

## Section 235

# The Somme

### The 5th Battalion

#### The Road to the Somme

In preparation for the 'big push' the 12th Division of which the 5th was part was transferred from I Corps to III Corps which was part of the new Fourth Army under Rawlinson. On the 16th June they were moved by rail and road first to Longbeaux a mile SE of Amiens and then to billets in Vignacourt where they remained for 10 days training.

On 1st July the 5th Battalion moved to Albert where 12th Division were intended to relieve 8th Division in the front line trenches. On arrival they found the trenches in *'a filthy state with dead and wounded lying about'* according to the battalion diarist. In Hennecourt Wood where they were awaiting orders there was a Casualty Clearing Station and the Battalion had the melancholy interest of seeing many of their colleagues in the 2nd Battalion brought in after their severe engagement on the 2nd.

#### Ovillers 3rd July 1916

On the evening of July 2nd orders were received for a Divisional attack at dawn on the 3rd to take the village of Ovillers. This had been a first day objective on the opening of the Somme offensive but had resisted capture. Zero hour was set for 0315 to be preceded by a ten minute bombardment being specially intensive and intended to drive the Germans into their dug-outs. During this period the first two or three waves of troops were to crawl forward to shorten the assaulting distance.

The 5th had a front of 120 yards and were ordered to attack towards Ovillers Church. They started out from a sunken road which ran parallel to the village, separated from it by a wide expanse of open ground which rose steadily towards the village on the ridge. Two battalions of the 35th Brigade were involved, the 5th Royal Berks and the 7th Suffolks.

At the last minute the plans for the artillery bombardment were changed so that instead of a very intense sudden 10 minute period the bombardment started an hour before zero hour. This had the effect of allowing the Germans to man their strong points and direct considerable hostile fire upon the British lines, causing many casualties and destroying the element of surprise.

The assaulting companies started off at 0303 and crawled through the gaps they had cut in their own lines

and managed to get quite close to the German lines. They found that the wire protecting the German trenches had been almost completely destroyed although some wire in front of shrapnell trench remained. Also there were many large shell holes which formed considerable obstacles.

All four companies appear to have kept good direction with the exception of the right Company which initially strayed too far to its right. The leading Companies appear to have suffered little or no casualties from rifle or machine gun fire until they had crossed the German front line which appears to have been empty. After crossing the front line the leading waves pushed on over the second trench and into what was known as 'Shrapnel Terrace' Here some of the enemy were encountered and hand to hand fighting ensued, many dug-outs were bombed and it became obvious that unless the 5th could procure a plentiful supply of bombs it would be impossible to hold onto the ground they had gained.

It was a very dark morning and in the darkness it was extremely difficult to tell friend from foe or even the trenches themselves which had been considerably damaged by the British shell fire. It was also impossible to hear orders. Some men did manage to penetrate the village it is believed but nothing was ever heard of them again so it is presumed they were eventually killed or cut off.

The German dug-outs appeared to have been undamaged by the bombardment and as soon as the Royal Berks began throwing bombs into them the Germans emerged from other entrances, fully armed with bombs. There were many instances of extreme bravery by small isolated bombing parties which defeated only because their supply of bombs became exhausted, whereas the Germans had plenty to hand.

The Commanding Officer and the Adjutant. Lt C A Gold went forward themselves at 0330 shortly after the last wave had set out to monitor progress. As they crossed no-mans-land Lt Gold was shot through the head and died instantly. In a letter to his father the CO Lt Col F G Willan wrote:

I regret to have to tell you that Cecil was killed about 3.30 am on the morning of the 3rd inst.

The Battalion was ordered to assault and capture a certain village just before it got light. As soon as all the Companies had gone I went forward to the German trenches with Cecil and my orderly, who was I believe

also killed.

Cecil and I ran about trying to restore matters as there was some confusion in the darkness, and trying to get the men to dig themselves in along the sunken road. He was killed on the road and died instantaneously as he was shot by a rifle bullet through the brain. His body now lies midway between our lines and the Germans.

It was still quite dark however and impossible to distinguish faces 50 yards away. When Col Willan reached the German front line trench he found about 100 men between them and the second line. He could hear sounds of considerable bombing to their right and the enemy were advancing to their left. There was considerable confusion in the darkness and men from the 7th Suffolks and the the 9th Essex were getting mixed up with the 5th Royal Berks. The noise was deafening and it was impossible to make oneself heard.

The bulk of the British troops fell back into the German front line trench. Some were inclined to go further, others simply stood on the top seemingly not knowing what to do.

