

Section 236

The Somme

The 6th Battalion

In the Fourth Army

As part of 53rd Brigade they were under the control of Rawlinson's Fourth Army coming within XIII Corps. Their Division, the 18th was under the command of Major General F I Maxse who would end the war as Inspector of Training. His philosophy was that effective training was both necessary for success and would save lives. In a report he wrote in December 1916 he set out the following exhortation:-

Teach, drill and practice a definite form of attack so that every man shall know it thoroughly. On the basis of theory and knowledge common to all, any brigade, battalion or company commander varies his attack formation to suit any condition which may be peculiar to his front and to his objective. The reason for this system is that all ranks know at least one attack formation thoroughly. It can be varied according to circumstance and at short notice. [Baynes p150]

Throughout the preparation stage everyone was given detailed instruction as to what to expect and how to react when the battle came. As Ivor Maxse put it:

It is better to risk information leaking out through captured prisoners than to run the risk of ordering infantry over the parapet unacquainted with what they are expected to do or where they are to go. [Baynes p 151]

The Brigadier reminded the 6th Bn when he addressed them that the fewer prisoners taken, the more food there would be for them as it was going to be very difficult to get food up to the front line troops.

On the 27th June the Battalion took over the Brigade Front A2 (junction of Lothian St and Front Trench) to the junction of York Road and Trench A7/2.

Maxse was disposing his division in a novel way by having all three of his brigades, rather than two, attack in line. Each brigade would be spearheaded by two battalions and so six assault battalions would be launched to gain and hold the furthest objectives.

Other preparations included the digging of new 'departing trenches' parallel to the German trenches and within assaulting distance of them. New communication trenches were also dug from the rear so that troops could escape the view of the enemy as they crossed open ground.

Objectives

The 18th Division were located on the extreme right of

the British line close to its boundary with the French army. Ahead of them, and just to the right of the 6th's line of attack was the village of Montauban on the crest of a ridge. Beyond and directly ahead lay Caterpillar Wood and Caterpillar Valley which marked the limit of the planned advance on the first day of the battle.

The 6th were given three objectives for the first stage of the offensive:-

First - Pommiers Trench from point A2 c61.59 to its junction with Popoff Land. Also Pommiers Land from the junction with Popoff Trench to point A1 b85.15. Pommiers trench was a German reserve trench lying some 1000 yards from the British line.

Second - Montauban Alley from its junction with Loop Trench to its junction with the Montauban/Mametx road. The series of trenches from S26 c34.35 to Beetle Alley S25 d97.48 Montauban Alley was a further 1000 yards away from Pommiers trench.

Third - From Caterpillar Trench, about S26 a99.30 to point S26 a40.20. This would enable them to establish an advanced line overlooking Caterpillar Wood with good visibility of the German positions in Caterpillar Valley.

Duties were allocated as follows:-

Company Commanders

A Coy - Lt K R Traill
B Coy - Capt N B Hudson
C Coy - 2nd Lt N B Souper
D Coy - 2nd Lt H P Sadler

Snipers

12458 Pte A Hicken
10431 Pte William Burl
Pte Casey
16070 Pte Albert James Gosling
15389 Pte Frederick Tucker
Pte Alexander
Pte Hayman
36425 Pte R Pratt
Cpl Morgan
Cpl Wykes

Vickers Gunners

A Coy 17339 pte C Field & pte Embling
B Coy - 26354 pte F Ward & Pte Whittington
C Coy - 12681 Pte H A Clements & 12127 Pte R H Dickenson
D Coy - Pte Clarke & Pte Middleton

CQMS for Battalion HQ - Sgt Fox

Document collecting

- A Coy - Pte A Lynch
- B Coy - 16383 Pte C Thatcher
- C Coy - 16304 Pte E Spiers
- D Coy - 12561 Pte Calcott

The document collecting duty required them to search German dug outs, as they were taken, for documents. Especially they had to search dead bodies, with priority given to officers. All documents found had to be sent to 18 Division Collecting station near Billon Farm. [WD6]

The Bombardment

The allied bombardment had started on 24th June and was to last a week. In sharp contrast to what happened further north the bombardment was reasonably successful, destroying the German wire and doing considerable damage to the trench defences. Needless to say the Germans were shooting back. The dug outs proved quite inadequate and 6 men were killed and 72 wounded before the offensive began.

Writing to his father in Newbury a young officer of the Berkshires described the bombardment.

Saturday June 24th was the opening day of the bombardment, which lasted continuously for seven days. For three days of the bombardment we were behind the lines, and out of reach of the Boche guns, but for four days we had to stick not only the sound of our guns but also the enemy's retaliation. Such a bombardment as our artillery gave them has probably not been equalled even in this war. All the accumulated mass of big guns and shells, of Trench Mortars and shrapnell, which has been turned out of our factories during the last year, was turned on the enemy. For seven days without rest we rained shell and shrapnell on the enemy's trenches, which were completely smashed up along the whole front.

The enemy's retaliation was feeble, but he shifted his guns back and gave us rather a hot time in the front line - shells falling actually in our trenches and causing a great many casualties. Shells are vey bad for the heart, and, as you can imagine, my nerves are in a contibual state of tension during all the preliminary bombardment. A great many men in my trench were buried by the shells but we managed to dig them out again. Sleep of course, was out of the question, and I have had no continuous sleep for over a week. I have simply snatched an hour or so at intervals in the bombardment.

