had suffered 163 casualties in less than twenty minutes.

The Brigadier reported:-

184 Infantry Brigade Report on Operations 19/20th July 1916

On the 19th July the Brigade (with 183rd Brigade on our right and the 15th Australian Brigade on our left) was ordered to attack, capture and hold with two battalions (2 Bucks and 4 Royal Berks) the German Front and Support Lines from N 14 a 60. 25 to N 8 d 95. 10. - Two Companies of the 4/Oxfords were placed at the disposal of the Brigadier to occupy our front Line in the event of all Companies in the Assaulting Battalions being absorbed in the same: the 5 Glosters and remaining two Companies of 4/Oxfords were in Divisional Reserve.

The following were also placed at the disposal of the Brigadier: 3rd Field Company R.E. and 'B' Company 1/5th Duke of Cornwall's L.I (Pioneers)

By 9.0.a.m. the Brigade was disposed, in accordance with orders. (vide Sketch No.1).

2 Vickers Machine Guns were posted in the front Line in support of the attack, 4 Vickers Machine Guns were detailed to follow the Assaulting Companies on the positions being captured. 6 Vickers Guns were detailed for indirect fire from vicinity of JOCKS LODGE. Owing to the difficulty of coming within effective range, only one Stokes Mortar was detained to bombard the SUGAR LOAF, it was arranged for 4 Stokes Mortars to follow the Assaulting Companies.

The Assaulting Companies No. 1 & No. 2 were ordered to attack in 4 waves at 20 yards distance.

The 3rd Company was to follow as soon as the position was reported captured, carrying consolidating material. Each consolidating Company had 4 R.E. and 4 Pioneers detailed to accompany same - An R.E. and a Pioneer officer were also detailed to supervise work of consolidation.

A portion of Reserve Companies were ordered to carry across NO MAN'S LAND reserve bombs and S.A.A.

Arrangements were made for a party of 3rd Australian Mining Company, under Major Coulter, to blow up, by means of an ammonal pipe, a continuation of the RHONDDA SAP, after this had been effected for the Pioneer Company attached to the Brigade to dig a communication trench between N 8.d. 25. 15 on the SUGAR LOAF to the RHONDDA SAP - parties working from both sides.

Diary of events (11. a.m. to 6. p.m.)

11. a.m. Our Artillery opened fire

11.50.a.m. Reported that enemy had shelled our Left Sub-section heavily - some casualties.

12.55 p.m. Report received that enemy's Artillery fire had diminished slightly - A few salvos on RUE DE TILLELOY

1.20. PM. Report received ROTTEN ROW Communication Trench heavily shelled by 77 mm.

2.10.p.m. Report received that our Support Trenches were heavily shelled with H.E.

2.30.p.m. Telephonic communication with Front Line temporarily severed

2.44.p.m. Enemy firing 103 c.m. on BOND ST Communication Trench

3.25.p.m. The whole sectional Front heavily shelled. Communication effected by Runners

4.24 p.m. Our C.T's. heavily shelled - BOND ST Communication Trench & PICANTIN AVENUE especially

5.15.p.m. Damage to our Front Line Parapet very severe (numerous casualties)

5.30.p.m. Owing to heavy casualties in Assaulting Companies of both battalions I gave orders for 2 platoons from reserve Companies to reinforce former - the consolidating companies to be left intact.

6.00.p.m. Communication by telephone with Front Line re-established by laying an additional line from Advanced Battalion H.Q.

Up to 5.30.p.m. owing chiefly to the crowded condition of our Front Line Trenches, considerable casualties had taken place, amounting to 100 killed and wounded in 2/Bucks and 40 killed and wounded in the 4/Royal Berks. This necessitated reorganisation of the Assaulting and consolidating Companies.

At 5.45 p.m. on the right 4/Royal Berks commenced to file out through 2 Sally Ports. On emerging from same they encountered severe Machine Gun Fire - numerous casualties ensued. A certain proportion of the Right Company got through the Sally Ports but only in scattered parties - some of whom are reported to have reached the German wire but, being unsupported and under heavy machine gun fire and shrapnel fire, were compelled to fall back, they reported that the German wire at X 20, X 21 was uncut.

A few men only of the left company, 4/Royal Berks got through the Sally Port under heavy Machine Gun fire but failed to advance any appreciable distance. Whilst directing these men from the parapet Lt. Col. J N Beer was killed. Several officers were killed and wounded in endeavouring to initiate an organised forward movement.