Only one officer could be found in the area. This was Captain Wace who was attempting to rally the men and get them to go forward. After a brief reconnaissance the CO decided that it would be impossible to retain a hold on the German front line trench which had almost collapsed and was exposed to fire from both flanks as well as from the front. It would have been impossible to get it consolidated before day break and even if they did, the men there would be trapped and unable to escape before the next nightfall. The prospect of them being there with no bombs, no support and running short of food and ammunition was too much so the CO decided to withdraw back to the sunken road.

By this time the enemy had started to direct a withering fire across the ground over which the British had just advanced so withdrawal was a slow and dangerous operation. However about 80-100 men made it back safely to the sunken Albert-Ovillers road where they were able to dig in. The road afforded them with complete protection from the north and was defiladed from the east.

A curious incident had occurred earlier when an order to retire was apparently given by an officer of another unit. One NCO thought that the order actually came from a German masquerading in British uniform. Anyway whoever he was, Lt Col Willan reported to 35th Brigade the next day, he had been shot, he believed by Capt Wace with his revolver.

At 1600 they were further withdrawn to the Albert defences where the men made bivouak shelters and cooks were brought up to provide a hot meal.

2nd Lt Breach, together with 2nd Lt May and another 60 men who had been dug in in no-mans-land managed to get back and rejoin their comrades at around 2300. He

wrote afterwards:-

I have had the most thrilling, and certainly the most terrible time I should imagine it possible for anyone to go through and remain sane. We attacked the Huns at 3 am on the 3rd July. We managed to take the Hun lines, but after some heroic work on the part of our fellows, the Battalion was driven off. We found it totally impossible to get back to our own lines, so we had to lie down in the open, exposed to the fire of both the Hun's artillery and our own, to say nothing of Fritz's rifle fire, machine gun fire and bombs for 20 hours. We crept back in after dark. Of our officers only the Battalioin Commander and two second Lieutenants, of whom I am one got back. I was buried once by a 'Jack Johnson'. Those 20 hours seemed quite a week to me.

The men remained there throughout the 4th July and were withdrawn on the orders of the GOC as soon as it was dark. The medical officer and the stretcher bearers remained behind in the Aid Post in Standish St doing much excellent work in bringing in further wounded.

Cecil's old friend Lt R H (Boozey) Causton went out himself on the night of the 5th to recover Cecil's body which was later buried at Aveluy. Lt Causton wrote:

Cecil was killed not far from our lines, and I went out at night and recovered his body and he was buried in an English cemetery by our Padre. The CO and others were there.

He continued later

There is one thing I am most anxious for them (ie Cecil's parents) to understand and yourself (Cecil's brother Pat) I ran no danger honestly in getting Cecil's body in - I did not have a shot fired at me.

More details of the funeral were given by F W Bennelick in a letter from the Royal Victoria Hospital in Netley where he was recovering from his wounds.

About two nights after, a patrol went out from our lines to bring Mr Gold in and he was brought to a place called Crucifix Corner in Aveluy. We in the regiment heard that Mr Causton organised and commanded this patrol.

The next morning a message was sent round the Battalion saying that the Adjutant was to be buried that day and all who wished to be present were to fall in at a certain time. Some of the Battalion were away on a working party, but I think every officer and man, off duty, fell in and was present on this occasion. We marched to Aveluy and made all preparations in an English cemetery there and then sent a party to fetch Mr Gold from Crucifix Corner under (I think) Mr Sharpe. I did not myself go with this party but when they returned we heard that Mr Gold had already been buried in the cemetery by crucifix corner, Mr Sharpe and his party arriving in time to see the ceremony completed, but soon enough for Mr Gold to be carried to the other cemetery where the CO and the remainder of us waited.

## Appraisal

In his appraisal of the engagement the CO commented:

The failure to maintain our hold on the captured

trenches may be put down to the following facts:-

- A The extreme darkness which had not been anticipated
- B The length of our bombardment which resulted in the enemy putting up a heavy barrage of shrapnell and HE
- C Excessive casualties caused to officers, their NCOs, bombing squads and Lewis gun teams (four were put out of action) at an early stage in the operations.
- D Little or no damage had been done to the enemy's dugouts by our bombardment
- E Some units regrettably lost direction and therefore did not reach their objective, thereby causing lack of cohesion and co-operation.
- F Heavy casualties caused in crossing no-mans-land.