While the bombardment was in progress we made raids all along the front and found the enemy was completely demoralised, being only too glad to give themselves up. They even came to our lines and gave themselves up, but a great many were shot. On the last day of the bombardment our raiding parties discovered that the enemy had retired to his third line in many parts and was withdrawing his guns as quickly as possible. The enemy has nothing to equal our trench mortar guns. We saw Germans, literally, blown up into the air by them. [RS 7/16]

During the 6-day bombardment Private Henwood was

engaged on carrying supplies up to the front line. By day they moved up the 60 lb trench mortars and at night they carried up rations and ammunition as well as aerial torpedoes which he described as "*the size of orange boxes*" [ref 74-Henwood]

On the night before the offensive was due to start, eight men of the 6th Battalion were sharing a dug out and trying to get some rest. Two of them, both from Stratford in London, were on their hands and knees trying to boil a mess tin of water to make tea. They were using lighted grease and pieces of dry sandbags as fuel. Just as the water began to boil a German shell hit the side of the dug-out and the whole place was obscured by smoke and dust. One of the tea makers noticed the overturned mess tin and cried '*Blimey! thats done it - the waters spilled*' His mate lying on his back with his face covered in blood and dirt held up his clenched right hand triumphantly '*S'all right Bill, I ain't put the tea and sugar in yet!*' [Told by Corp J Russ of Ilford Essex, from 'On the Western Front' by John Laffin 1989]

The men's real priorities were brought out where food was concerned. Pte Fred Henwood (19637) noted

'One or two of our dugouts had been smashed in and some men buried and had to be dug out, some dead. The worst part of all was our old cook who was killed whilst attending to our food. A shell burst close by and a piece passed through his side and out the other side.'

Pte Gosling noted

On the 26th June I was back in the line as an ammunition carrier. On the 29th June while sitting in a trench with some pals, a shell burst in the trench alongside of us, but by a miracle only one was slightly wounded. We moved back to Carnoy but several of my mates were killed by a shell landing over the trench in which we were lying

Capt R A Rochford, Adjutant to the battalion wrote in a memoir contributed to the regimental history about his impressions of the days immediately before the attack:-

This period of holding the line was the most extraordinary one imaginable. Throughout the day it was quite safe to walk about the front line, sit up on the trenches, look over the German line and watch the shelling without any fear of being sniped at. The country in front of our barbed wire appeared absolutely devoid of German life; the German guns only replied at night and then replied to very good effect. Rifleshot in the daytime was an unheard-of thing.

At the last minute command of A Coy was given to 2nd Lt T A Collot. The Battalion was ready for action under its Commanding Officer Lt Col B G Clay and its Adjutant Capt R A Rochford. The total attacking strength of the Battalion was 20 Officers (the maximum permitted) and 656 other ranks. The 8th Norfolks who were their Brigade companions on their right were over 200 men stronger with 896 other ranks.

During this stage there were the following casualties:-

29th June Killed 1, Wounded 30

30th June Killed 5, Wounded 42

The Attack at Montauban July 1st 1916

At 0300 on the 1st July the Battalion moved into its assembly positions. They were very crowded in the trenches but fortunately the losses from enemy shells were less than might have been expected. It had been arranged that each man would be given hot tea or soup and a bully beef sandwich up to an hour before the attack. They were also instructed not to cheer when they left their lines so as not to let the Germans know they were coming.

Each man was to carry his rifle and equipment, without his pack but with 170 rounds of ammunition, a haversack containing two tins of meat, eight hard biscuits and a grocery ration, a waterproof sheet, a jersey, two Mills bombs, two empty sandbags and two smoke helmets. Officers had to change into other ranks uniform so as to make them less of a target for German snipers.

At 0727 the first two waves of the leading companies under Capt S Fenner and Capt R Litten went over the parapet and formed up in front of the trenches.

The officer from Newbury continued his account

The last two hours of the bombardment were terrific: the infantry were massed in the trenches awaiting the moment for the advance. After the nerve racking days we had just had, we were very glad to get over the top and I think most of us would have gone mad when we did get over. [RS 7/16]

The Battalion were in front of Mine Trench at the west end of which was Casino Point, a German Machine Gun nest. A 5000 lb. British mine was exploded under this at 0728 and a machine gun which had been firing atop the mine was blown up. The falling debris caused slight loss among the 6th, but on the other hand as they advanced the Germans came forward with hands up to surrender. Capt RA Rochford, the adjutant described the incident as follows:

The machine guns at Casino Point were doing quite a bit of damage when suddenly there was a blinding flash, the whole of the earth seemed to shake and the mine went up. The earth was filled with huge lumps of earth, Germans, machine guns, baulks of wood, concrete emplacements and all the debris of the strong point itself. One man was killed by a sphere of earth five feet in diameter which fell on him. the crater was 40ft deep and quite 30 yards across.'

Private Henwood had a slightly different view

"Our chaps were glad when the time came to make the attack, they even asked the officers to let them go over before it was time to attack."

When the attack opened

"The Huns had a great surprise, we gave him a taste of our gas about half an hour before the attack. We hurried from the dug-outs in the village, up to the assembly trenches. Just as it was breaking daylight we had our rum and put our gas masks on. We had orders to fix

bayonets. We were ordered to stand on the fire step and told we were going to send a mine up before our men took the German front line. Our men were so mad to get there they rushed forward. One of our Company being well in front got to the German parapet and were just landing in the trench when the mine went up and blew most of the Company up with it. Just as this happened we were ordered to go over the top. Just as we did a German machine gun, which had been overlooked by the first wave or two, tried to stop us supporting the other companies. It couldn't be done. We kept going forward, but a lot of our men kept dropping wounded or killed. I got to the German Front Line as soon as possible to find four of us young chaps faced with six big Germans, but by what I could see, they did not mean to fight as all but one, who was an officer, did not have any arms and we had them all covered with our rifles. [ref74 Henwood]

Private Gosling was carrying supplies

"On the 1st July at 0700 the guns were very busy. It was an ideal day for the attack, a light fog mingling with the smoke screen. At 0730 we had the order to advance. At the front line I had the sad experience of seeing two mates in front of me fall, but I still carried on, passing a good many wounded men on the way. After dodging the shells I reached the German front line safely. Here we were able to get a little lower, although the trenches had been terribly knocked about and a good many German dead were lying about. After we had been called together we started out for our objective 'Pommiers Redoubt'. This was where we were to leave our SAA and bombs, but, on arriving, volunteers were called for to take the ammunition and bombs to the boys in the front trench. I went with some more pals but found everything fairly quiet. The boys were quite content with their morning's work, having taken five lines of trenches and a redoubt in three hours. We were ordered to hang on till the next night so we all took our place to ward off any counter-attack. By this time he had got the range of our position and was shelling them rather heavily, but we got out the next day and returned to Carnoy having carried food and water to the front area quite safely. [ref 16]