At 5.40.p.m. the 2/Bucks commenced to file through the Sally Ports but, owing to severe Machine Gun fire directed at the latter, Lt. Col Williams decided to utilise the Rhondda Sap. This was carried out and the 2 Assaulting Companies were successfully deployed from head of same., they were however subjected to heavy Machine Gun and shrapnel fire and a certain number of casualties occurred, whilst waves were getting into position.

At 6.0.p.m punctually the 2/Bucks advanced to the Assault, a withering Machine Gun fire was encountered which mowed down a large proportion of men, especially with the Right Company. A portion of Capt. Church's Company on the left pressed through the enemy's wire on the N.E. face of the Sugar Loaf and fierce fighting was seen to take place on the parapet.

A good proportion of this Company, ably led by Captain Church (who was killed just before the glacis (sic) to enemy's breastworks) got into the Germans trenches. (This has been substantiated by reports from the Right Battalion of the 15th Australian Brigade)

Owing to the 4/Royal Berks having been driven back on their Right and the same thing having occurred to the Right Battalion of the 15th Australian Brigade on their left, this lack of support on their flanks seriously impaired what chances the 2/Bucks had of capturing the SUGAR LOAF. The C.O. is of the opinion (with which I concur) that if 2 Reserve Companies had been available at this period fro throwing into the assault, a substantial lodgement would undoubtedly been effected in the SUGAR LOAF. 61 missing N.C.O's and men in this Battalion testifies to the belief that a considerable proportion of the Left Company of this Battalion got into the German Trenches.

Owing to want of support and heavy casualties the 2/Bucks were compelled to effect a withdrawal In accordance with orders, C.O.s, 4/R.B Berks and 2/Bucks then reorganised their battalions with the view to launching a second attack.

During the enemy bombardment shells emitting a dense column of light green smoke were observable in the vicinity of the Red House (Regimental First Aid Post)

At 6.0.p.m the 1/8 Cornwall's left the Assembly trenches and proceeded to the Rhondda Gap and started improving it

184 Machine Gun Company - The Machine Gun company fired 30,000 rounds with indirect fire and supporting the Infantry attack. 3 of their guns were put out of action by bullets. They endeavoured to silence the enemy's guns.

184 Light Trench Mortars - The one gun in the Front Line at 4.30. pm. fired 30 rounds on the SUGAR LOAF obtaining direct hits.

Communications were maintained throughout the Operations from Brigade and Battalion H.Q. From Battalion H.Q. to the Front Line they were cut between 2 and 3.p.m. but were re-established by 6.0.p.m. Runners were employed and were most satisfactory. [TX01481]

The Battalion had lost its Commanding Officer in the battle. The Berkshire Chronicle reported it first in their edition of 28/7/1916

A SECOND COLONEL KILLED

Yet another battalion of the Royal Berkshires has been in fierce fighting, the Berkshires and other battalions being engaged on the occasion when the Australians distinguished themselves. The Berkshires assisted in the capture of the German first and second lines against it is said the Prussian Guards and the Bavarians. Unluckily the Colonel of the Battalion wa skilled and several other officers were killed or wounded whilst the number of homes in Reading which are mourning the loss of members of their family, or who have received intimation that they are wounded shows how desperate was the fighting in which they were engaged. [TX01515]

The Berkshire Chronicle reported in greater depth on 11/8/1916

LIEUTENANT COLONEL J H BEER

Very high tributes have been paid to Lieutenant Colonel J H Beer who, as already stated in the Chronicle, was killed whilst in command of one of the Territorial Battalions of the Royal Berkshire Regiment. The General in charge of the Division writes: "The Division sustained a great blow yesterday by the death of your son Lieutenant Colonel Beer, who was gallantly commanding his battalion in action. I had quite recently given him command of the battalion. His fine soldierly qualities had commanded my admiration, while his personal characteristics had earned my liking and that of all who knew him since he has been with me. I deeply sympathise with you"

The General in command of the Brigade wrote:- "He died at the head of his regiment, displaying splendid gallantry and dogged determination to overcome the difficulties of the moment. Your son was undoubtedly a born leader and it was infinitely sad that his life should have been cut short so soon after he had been selected for the command of a battalion. In that short time he had, however, made great strides with the view to promoting war efficiency. His death will be greatly deplored by all ranks of the regiment, who one and all fully recognise what an intrepid commander that have had."