Private Harding was one of the survivors. He wrote:-

Our attack at Ovillers proved abortive, only killed and wounded to show for our efforts. Afterwards we were assembled in a field near Mametz Wood, where our Brigadier, Solly Flood, told us that '*it was a bloody rough game calling for bloody rough action*' - as if we didn't know

on the 20th August 1916 the General Officer Commanding 12th Division presented decorations for operations on the 3rd July. Not everyone was able to be present (marked \*)

Military Cross

- 2nd Lt H M Brown (\* since died of wounds)
- 2nd Lt A D Breach (\*since sick to England)

DCM

- 8000 Cpl C P Howard
- 10375 Sgt H G Nicholls \*

MM

- 9499 Sgt J Bunce \*
- 10291 sgt E Wardley
- 7493 Cpl W S Hammond
- 11875 Cpl W Pearmine
- 11117 Pte P Allison
- 11129 Pte A I Smith
- 9284 Pte J Gardner \*
- 10254 Pte A Purchell \*
- 12016 Pte J MacFarlane \*
- 15996 Pte E Robbins \*

On the 16th/17th September further awards were made:-

MC

- Capt J J Bartholomew (RAMC Attached)
- Lt JSE Burton (Transport Officer)
- Lt M Wykes
- 2nd Lt F A L Edwards (died of wounds 10/8/16)
- 6589 CSM T A Perkins

DCM

- 10573 CSM A Waite
- 10431 CSM J Faulkner
- 12810 Pte E T B Ward
- 17231 Pte S Breathwick

MM

- 10489 Pte W Cousins

10441 Pte J Garlick  
10563 L/Cpl A Hinstead  
15239 Cpl P Reynolds  
10286 Pte L Purvis  
10861 Sgt J Redford  
10563 L/Cpl C Goddard

Casualties for the action were:-

Officers Killed 2 (Lt C A Gold, Capt H Stewart),  
Died of wounds 2 (Capt P B Wace, 2nd Lt AEW Butler),  
wounded 3 (2nd Lt H M Brown), missing 7

Other ranks killed 2, wounded 212 missing 104

## German Counter-Attacks 8th August

The Battalion had been reduced to a total of 340 men, but even so they were ordered to take over the front line from the 7th Suffolks for the period from 6th to the 8th July. Then with great relief all round they were moved to Bois de Warnicourt where they could re-group and begin training again.

They had a further uneventful spell in the front line from the 21st July when they relieved the 1st KOR in the Auchonvillers sector. However their next spell in the front line NW of Pozier brought them into action once more.

It started just before 0300 on the 8th August with an intense bombardment during the course of which 2nd Lt H M Thurston, A Bidmead and A J Shipton were wounded. Around 0300 the Germans launched an attack on Ration Trench from both flanks. The attack on the right was made with Flammenwerfer (Flame throwers) and on the left with bombers. The German bombers managed to get into the British trenches but were quickly bombed out again by the Royal Berks' counter-attack parties.

The attack from the right with flamethrowers was made on the barricade which was part of the trench defences. Under cover of the smoke some Germans broke through but in a swift hand-to-hand engagement they were driven back beyond the barricade. 2nd Lt G M Hughes was seen to be wounded during the attack but was found to be missing. He was later reported as killed in action. 2nd Lt H Crowhurst was injured by enemy bombs.

At 0530 they tried again and this time succeeded in entering the British trench, capturing 50 yards and forcing the Royal Berks to withdraw. A fresh barricade was erected about 50 yards from the old one and they were able to hold the enemy there. While supervising the construction of the new barricade the Company Commander, 2nd Lt F A L Edwards was wounded and he succumbed to his wounds and died two days later. He died not knowing of the MC awarded to him for the earlier action at Ovillers. As the 12th Division History recounted:-

CSM A W Waite and Sgt J Faulkner showed considerable courage and initiative on both these occasions, rallying the men and organising counter attacks, thereby preventing further loss of trench and recapturing a portion of that lost.

A second attempt was made on the left at 0730 but this was easily repulsed.

Reading Mercury 1/9/1917:-

The battalion made a raid on the enemy's lines at daybreak and within the space of an hour we put down a heavy barrage which proved too much for the enemy. He retaliated, hotly, by bombarding us while we held the line. Then we were relieved. We had just previously commenced an attack on a German stronghold but were hung up on the brow of a hill, by their machine guns which were very active, whereupon we dug in. Lt C de V Hinde was awarded the Military Cross for what I consider was a great piece of Bravery, in fact I would go as far as to say that he saved the battalion. He was in charge of a party of men in an advanced position. Jumping out of this, he, with the others commenced firing at the German machine gunners with rifles, but he got wounded in the hand. In spite of this however, he carried on for several hours and the continuous firing had the effect of quietening the enemy's guns and so, in this way, the battalion was saved.