The second wave advanced at 0732 and the third moved forward at 0735. Mine trench was captured by the Berkshires and Norfolks in the first rush. By 0750 the Battalion had taken Bund Support, had reached Pommiers Trench and was bombing up Popoff Lane. Capt Litten was killed and B Coy who were leading in the left had no officers remaining as Capt V G McArthur and Capt H G F Longhurst were wounded. 2nd Lt G M Courage was sent to take command. A Coy were little better off: Capt Fenner was still OK but Lt K R Traill and 2nd Lt Collott had been killed. The bombers of D Coy started their attack up Popoff Lane and the Vickers gun teams were sent up to get into position near the junction of Popoff Lane and Pommiers Trench

Sergeant W Lambourne of C Coy later recounted his adventures to the Berkshire Chronicle

The advance was made at 0730 on Saturday. For several days prior to this there had been a heavy bombardment on both sides during which the Berks lost a number of men. A few minutes before the attack the Berks blew up a mine and, ably led by Capt McArthur, advanced. The coolness of the men was remarkable, they smoked

cigarettes and whistled and their demeanour generally didn't give one the impression that they were about to make an assault on the enemy's position.

The first line of the German trenches was taken with comparative ease. The Germans were there in fairly large numbers. Many were killed or surrendered. The 2nd and 3rd lines were vacant and it was between the 3rd and 4th lines that we lost most of our officers and men. However after about half an hour's desperate fighting we were successful in capturing the position. The Machine Gun fire from the enemy on both sides of us was deadly and to have taken the line, in so short a time really was a splendid bit of work. [BC 14/7/16]

Sergeant Lambourne was wounded but his story was taken up by Private Redfern of B Coy.

The Germans were in very strong numbers in the support line and outnumbered the Berkshires and the other two battalions fighting with them. When we got into their trench they would not face the bayonet and took to their heels. But few escaped. Several of the Berkshires then got joined up with the Bedfordshires and we made a dash for the 5th line. However when we got there we found the Germans had retired. Later they made a counter attack. A sergeant who was with the Bedfordshires gave the signal for us to mount the parapet. We did so and after a short but sharp tussle the enemy was repulsed. [BC14/7/16]

By 0930 Pommiers Redoubt was taken and the Battalion were starting the advance to Montauban Alley. A Coy had moved in a succession of bombing posts up Loop Trench with Lewis guns to protect their flank. This had been an objective of the 8th Norfolks on the right who had encountered stiff opposition and had not advanced to their objective leaving the 6th Berkshire's flank very exposed. On the left the Bedfords were keeping in touch.

The young officer from Newbury continues his story:

Our battalion acquitted itself splendidly, and took the enemy's trenches in great style. When we got to the enemy's second line I had a curious accident which probably saved my life. My platoon was to have stopped at the enemy's second line and consolidated, but in the excitement we scarcely noticed where we had got to and, when the wave in front of me got into the third trench, we found ourselves just behind them and 200 yards beyond where we should have stopped. It was death to go back so I had to take refuge in a shell crater where we had to stop for two hours. There were about six of us bunched together in it. Several times we tried to get out and crawl along but an enemy machine gun was trained on us at once and two men who crawled out by my side were hit. We decided it was death to go on as the enemy had evidently spotted us getting into the shell crater, so the only thing to do was to wait till the machine gun was put out of action which took nearly two hours

When it stopped firing for some time we crawled out and made our way into a communication trench from which we hurried up to find our company. but discovered it had lost heavily by enfiladed fire from the same gun as had been firing at us. Only a very few in my platoon were left and in the whole company not many. Never I should think has a machine gun done so much damage in the same time as this single gun of the Germans. It was established in a very strong position commanding a wide

field of view. A bombing party of ours eventually closed with it and put it out of action.

By 1050 the Norfolks were still held up at Back Trench and Boche Trench. By 1515 they were still in touch but not advancing and it was not until 1745 that Loop Trench could be handed over to the Norfolks so that they could begin to bomb Caterpillar Trench.

At 1215 bombing attacks on Montauban Alley were progressing well and half the line had been taken. The Berkshire's attack on Loop Trench, leading northward from the Loop had cleared it as far as its junction with the Montauban/Mametz road.

At 1330 the Norfolks still had not come up on the Berkshire's right and Captain Fenner with about 50 men was holding Loop Trench at the point where it crossed the road.

At 1520 the 10th Essex sent some bombers up to support the Berkshires and these were sent up Montauban Alley which helped the advance considerably.

In the afternoon fighting became very disconnected, consisting of bombing attacks supported by mortars rather than of successive waves of riflemen. Progress was slow, a particular source of difficulty being a German sniper with an automatic rifle. Attempts were made to bomb him but without success. Lt Rushton of the Brigade Mortar Battery tried to shoot him with his revolver but was himself killed. Thereupon 2nd Lt Saye of the 6th Royal Berks went out with a rifle and was fatally wounded. CSM Sayer then crawled along the top edge of the trench and fired at the sniper at the same time as the latter fired at him. the sniper was killed but CSM Sayer was severely wounded himself. It was not until 1645 when mortars had been brought up into Montauban Alley that the Germans retired and the position could be consolidated.

At 1830 the final objective was reached and consolidation commenced. Consolidation continued on the 2nd July until 1600 when the Battalion were relieved by the 8th Suffolks and were able to return to Carnoy.