A memorial service was held at Kenton, Devon [TX01309]

A letter received from a brother officer in the regiment by the father of Lt Col Beer said:-

"It happened on the 19th when we were making an attack and the Colonel was down in the front line. The assaulting troops were leaving our trenches to make the assault and the Colonel was standing looking over the parapet cheering the men on, when he was shot through the head by a machine gun bullet and instantly killed. We buried him yesterday evening, together with another of our officers and all the officers were present to pay their last mark of respect to our commanding officer. He lies in a military cemetery with other brave men of his battalion [TX01309]

Sergeant H E Fountain was killed, the incident was reported in a letter from his CSM to his wife

"It is with the deepest regret and sorrow that I have to inform you that your husband was killed in action at 2 pm on July 19th during a very heavy bombardment. Joe had not left me two minutes and was going along the line to ascertain whether any of the men were casualties, when another sergeant came along and reported that he was killed. Joe was well liked by all ranks and was the life of the company with his hearty laugh and whistle-pipe. Just previous to Joe being killed, one of his men, who always used to accompany him on the mouth organ whilst Joe played the whistle, was wounded. Only the night before they had entertained the company to an impromptu concert in the field. He was one of my best sergeants and was always willing and a good worker. [TX01314]

Another casualty was Corporal T Hollings [3539]. In the Berks Chronicle of 8/11/16 it was reported:-

Tom, eldest son of Mr and Mrs E Hollings, South Hill Park, Bracknell (died of wounds) joined the Army on Dec 30 1914. He went up for medical inspection in September, but the authorities would not pass him, so to enable him to join up he underwent a serious operation. He was only in France for two months, but had seen considerable fighting in that short period.

Mrs Hollings received this letter from the captain of his regiment:- "It is with the deepest regret I have to inform you of the death of your son Corporal T Hollings. He was very seriously wounded on July 19th during bombardment preliminary to an important attack and has since died of wounds. He was a most gallant man and his cheeriness had, if you will allow me to say so, endeared him especially to me, though all the company loved him. We shall miss him terribly, for he was a splendid soldier as well as a good friend. Major Shields [SH0008] who commanded the Company was wounded about the same time. The colonel [BE0007] was killed. Please accept the deepest sympathy of all B Company. Your son was such a dear fellow, nobody could help loving him. [TX01322]

Private Rowland Gunston [2189] was wounded:- The chaplain of the 3rd Casualty Clearing Station BEF France wrote under date July 27:-

Your son was admitted to this hospital a few days ago suffering from wounds in the chest. His condition was rather serious at first, but today he has improved quite a lot and we are quite hopeful about him. He will probably be moved down to a base hospital tomorrow. He is very comfortable and well looked after here" This is the second time that Private Gunston has been wounded, the first being in the German raid on May 16th when he was slightly hurt. Twenty three years of age he was in the Territorials before the war broke out [TX01332]

Private G R Simmonds [201516] Royal Berks of 86 Norton Road Reading wrote home:-

"We fought with the ANZACS early on Sunday morning and were in the thick of it. We went through a great deal on Sunday but had the best of it. I got wounded while carrying bombs across the open and when I got back to our trench we were heavily bombarded and I got buried under the parapet with a shell and my nerves went to pieces and my platoon officer sent me down to the dressing station. I was absolutely whacked as we had had no sleep for over two days and not a shave or a wash for over a week. [TX01347]

Private Pritchard, Royal Berks of 73 Katesgrove Lane Reading gave an account to the Chronicle. Writing under date July 21 he says

"It was real murder, but thank God we came out all right. Bert Day and Len Gibbons were wounded. Poor little Day [Pte Bert Day 3328] was blown about 13 feet in the air and got both his legs broken. Gibbons [Pte Len Gibbons 5277] got one leg broken and his other foot smashed. It was a miracle I and Tom did not get hit. We had just finished our dinner and were sitting on the firestep when a shell came over and up went the lot. Three were killed outright and several others wounded. It was perfect hell; they were shelling us all day. We did not know where to get away from the shells. It was horrible to see the poor chaps. Tom was hit in the back, but not seriously, it was his cap that saved him. It was smashed to bits. He got a big bruise and the skin off so tell mother not to worry, we are both as well as can be expected. You should have seen the chaps reading their Bibles and waiting to see who was going to be next. [TX01348]

Another casualty was Corporal J Powell reported in the 28/7/16 edition of the Berkshire Chronicle:

CORPORAL J POWELL

Corporal Joseph Powell eldest son of Mr and Mrs J Powell of 8 Wykeham Road Reading was wounded in the left shoulder on July 19th and is now in hospital in Eastbourne. A letter has been received from Corporal Powell himself saying that he is making satisfactory progress and that the bullet went through his shoulder and came out the top of his arm. He is 20 years of age and joined up in September 1914. Prior to that he worked at Messrs Wymans as a compositor and had only been at the front about two months. In a letter Corporal Powell says: "Of our company half the men and half the officers were put out of action before they charged and the colonel was killed about the same time. They captured and held the German first and second lines and from such redoubtable fighters as the Prussian Guards and Bavarians. The latter fight like tigers but our lads were too good for them." [TX00057]

Lance Corporal Hamblin [20925] was also wounded: (BC 28/7/16)

LANCE CORPORAL E HAMBLIN [20925]

Lance Corporal E Hamblin of 16 Letcombe Street Reading, in the signal section of his battalion, has been wounded in the chest and side. Aged 19 Hamblin joined up 12 months ago last February and had been at the front five or six weeks. He was recently made lance corporal. His lieutenant writes "Out here he did very good work indeed and was always keen on his work, very willing and above all always cheerful. After he was hit I still found him in charge of his station and still cheerful and I heard afterwards he walked down from the trenches quite happy. I can only say how pleased I was with what he did out here and it is through having NCOs like him that we get along so well. Hamblin has two brothers serving – Bert who joined up from the Chronicle and the other is in Salisbury. [TX00060]

Another report in the same edition read:-

PRIVATE E J WISE [3533]

Private Ernest James Wise of 68 Blenheim Road Reading was wounded in the right buttock on July 19. He was formerly in the employ of Messrs Baylis and Co, Erleigh Road Reading. He is now at Ingham near Bury St Edmunds. He was 21 last November. [TX00074]

Private Gibbons [5277] died from his wounds

Mrs Leonard Gibbons of 37 Grovelands Road Reading on Saturday received the regrettable news that her husband Private (Dick) Leonard Gibbons of the Royal Berks Regiment had, on the previous Wednesday, passed away as the result of wounds. On the previous Tuesday Mrs Gibbons had received a cheery communication from her husband in which he said he was alive and well. Within a few hours of writing that letter however Private Gibbons must have been mortally wounded. As recently as Wednesday this week a letter was delivered to Mrs Gibbons from one of her husband's chums in which he said how greatly he regretted to have to inform her that his pal had been wounded by his side. A letter from the chaplain of the corps said how manfully Gibbons had borne up to the end. His chief thought was for his wife and children. Right up to the finish though he knew his case was hopeless. Gibbons, said the chaplain was as bright as possible and died the death of a hero. The late Private Gibbons was prior to enlisting in the employ of Reading Corporation Tramways serving faithfully and well for eleven years. He was a courteous conductor and carried out his duties to the complete satisfaction of the Corporation and the many passengers with whom he came in contact. One of his fellow workmen remarked to the writer "Dick Gibbons was one of the best. We hadn't a more popular man on our staff. He was one of the most assiduous in the organisation of our summer outings much of the success attained being due to his excellent work" The dead soldier was a close follower of the doings of Reading Football Club and he was very fond of cricket. Unfortunately he leaves his widow and five young children (the eldest being 12) to mourn their loss. Gibbons was home as recently as May.[TX00090]

Lance Corporal Wellman [3614] was another who was killed-

News has been received by Mr and Mrs Wellman of 51 Weldale Street Reading that their son Lance Corporal David John Wellman was killed in action on July 19th, information having been received from the chaplain who buried him. The deceased who was 20 years of age joined up in January last year and had only been at the front for about a couple of months. He was in the signalling section and received his promotion just prior to leaving England. He entered the employ of Messrs Huntley and Palmers when he left school and was in the sugar wafer department. He was a member of the Elm Park Hall band. Lance Corporal Wellman is a second son and has a brother serving in the Royal Engineers.

Review of the Battle

The attack had failed, as had those of the 2/1st Buckinghamshire and of the Australians on their left. But there was an even bigger disaster, unknown to them at the time. The Germans found a copy of Haking's orders on one of the dead. This confirmed to them that the operation was merely a feint and as a result further troops were moved to support the defences on the Somme.