### 9th August 1916

There was further intense shelling the next day the 9th August but the situation had stabilised itself again with the Germans having captured 50 yards of trench with considerable losses on both sides.

Casualties for the two days included 128 other ranks on the 8th and 39 on the 9th. In addition on the 9th 2nd Lt R A Bance was killed and Lt C de V Hinde, 2nd Lts A G C Rice and H C Toogood were wounded.

### 10th September 1916

On the 10th September the Commander of VI Corps granted MMs to the following for their gallantry between the 7th and 9th August.

10506 Cpl H J Matthews  
10851 Pte T G Baker  
9309 L/Cpl G F Epsley  
10441 Pte J Garlick (bar)  
6101 Sgt W Francis  
10283 Pte F J Allen  
10555 Pte L W Perris  
19606 Cpl H W Hestor  
10363 L Cpl F Amor  
9872 L Cpl E Harwood  
10660 L Cpl G Bennett  
8730 Pte A Dobble  
11763 Pte F Pike  
11020 Pte A Clarke

## Further Actions

### 11th August - 27th September 1916

The 5th as part of 12th Division remained with III

Corps until the 27th September when they were transferred to XV Corps but still in Fourth Army under Rawlinson. Most of the time was spent in and out of the around Arras, however they did see a bit more action.

### 27th August 1916

On the 27th August at 2210 they were subjected to an intense bombardment, with small and medium sized aerial torpedoes between Hunter St and Hazebrouch St which they were holding. Several cannister bombs were thrown at the Lewis gun positions and there was a half hearted attack on the Berks which was easily beaten off. The next day another attack was launched by the Germans who succeeded in cutting two lanes through the British wire but they too were driven off without being able to penetrate to the British trenches.

The attack had forestalled a planned attack by the Royal Berks whereby a group of one officer and twelve other ranks would attack an enemy trench on the sunken road opposite Hunter St with the objective of inflicting losses on the enemy and gathering intelligence. Zero hour had been fixed for 2230 and during the afternoon the British artillery had cut the German wire in a barrage lasting from 1500 to 2000.

### 6th September 1916

When they were in trenches round Maison Allongee on the 6th September a similar aerial torpedo attack was launched however this came to nothing.

### 24th September 1916

On the night of the 23rd/24th September a raid was attempted on the enemy trenches. The raiding party was led by 2Lt A W Taylor and consisted of two officers and 36 other ranks. The attempt was timed for 21:00 but the start was delayed by a German patrol which had to be dealt with. They fled leaving their grenades in sandbags behind them. The attempt was renewed at 01:48 on the 24th. The intention was to cut through the enemy wire with a 30 ft torpedo. The torpedo was successfully fired but it did not cut the wire. Attempts to do the job by hand were unsuccessful, but a gap was made and the raiding party slipped through, only to be confronted by yet more wire. As they were attempting to cut this by hand they were discovered and fired upon so the party was withdrawn.

### 25th September 1916

The next night they tried again under 2Lt Taylor and this time the torpedo did cut the wire. The party went through the gap and found themselves in a crater in front of a trench parapet. No one was in sight so they lay in wait hoping to catch an enemy patrol. Eventually they were spotted by the Germans and fired on. 2Lt Taylor was killed and his deputy 2nd Lt R Cobb tried to

recover his body. However they were forced to withdraw once more. Later it was announced that the torpedo operator, 9376 L/Cpl A Cox and his Sergeant 8348 Sgt J Hackett had been awarded the Military Medal for their gallant conduct.

The 12th Division History noted that although the primary objectives had not been attained, some valuable lessons had been learned.

Our efforts at obtaining identifications had not met with success, but the fact was, that the German wire was anything from 20 to 50 yards broad, the front line only held by posts, the remainder of it being filled with wire, and the troops were located in the support line. On the other hand our activities which included at least one patrol from each brigade every night, had made us masters of no-mans-land, the result being that with the exception of the one on the 28th August which failed, no raid was ever carried out against our line. In addition the junior officers and other ranks received a most valuable training in night work, and great confidence was inspired.

The 12th Division and the 35th Brigade had a few further engagements during October but none involved the 5th Royal Berks directly, except for an attempt to capture Bayonet Trench on 18th October. However this was called off after the enemy launched a surprise heavy barrage just as the attack was due to get underway.

During the period the Battalion received several fresh drafts, mainly 300 other ranks from other Battalions of the Royal Berkshires.

## Sources

History of 12th Division pp 51-2, 67 and 78