Pte Henwood noted

'we took one and a half miles of ground that day. I fell asleep in the Front Line with shells bursting round me until I was kicked in the pants by the sergeant and told to take two men with me and bury a dead German lying in our trench. So we put him in a shell hole and just as we were going to put some soil on him a shell went into the hole blowing him sky high' Next day I went with the sergeant and six more men to see if the Germans had occupied their front line. As we were going down one of their trenches they opened up with machine gun fire [ref 18]

The young officer from Newbury concluded his account:-

The Huns offered strong resistance only in their third line, the first two lines were taken easily, most of the enemy who were left throwing up their hands. The Berkshires

obtained their objective swiftly, in spite of the heavy cost. We hoped to be relieved at once, owing to our heavy losses, when we had obtained our objectives, but the General decided that we must hold the position for one day against counter attacks: so we consolidated and established strong points. The enemy were too demoralised to counter attack, although his artillery made us uncomfortable for some time. But our guns shifted up and soon got to work again, making the enemy withdraw still further. We could see him hurrying back his guns with great speed. We captured many stray Germans hidden away in dug-outs and took many souvenirs - rifles and helmets etc. I will not accuse the Germans of being absolute cowards, but they must have been so completely demoralised by our artillery bombardment that they had no power of resistance.

To come down to details of casualties. Of the five officers of my company who went over I am the only one left. Two were killed instantly, one badly wounded and one, our captain wounded in the ankle. Of the officers in the battalion who went over few came through unhurt. It can only be by a miracle that the rest of us got through. However our battalion has done it and done it gloriously. We have received the thanks and congratulations, not only of our Divisional General but of General [Rawlinson] the army commander.

Retrospect of the 1st July

The enemy had been driven back about 2500 yards, an exceptional achievement matched only by units of the 30th Division and the French 6th army both on the 18th Division's right. In congratulation Lt Gen W N Congreve commanding XIII Corps sent the following message to 18th Division.:

Please convey to all ranks intense appreciation of their splendid fighting which has attained all asked of them and resulted in heavy losses to the enemy.

Some of the reasons for the success of the operation were identified by Captain Fenner writing as CO in the Battalion Diary on 30th July 1916:

The success of this operation was due to the thorough grounding everyone had in his work. The whole scheme had been explained to the men and even when the majority of the officers had been knocked out, the NCOs and men carried on according to programme. Every man knew the ground from the excellent maps that were received and this assisted in the successful attainment of the objectives

The Brigade Commander, Brig-Gen H W Higginson subsequently set out in the Brigade diary his reasons which included: careful preparation of the ground from which the attack was launched, previous training over trenches which were an exact facsimile of the German trenches, artillery preparation and wire cutting and the co-operation of the artillery during the attack.

Reflecting on the first day's attack General Maxse wrote in a report dated 18th August:-

It is of interest to note that the left battalion of the centre brigade [ie the 6th Royal Berkshires] reached Pommiers Trench in less than 20 minutes, whereas the right battalion [ie the 8th Norfolks] reached the same line

several hours later. Both battalions encountered stout opposition and both fought hard and suffered heavy casualties, but of the two I should say that the one on the left which went quicker had the severer task. The quick moving battalion followed its barrage close up; the slower battalion lost touch with its barrage in 10 minutes. This was owing to the different German dispositions in the two localities.

The 35th Brigade Commander Brigadier General H W Higginson also had a story to tell about the day after the battle. On 2nd July he was returning to Montauban when he saw a group of men collected around a dug-out from which smoke was issuing. They were trying to bomb out a German who had been sniping from there for 24 hours and had wounded three men in the legs as they passed. There was only one entrance to the dug-out but smoke bombs and grenades thrown in had no effect. On the following day the entrance was blown in and the German was left to die of starvation or thirst. It was assumed that he had constructed a barricade across the dug-out behind which he could take refuge when bombs were thrown. General Maxse who included this incident in his report of 18th August, saw it as evidence that the Germans were not showing signs of demoralisation after the British advance.

When the volume of the Official British History which covered the engagement was being compiled after the war, its author Brig-Gen Sir James Edmonds sent drafts for comment to officers who had taken part. One of his correspondents, M F Grove-White wrote on 10th January 1931 that in his opinion, formed at the time:

Extreme care was taken to foresee and provide for every possible eventuality and not to rely solely on a set piece attack worked out according to a programme ... great attention was paid in 18th Division to training in open warfare methods, ie troops working forward by fire and manoeuvre without artillery support.

Amplification of Higginson's praise of the artillery can be found in a letter received at Fourth Army Headquarters from the General Officer Commanding XIII Corps drawing attention to the excellent services rendered by French artillery both in the preliminary bombardments and in counter battery work.

For the 6th casualties were:-

Officers Killed 7 (Capt R Litten, Lt K R Traill, 2Lt E Bayley, 2Lt T A Collot, 2Lt G M Courage, 2Lt C K Howe, 2Lt N B Souper), Wounded 5 (Capt H G F Longhurst, Capt V G McArthur, 2Lt J V McLean, 2Lt G W H Nicholson, 2Lt L H Saye)

Other ranks Killed 71, Wounded 254, Missing 11

Respite - 2nd to 18th July

After being relieved by the 8th Suffolks the Battalion moved to Carnoy where they remained until the 7th July

resting and clearing the battlefield.

Pte Gosling gave his account '

We were ordered to hang on until the next night (the 2nd) so we all took our places to ward off a counter attack ... but we got out next day and returned to Carnoy ... the next day we were formed into burial parties. I was in charge of our party and it fell to my lot to have to bury my own section - men that I had served with since joining the Battalion.'

On the 8th July 1916 the Battalion moved back to shelters in Grovetown and Bray, returning to the Front on the 12th.