Brig Gen Carter was sacked and although his battalions sympathised with him they were glad to see the back of him. Major Geoffrey Christie-Miller 2ic of the 2/1 Bucks wrote:

the Brigade were heartily glad to be rid of a commander in whom they had no confidence and who demonstrated daily his ignorance of the requirements of war.

Thereafter Haking was always referred to as 'butcher' Haking and in an enquiry after the war he was described as incompetent.

The 2nd/4th casualties in this affair were:

Officers:

Killed:

Lieut.-Colonel J. H. Beer (commanding the battalion)
2/Lt. Frederick Christopher Dallas Williams of Sydenham,
2/Lt G. S. Abbott.

Wounded:

Major T. Shields,
2nd-Lieut. D. R. Gibson.

Other Ranks: Killed 22, Wounded 123, Missing 9.

The Other Ranks who died were:

3376 Richard Barber of Reading
3569 Charles Bates of East Garston
6670 Frank Beresford of Aigburth
6610 Ernest Victor Brazier of Goldhanger
3760 Frank Reginald Church of Windsor
6611 Howard Victor Cole of Ridgewell
3398 William Edward Couzens of Thatcham

5334 Charles Davis of East Woodhay
 6558 Charles Tilby Fleet of Isleham
 3974 Harold Ernest Fountain of Clewer
 3380 James Arthur Hollands of Cookham Rise
 5302 William Edward Hooper of Reading
 6678 Frederick W Leyland of Liverpool
 5306 John William Martin of Frimley Green
 6675 James McGhan of Liverpool
 2143 Frederick Mulford of Wantage
 3483 Frederick Charles Painter of Reading
 3545 Albert T Rivers of East Garston
 3390 James Rose of Bourne End
 2507 Frederick Ernest Savage of Goring
 3619 William John Savory of Reading
 6289 Frederick Smith of Luton
 3800 George Snow of Reading
 6691 Frank Victor West of Finedon
 6673 Richard Hughes Williams of Liverpool

and on the 20th

6004 Albert Moisey Blades of Brownsver
 3328 Albert Day of Reading

Most of those who died are buried at Laventie Military Cemetery with two who died of wounds at Merville Communal Cemetery.

5th Australian Division lost 5533 men (76%), 61st Division 1547 (46%) 481 men were taken prisoner and these were paraded in Lille later. By contrast 6th Bavarian Division lost only 1582 made up of 274 from 17th Bavarian Infantry Reserve Regiment (BRIR), 775 from 21/BRIR and 377 from 16/BRIR

That night the battalion was relieved and went back to billets at the Rue de la Lys.

In a letter dated 24.7.16 Major J H Simmons, who had assumed command of the battalion wrote to his brigadier with commendations:

From:- OC 2/4th Royal Berks Regt

To:- HdQrs 184th Infantry Brigade

I beg to bring to your notice the names of the following Officers, NCO's and Men who were conspicuous for gallantry in the Action of July 19th.

Capt. R. Whittaker. Went out with his Company under heavy machine gun fire. When, owing to heavy casualties, the Company had become somewhat scattered, Capt. Whittaker moved about under fire and collected his men and led them forward. He remained in NO MAN'S LAND for four hours, and finding that his Company was weak and unsupported, he collected them and brought them back, together with all the wounded.

2nd Lieut. D.R. Gibson. Led his platoon with great gallantry under heavy fire. Made repeated attempts to get through the wire gap and saved 2nd Lt. Abbott from being badly burnt through the explosion of the flares in his haversack. He afterwards led the remnants of his platoon forward by another gap, and himself patrolled some 50 yards of the German wire. (Wounded).

2nd Lieut. G.S. Abbott. Led his platoon with splendid gallantry. Made strenuous efforts to get through the wire gap under very heavy machine gun fire. He then led the remnants towards the next gap, but was killed on the way. This officer had on many previous occasions done remarkably good work on patrols, and was a most fearless leader.

No 3070 Corpl. Powell J. When under heavy machine gun fire, bandaged up a wounded man, and, though wounded himself whilst doing so, finished the man's dressing after he has staunched his own wound. He afterwards got his reduced section away from the zone of fire in the gap and brought them back safely some hours afterwards. Has previously done very good work in patrols.

No. 3409 Corpl. Puddle. Dressed a wounded man under heavy machine gun fire, though wounded himself, and afterwards brought the remnants of his section into safety with great coolness. Has previously done excellent work on patrols.