After they were relieved Private Henwood wrote-

We went into a wood close by and put up there to have dinner. We stayed there for two and a half hours then marched back to Corbie where we stayed for two days. We had a very good time there - eggs, cake, oranges, chocolate etc. Then to Bray in old broken down houses. [ref 18]

Capt Ackroyd was at last able to write to his daughter Ursula again:-

The battalion I am with did splendidly and now am with them a few miles to recruit and refit. A few days ago where we now are was under constant fire but now is as safe as Royston. Although I'm ...the guns always firing and everywhere are firing .. balloons watching the enemy.

.. of the final day's great fights and our battalion was in the front line.

I can tell you I was very proud of the officers and men I have known so long.

Now we are on what a few days ago was a bare hillside, nothing but mud - now covered with funny little shelters against the wind and rain and we are all very happy and contented, sleeping on the ground while at last the sun shines and it does not rain.

You would be so interested to see it all with funny little cages for the German prisoners to stay in for a few hours before leaving for England.

On the 13th the Battalion moved to Montauban to relieve the Camerons of 21st Brigade. Private Thomas Alfred Jennings joined the 6th Berks as a Lewis Gunner in 'B' Company, 2 Platoon on the 12th July from the 14th Gloucesters. He wrote

'On the 13th July we marched from Trigger Valley to Bernafey Wood passing Montauban Farm and halted at the edge of a small wood where a dump had been established. Took ammunition and stores across 1000 yards of open ground, through field guns and across a sunken road till we reached the edge of Delville Wood. It was nearing dusk and Jerry thought it was time to put an end to all this activity, and well he did. Hell was let loose; this was my baptism of fire. The German bombardment of 5.9s and larger shells came screaming over and fell all around us. ... I tagged along with an experienced soldier and ran. When a new shell hole was created we ran and jumped into it and kept on doing this till we reached the place we had started from; Bernafey Wood. It was now dark and we had a slit trench to shelter in. To crouch or lie down was the best cover and this I did and fell fast

asleep.

At 0600 on the 14th the Battalion moved back to Trigger Wood and were heavily shelled with 'tear' shells during the withdrawal. Jennings reported:

On the morning of the 14th we started to march back to Company HQ at Trigger Valley led by Capt AH Hudson. Jerry sent over a small anti-personnel shell, a splinter of which tore through the Captain's puttees and entered his calf.'

German shells were of many types, but two of the more memorable ones were the "Johnson" and the "Minnie". The Johnson was the standard 5.9 inch (15 cm) shell which weighed in at 100 lbs. They were referred to as 'coal boxes' or 'Johnsons' (after Jack Johnson the boxer) on account of the black smoke they gave off on landing. The 'Minnie' or 'Minnenwerfer' was made from a steel drum packed with High Explosive and scrap iron. It was fired from a mortar gun and sailed 100 feet or so in the air trailing a lighted fuse. They were supposed to explode above the trench and the effect could be devastating. A trench would be blasted out of existence, men would simply disappear or were cut apart by flying shrapnel and buried alive

Plugging the Gap

The South African Brigade which was part of 9th (Scottish) Division had been forced out of the northern part of the village and of most of Delville Wood in a series of German counter attacks which had started at 0800 on 18th July with a colossal bombardment which went on for 7 hours reducing the wood to a shambles of splintered trees and churned up earth. At 1530 an assault was launched by fresh German troops which drove the South Africans back into the southwest corner of the wood. . The holding of this was considered so vital that an extra brigade was called up and 53rd Brigade were selected to assist.

Thus late on the 18th July the Battalion, now reduced in strength to 19 officers and 401 other ranks, moved from its position at Trigger Wood, south of Carnoy, to a bivouac on the north slope of Rail Valley, at Tallus Boise. They and the rest of 53rd Brigade were temporarily under the orders of 9th (Scottish) Division to assist in the recapture of the rest of Longueval village and Delville Wood.

As the planned British counter-attack was in response to a desperate situation there was not enough time to plan the action properly nor to train or brief the troops. It was not until 0030 on the 19th that the staff gave the plans to the Brigadier and the Royal Berkshires were not altered until 0330. The result was what Brig Gen Higginson of the 53rd described later as *'the graveyard of my brigade'* - *'a triumph of individual bravery and resource - particularly on the part of Non-commissioned officers'*. It was in no other way a triumph [Baynes p147]

The Attack of July 19th, Delville Wood

The general plan of attack was for the 8th Norfolks to lead and clear the southern portion of Delville Wood from its western edge. When this had been done the 10th Essex on the right and the 6th Berks on the left would form up in the southern portion of the wood and proceed to the clearance of the northern half. At the same time the 8th Suffolks on the left of the Berkshires would clear the northern part of Longueval village.

The Berkshires arrived in the valley at 0330 and the Norfolks announced that zero hour would be 0615 on the 19th July. At 0540 the Norfolks commenced to move off towards Longueval which was about a mile away. At 0705 13 Platoon, 'D' Company of the 6th Berks moved off as leading platoon of the brigade. The Norfolks had not yet attacked because of difficulties they had encountered in assembling their troops. Owing to the long delay the 6th Battalion suffered many casualties from enemy shells. Altogether the Battalion lost 34 men killed before the outskirts of the village of Longueval was reached at 0910. Then their attack had to be made without artillery support. Progress had been further hindered by troops coming back from Longueval and blocking the road. At Longueval they waited for the signal from the Norfolks that they could go ahead.

Capt Rochford described this move up to Longueval in his memoir:-

The four battalions were sent up through a defile [the sunken road into Longueval] in broad daylight, with German balloons up, and most of the battalion had to halt for quite a considerable period in the sunken road, where they were exposed to shelling from three sides. Every gun that the Germans could get turned on to the road opened fire and I have never seen a short stretch of road with so many casualties on it as the piece leading into Longueval village.

At 1140 the Norfolks reported that the southern portion of the wood was clear. The Berks moved on to this southern portion which they found to be far from completely cleared. At 1155 they were in position in the southern part of the wood with the 10th Essex on their right. The Battalion was very weak owing to heavy losses from shellfire. A machine gun opened up on the leading platoons of 'D' Company from the northwest corner of the south of the wood.

Private Jennings gave a much fuller report:-

'The brigade moved forward to re-capture the southern portion of Delville Wood after the South Africans had been forced out of it. following two days of action under appalling shell fire. There was only one entrance into the wood on the south side and the way from Longueval to this entrance was under direct machine gun fire. The 8th Norfolks went in first then the 10th Essex and 6th Berks in the centre. It is astonishing that, in spite of the enemy barrage of HEs, we went in in columns of four. It seemed ages before the order to thin out in extended order was given. We now passed the field gunners who were

stripped to the waist and gained the cover of the sunken road. We stopped for a while, then went on a yard or so, then stopped again and so on. It seemed such slow progress. It must be that "A" Company in front was finding it difficult to push forward. As we crouched against the bank there came out of the blue a terrific explosion. When everything had cleared I saw two dead soldiers in front of me and a dozen or so soldiers were crying and staggering about with shell shock. We moved on again and reached a communication trench running alongside the road with a wood the other side. It still seemed slow progress and as we made our way along the trench shrapnell pegged us down. As Capt Hudson was talking to the RSM, the German sniper saw them, killed the RSM and put a bullet through the Captain's tin hat.

Slow progress was made again along the trench with the dead and dying all around. We moved on again and at last came to the end of the trench. It ended by the side of the road and at the other side was the wood. Our Captain was there to give us the signal when to go. "*Follow your sergeant -- GO!*" The sergeant shot across the road as if from a gun, each man ran singly under withering machine gun fire and shelling. I did not see a single man falter.

Captain Hudson followed suit but lost the sergeant and myself in the wood. I wandered around for a moment or so and then dived into a shell hole. A couple of our lads appeared and asked me what I was doing. I got out of the hole and we set off in the direction we thought we should go. With a bit of luck we ran into a platoon of soldiers who turned out to be South Africans (one had fought against us in the Boer War). They indicated to us where they thought our Company was. We eventually found our Company at the edge of the wood.

The Commanding Officer arranged for a fresh artillery bombardment to last from 1300 to 1330. At 1330 the field gun barrage began to lift towards the northern edge of Delville Wood, but at first heavies were still falling short and some of the field gun shrapnel also burst short. The Battalion suffered casualties from both. However at 1330 the Berkshires began their move northward.

Also at 13:30 the Germans brought a heavy barrage down on the Princes St Line and opened up with machine guns on the advancing troops. Princes St was a ride through the wood running roughly east west and dividing it into two. D Company were unable to advance owing to Machine Gun fire from a house on their left. C and B advanced 50 yards but suffered heavy casualties and were finally forced to drop back to the Princess St Line. At 13:50 A B And C Coys withdrew a further 80 yards south. The line was held by 240 rifles, 6 Lewis guns and 4 Vickers guns, all that remained of the weak Battalion of the night before. At 1415 they were ordered to consolidate so at 15:05 four machine guns under 2nd Lt Gilbert were sent into the line that the Berkshires proposed to hold. By 15:30 a line running some 120 yards south of Princes St had been established and this line was held, despite numerous counter attacks until the Berkshires and the Norfolks were relieved at 02:00 on 21st July.

The South Africans could see what was happening as the RFA shells were falling short oand dropping on the

Royal Berks. One of their commander sent an urgent message:

At 15h20 Thackeray complained about the British artillery firing short:

Very urgent. To army officers on left or South end of B [Buchanan] Trench. Inform RFA [Royal Field Artillery] urgent that . . . barrage in front of Buchanan trench is short. A number of shells bursting in Buchanan Trench and amongst Royal Berks [i.e. men of the Royal Berkshire Regiment] in front i.e. East of it, causing them to retire on my line of BT [Buchanan Trench]. Five minutes later Thackeray received a message from Maj J.S. Drew, Brigade Major of the 26th Brigade, which appeared to answer his prayers: [TX01716]

Captain Hudson wrote to the father of 2nd Lt Henry Teed at the end of August:-

It is my very painful duty to have to write and inform you that your son is missing and I am afraid there is every reason to believe he is killed. Your boy who had been a transport officer up to July 15th came to my company as a platoon commander when our proper transport officer returned to the battalion from hospital. On the morning of July 17th we went into action at a certain wood [Delville Wood] which has been mentioned a lot lately and at about 3.30 pm I saw your boy lead off his platoon against the enemy in the wood. Some of his platoon came back but I can get no information at all from them save that one man told me (I am afraid this all seems very cruel, but I think you would like me to say all I can) that he had seen an officers body lying in the wood wearing riding breeches and stocking puttees and these I know were the clothes your boy was wearing. There is only one piece of hope that I think I can offer you and that is that no one saw him killed, but in a wood that means very little. We have come back 30 miles from the scene of the action now. From dawn on the 17th until 3.30 pm your boy was with me and showed great coolness under very trying conditions. At 3.30 pm he led his platoon through the wood on the right of the company, while I took the left. I did not see him any more. I cannot say how much I sympathise with you. To have your boy reported missing is worse I think than anything. All I can hope is that you may have heard something that I have not. This I can say that although your boy had only been in my company for two days, I saw in him during the action a fearless and courageous man whom I felt I could trust."It is my very painful duty to have to write and inform you that your son is missing and I am afraid there is every reason to believe he is killed. Your boy who had been a transport officer up to July 16th came to my company as a platoon commander when our proper transport officer returned to the battalion from hospital. On the morning of July 17th we went into action at a certain wood which has been mentioned a lot lately and at about 3.30 pm I saw your boy lead off his platoon against the enemy in the wood. Some of his platoon came back but I can get no information at all from them save that one man told me (I am afraid this all seems very cruel, but I think you would like me to say all I can) that he had seen an officers body lying in the wood wearing riding breeches and stocking puttees and these I know were the clothes your boy was wearing. There is only one piece of hope that I think I can offer you and that is that no one saw him killed, but in a wood that means very little. We have come back 30 miles from the scene of the action now. From dawn on the 17th until 3.30 pm your

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Stretcher bearer Walter Ernest Brill was helping to carry a wounded man to the rear when a shell struck the stretcher and he was killed instantly [RS 2/9/16]

At 1700 all four battalions were ordered to dig in where they were. Pte Jennings noted

The wood was littered with hundreds of wounded and dying men, South African, British and German. There was great difficulty with water as the only well was near where the enemy was strongest. We received no food supplies the whole time we were in the wood. The air was thick with the horrible stench from dead bodies and the pungent odour of gas. The 'Devils' Wood' was truly a terrible place.