No. 986 Sergt. Barrett F.J. and No. 2940 Sergt. Blay S.C. Both these NCO's got small parties forward under heavy fire to within easy distance of German parapet, and brought them back four hours afterwards, when they found themselves unsupported.

No. 3366 Pte. Powell E.P. Went forward under heavy fire to look for remainder of attacking wave from Sergt. Barrett's party. He afterwards did very good work in recovering wounded, though wounded himself.

No. 3360 Pte. Hayter W.A. Carried out his duties as stretcher bearer during the whole day with conspicuous devotion and regardless of his own personal safety. His behaviour helped greatly to steady and encourage the men.

No. 3405 Dmr. Maynard G. Carried messages all day in spite of great difficulties, and carried on with the duties of the pigeon signaller when that man was wounded just before the Company went into action, taking the pigeons out with the assaulting party into NO MAN'S LAND.

No. 3089 Sergt. Dore A.J. During the heavy bombardment, two men of No.7 Platoon were blown over the parapet. Sergt. Dore unhesitatingly jumped over the parapet and brought both men in under heavy shell fire. Their legs had been broken and

they were quite helpless.

No. 3016 Sergt. Lambourne J.W. On hearing of the death of 2nd Lieut. Williams, Sergt. Lambourne crawled across, under heavy machine gun fire, to his body, and searched it for documents which might prove useful to the enemy, 2nd Lieut. Williams having been previously heard to express some doubt as to whether he had sufficiently emptied his pockets. During the latter part of the operations, Sergt. Lambourne was of the utmost value in preserving the morale of the Company, which had lost heavily, indeed, since our first day in the trenches, Sergt. Lambourne has been fearless and indefatigable in innumerable patrols and any tasks of especial danger.

No. 5294 Lce.Cpl. Lovegrove S.C. This NCO was one of the leading wave of "B" Company, and with a few companions managed to reach NO MAN'S LAND. Finding the assault checked, Lce. Cpl. Lovegrove returned for further instructions no less than three times, running the greatest risks on each occasion.

No. 3639 Pte. Allen A.E. (Stretcher Bearer). Carried out wounded constantly all day under heavy shell fire. He is always to the fore and quite regardless of personal danger, and sets a splendid example to the other bearers. Worked continuously from the morning of July 19th till 7 a.m. on the 20th, when he was complete exhausted. He also showed marked coolness when evacuating gas casualties from the BUCKS line on July 18th.

No. 3943 Pte. Stanwell K.W. and No. 3406 Pte. Norton W. Were continuously employed from 100 a.m. till 11 p.m. acting as messengers backwards and forwards to the front line through heavy shell fire. Throughout they showed the greatest coolness and devotion to duty under most difficult circumstances, all telephonic communication having been cut.

The following names are brought to your notice for meritorious service during the Action of July 19th:-

2nd Lieut. E.C. Aylett. Mentioned for good work done throughout the attack and afterwards in recovering wounded.

No 2895 Company Sergt. Major Matthews A.G. Did excellent work by helping to collect the remnants of the Company under heavy fire.

No 3363 Corpl. Pocock Jas. Took charge of No 12 Platoon when his senior officer and NCOs were killed or wounded. He collected the remainder under heavy fire and brought them in safely.

No. 2856 Pte. Borrett L. ,No. 2254 Pte Martin L.L. and No. 3284 Pte. Townsend A.W. These three men did noticeably good work in recovering and attending to wounded. All three have, in addition, done regular and reliable patrol work ever since the Battalion entered the trenches. If selection is necessary, the claims of Pte. Martin are, perhaps, slightly greater than those of the other, but all have earned recognition.

No. 3593 Pte Tee H. (Stretcher Bearer) and No. 3531 Pte. Gibbs R. (Runner). Did particularly Meritorious work on July 19th as well as on many previous occasions.

No. 3465 Pte. Portsmouth T.H. For great coolness and disregard of personal danger while carrying messages backwards and forwards from Battalion Hd Qrs. to the Front Line.

No. 5263 Pte. Coxhead W. This man attended to the wounded in an exposed portion of the trench until himself wounded.

No. 2463 Corpl. Robey A.F. Company Bombing NCO – Led bombers forward with great coolness, and, after they had been badly out in the gap, kept them together for four hours under heavy fire, ready for use if required.

(Sd) J. H. Simonds. Major

Battn. HdQrs.

Commanding 2/4th Royal Berks Regt.

24th July 1916

Continued in Section 244