At 2140 2nd Lt G C Hollis arrived with details of the arrangements for the relief of the Berkshires by the Royal Welsh Fusiliers starting at dawn the next day. Almost immediately after he arrived the Germans opened up a counter-attack on the left edge of the wood and into the village which was repulsed.

Pte Jennings:

Nightfall came and Sergeant Bygraves. one of our senior NCOs, crept over to a severely wounded German prisoner to give him a drink of water. That poor Jerry had been propped up against a tree for 30 hours or more. A one-armed Guards Captain from Brigade, who had come down to see what was happening, saw the German prisoner and told me to "*Shoot the bastard*" as he walked past. I thought "*You have a gun - you shoot him if you want to*" I did not do it and later the stretcher bearers took him. Although it was not put in writing all the Divisions were told not to take prisoners as it was difficult enough to get food up for our own men.

A second counter attack came at 0130 on the 20th when the Germans assaulted the western edge of Princess St and the southern portion of the village. Helped by the newly arriving Royal Welsh Fusiliers this was repulsed but at 0230 tragedy struck when the Welsh, against advice, insisted on pressing on with their attack, only to get caught in cross fire from the South Africans.

It was not until 0200 the following day (21st July) that the handover to the 11th Royal Welsh Fusiliers could be completed and by 0600 the Battalion had arrived at Grovetown.

Pte Jennings was looking forward to something to eat:-

During the night of the 21st/22nd we had orders to withdraw as another regiment was taking over. It is still a miracle that we didn't shoot each other'. We arrived back at the sunken road and fell in to march back. We carried on a bit further and the most welcome sight awaited us.

The cooks by their food kitchens were drawn up ready to dish out our breakfast of fried bread and slices of bread dipped in the oily pans. "Come and get your dip lads" - but to top the lot were dixies of tea laced with our rum issue for all the lads who went up.

Private Gosling noted:

'They (the Royal Welsh Fusiliers) still had other work to do in taking Delville Wood, one of the hottest places you can imagine. We lost a good many men, especially were the casualties heaviest amongst the new draft.'

Casualties were:-

Officers Killed 3 (2Lt W V Burgess, 2Lt H P Sadler, and 2nd Lt C J Fuller who died from his wounds), wounded 4 (Capt A H Hudson, 2Lt J N Richardson, 2Lt A J Fox and 2Lt C H Hunt), missing 1 (2Lt S R Collier)

Other ranks Killed 27, wounded 127, missing 30

Commenting on the drafts of the official history in 1933 R A Chell of the 10th Essex was highly critical of the whole episode:

The 53rd Brigade was lent to another Division in a foolishly precipitate manner. No thought was given to the question of breakfasts on the 19th. The infantry plan of attack was poor and its execution, as conceived, impossible. Forward movement and deployment of a whole brigade was carried out in daylight and under close terrestrial observation, machine gun and rifle fire and enfilade artillery fire.

In a report written after the operation, the Brigade Commander enumerated the reasons as he saw them for the failure of the Brigade to take its objectives. Among them were:-

- insufficient time for preparation and reconnaissance
- troops having to move up in daylight and being exposed to enemy fire
- congestion caused by reliefs going on when attacking battalions were moving up.
- the delay in the start of the attack
- commanders and troops not being trained to carry out difficult tasks at short notice.
- difficulties of communication between brigade and battalions.

These perceived weaknesses contrast sharply with the acknowledged strengths of 18 Division's set piece operation on 1st July. On 19th July a quickly improvised small-scale attack failed in conditions which perhaps demanded too much of command as well as of the men. A remarkably frank telephone message was received at Haig's headquarters at 07:50 on 19th July stating that Fourth Army did not know who was in command either at Longueval or at Montauban and neither did XIII Corps. All wires appeared to be cut and the only communication possible was by runner. Haig's somewhat starchy response was:-

I do not think this indicates sufficient method. In order to

win, the first essential is to organise a sound system of command.

Into Reserve 27th July to 26th September 1916

There was very little left of the Battalion as it existed before before being thrown into the Battle of the Somme. Because of the need to reconstitute the battalion, virtually from scratch, it could not be used again in the Somme campaign other than in a supporting role. What was left was sent to the far back areas to recoup. On the 24th they left by train for Blaringehen and by the 28th they were at no 1 camp in Sercus.

Pte Jennings :-

The Battalion moved from Albert via Estaires and Armentieres to Bailleul. What a contrast: not a single house damaged and all the inhabitants going about their business in a normal fashion. The shops were open for trade in spite of the fact that they were only three miles behind the front line. August was spent in a quiet neighbourhood of Flanders.

Capt Ackroyd had another opportunity to write to his daughter:-

I do so wish that I could come over to see you but I am afraid that it is not likely that I shall get home for some time. Woulnt it be jolly when father comes home for good and there is no more war, though I am afraid you and I will not be able to go any more rides together in the motor because after this war no one will be able to keep motors I expect.

I am now in such a nice quiet country place where you would hardly believe there was a war at all except that in the far distance we can hear the guns. I dont suppose we shall stay here very long but shall soon go up nearer those same guns and here them louder. But you know we get as used to hearing banging noises as you are now to hearing the sea at night so it does not worry us at all.

It is only when the noises come and bang very close that it is unpleasant and then well it is very nasty but they wont hurt your daddy.

On the 14th August near Ballieul, the Battalion was inspected by HM The King whilst training at taking and consolidating a trench. On the 7th September the Battalion received a draft of 399 other ranks from Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire. They were numbered 36222-36521 (Herts) and 36522-36621 (Cambs) Also on the same day 2nd Lt J V Murphy arrived back 'in arrest' He had been accidentally wounded on 19th July and had been hospitalised.

The Battle of Thiepval 26-28th September

Thiepval village and the ridge on which it lies had been a first day objective for the Somme offensive In common with most of the German defensive positions in the central and the northern sectors of the front, it had resisted capture on the 1st July. It remained for almost

three months an important point of observation across the British lines. The 18th Division was given the task of taking both Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt, a strong point to the north. For three weeks before the attack, scheduled for 26th September, the Division engaged in a daily routine of practice and gained a thorough familiarity with the ground to be taken. This time the attack on the village, by now in ruins, would come from the south with supporting enfilade fire from the west.

On the 19th September the 6th Battalion arrived at Forceville and commenced their training. The attack was to be led by the 8th Suffolks with the 10th Essex closely behind with the 8th Norfolks in support. After three days of preliminary bombardment the 53rd Brigade attacked on the 26th September and captured the village of Thiepval. Unusually the attack was launched at 1235 to give some daylight hours for consolidation which could continue under the cover of darkness. Initially progress was rapid and many Germans appeared eager to surrender without a fight. However resistance stiffened and at 1820 the advance came to a standstill.

The 6th Battalion was in reserve at Crucifix Corner and were not called upon to fight. However they did provide carrying parties for the other battalions and overnight struggled to bring supplies of water, food and ammunition to the exhausted troops at the front. On the 27th the Suffolks attacked and took the Schwaben Redoubt.

Private Jennings experience was:-

'On the 26th September at 1235 the first waves of the assault moved forward at a slow walk. We of the 6th Berks were in reserve dug-outs at Crucifix Corner. Then it was our turn and we made our way forward in small columns to Thiepval, unmolested in broad daylight. Dusk was creeping up fast and then came the biggest barrage Jerry ever sent over. This went on throughout the hours of darkness till dawn.

The trenches we were in must have been a terrible hot spot during the past few weeks, for buried in its walls were dozens of bodies, both British and German, rotting in the wet earth. That evening the 6th Berks worked throughout the night, in parties, carrying food, water, ammunition and stores to the forward line where the troops awaited their arrival with eagerness.

Daylight gave us the opportunity of looking further afield. A huge crater came into our view about 50 yards away. The occupants were the dead of the soldiers who made the advance on the 1st July, nearly three months before. We were about to retreat to the trench when our Captain came across to reprimand us for being away from our position. Then he ordered us to search the bodies for their personal belongings, paybooks etc. This helped to clear up the 'Missing, believed Killed' We found that they were Dorsets. It wasn't a pleasant task.

A few hours later our barrage on the enemy line opened up. 10th Essex went over the top first, then the 6th Berks in close support. The 10th Essex had done extremely well but suffered heavy losses. The 6th Berks relieved them the next day and went into the captured trenches at Thiepval. Because I was in a Lewis gun team of six we

were allocated a dug-out. It was wonderful. It must have been about 20 ft in length, linked up by galleries to other dug-outs along the line.

The Battalion were kept in readiness for a counter attack. They took over the Front Line from the Essex and Suffolk Battalions on the 28th. B coy were in the front line, D coy were ready to counter-attack in Bulgar Trench, C Coy were in support in Bulgar and Nameless Trenches and A Coy were in reserve in Schwaben Trench. They were heavily shelled all day and everyone was suffering from want of sleep and rest.

Pte Jennings

On the 28th September the 6th Berks composed entirely of recently joined recruits were in Brigade Reserve in Authville, carrying supplies for the assault on the Schwaben Redoubt. It was here that the Battalion had a wounded Jerry who became asort of mascot, being handed over to each relieving platoon until he was got away by the stretcher bearers. The week that followed was the usual routine. At dusk everybody lined the fire-step and throughout the night each of us took a turn of one hour on, two off. Then, at last, we got it. We suspected a counter-attack for Jerry chucked over every type of explosive he had until the trench was almost flattened.

Capt Rochford also had memories of going up to the front line in this sector:

The general line here faced north and the communication trenches were really only two old German communication trenches between Thiepval and Schwaben. There were no traverses in either of these trenches and both were in view from the Schwaben Redoubt. As a consequence a visit to the front line was a most unpleasant affair. Add to this the fact that the Germans attempted to bomb down these trenches three or four times a day and that they were well supplied with egg bombs, while our supply of Mills bombs, which were the only reply to an egg bomb, was very limited and it will be realised that the days we spent holding Thiepval were somewhat exciting.

They remained in the front line until the 5th October.

29th September 1916

On the 29th the Battalion came temporarily under the orders of of the 55th Infantry Brigade which was to complete the conquest of the Schwaben Redoubt which, so far, had only been partly effected. The shelling was particularly bad on the 29th when 6 men were killed and 49 wounded.

The Berkshire Chronicle carried an account of this engagement in its edition of January 5th 1917

The Battalion was in reserve to ----- who first of all made the charge. Three lines of the enemies tranches were quickly taken and a portion of the redoubt which was very large. The Germans were strongly re-inforced and made a counter attack. The Berks were rushed up to deal with it and after an engagement which lasted upwards of an hour, they were successful in achieving their object. The fighting consisted almost exclusively of fierce bombing attacks. The Germans put up a very stubborn fight until they were bombed out of their position. The losses they

Wood in which portions of the Division were engaged was an example of discipline, valour and endurance which was wholly admirable.

It is with great regret that I hear the Division is to be transferred to another army and I trust at some future time I may be honoured by again having it under my command

(signed)

H Rawlinson
General
Commanding Fourth Army

Bibliography

War Diary

Baynes

continued in section 246