

Section 238

The Somme

The 8th Battalion

The 8th had stayed in the Loos area since their mauling. They were not required for the opening battles of the Somme offensive. (continued from 228)

The Role

The role of the 8th Battalion during the Battle of the Somme was essentially one of support in three separate engagements: on 14th July, on 18th August and on 3rd September. During this period the Battalion and its Division were under III Corps which operated in the area to the south east of the Baupame Road, taking in Contalmaison, Mametz Wood, Bazentin le Petit, Bazentin le Grand and High Wood.

Contalmaison 9th-14th July

9th July 1916

The battalion arrived on the Somme on the 9th July. They had started from Fouquerville by train on the 6th, stopped briefly at Naours overnight and marching on the next to billets in Albert, arriving about 2330 on the 8th.

10th-11th July 1916

On the following day they left Albert and took over two trenches near Lozenge Wood. Early in the morning of the 11th July 2/Lt F S Snell was killed while reconnoitring from Lozenge Wood in the direction of Contalmaison. At 2230 the Battalion was ordered to capture and occupy 'The Cutting' by morning. Another fighting patrol was sent out to effect the capture but it was driven back by machine gun fire. [WD6]

During the day the C/O Lt Col T G Dalby, had been wounded in the hand whilst returning from a visit to the sunken road.

The Berkshire Chronicle gave a heavily censored account of the engagement on the 18th August:

The village of [Contalmaison] had been taken a few hours previously and the Battalion, with their comrades, were to be sent to hold it at all cost and to consolidate it as it had already been taken and retaken three times. In reconnoitring the position before going on they had the great misfortune to lose a very brave and promising officer, in 2nd Lt Frank Saxon-Snell who was killed instantly by shrapnel.

At nightfall the Battalion moved up into the village and the sight that met their eyes was one which the men say they will never forget. The Germans were shelling the village. Of the village itself not one house was left standing, but

three or four cellars, which had been reinforced by the Germans were still intact. These the Germans were now doing their best to destroy. The dead and dying of both sides were everywhere lying among the other debris while the smell was anything but inviting.

One of the cellars was used as a dressing station and the MO, in taking over, found to his surprise the place already occupied by a German doctor and about 20 of the enemy's wounded, who had been there with hardly any food for 190 days. During which time the ownership of the village had been in doubt. We gave them food and the German MO helped in treating our wounded. He and the wounded Germans were taken off to the rear under escort. One or two of the other officers had something of a scare in going down cellars and finding little groups of demoralised Germans. Little groups of Germans were turning up in all sorts of places, some showing fight, but the majority willingly surrendering.

The battalion soon set to work in digging themselves in and preparing for the anticipated counter attack. It was ascertained that the enemy were holding a trench only 50 yards away and in their hurry to get out when the battalion attacked they left behind a couple of machine guns and several thousand rounds of ammunition. Another Company, while on its prowls, captured a field gun. Meanwhile the rest of the battalion had relieved the other companies and, by daylight had pushed on another 200 yards, the enemy showing little fight and several coming in an surrendering.

12th July 1916

The following day (the 12th) another patrol was sent out which succeeded in occupying 'The Cutting'. As soon as this capture was effected a small force was sent out to capture the road running east to west from The Cutting to Mametz Wood. At 1200 the enemy made a feeble counter attack which was repulsed by gunfire from the 8th and the Boche dispersed in disorder taking shelter in the small woods in front of the British line and in shell holes. Later in the evening a patrol managed to make contact with the 7th Lincolns who had cleared Mametz Wood earlier in the morning.

The Berkshire Chronicle Account continued:-

The next morning the enemy attempted a counter attack but it was repulsed with heavy losses, so terrific was the fire from machine guns and rifles. One batch of prisoners who were captured said that so terrible was our artillery fire that they had been cut off for four days without officers, food or stretcher bearers.

In resisting the attack 2nd Lt [George] Maggs and 14 men had some hand to hand fighting with a party of some 20 to 30 of the enemy, his men using bayonets with great

effect while the gallant young officer used his revolver to great advantage. Not one of the enemy party escaped and it was a great loss to the battalion when [later on July 16th] 2nd Lt Maggs was mortally wounded by a shell while resting in a trench. He was a most fearless officer, loved by officers and men alike and one the Battalion could ill spare.

At 2130 the rest of the Battalion had moved out of the trenches near Lozenge Wood and relieved the 8th York and Lancs who had captured Contalmaison the previous night. The Royal Berks established themselves on the eastern edge of the village, occupying two trenches in the grounds of the chateau. the 1st Black Watch were on their left and Battalion HQ was in the cellar of a ruined house just behind the chateau. The cellars were full of wounded Germans who had been there since the 1st July, many with septic wounds

Thus by the evening of the 12th July the Battalion had consolidated a line from the northern corner of the Chateau grounds along a sunken road to the western edge of Mametz. At midnight a bombing patrol was sent up Pearl Alley - the main communication trench between the sunken road and the German 2nd line defences - where a post had been established at a distance of some 300 yards. Pearl Wood, lying to the north in No-man's-land, was seized and consolidated by a patrol led by 2/Lt F G Marsh.

As a further preliminary to the forthcoming attack a patrol with a Lewis Gun team under 2/Lt G R Goodship was sent out from the sunken road and they seized Lower Wood, to the right of Pearl Wood, some 350 yards ahead in No-man's-land.

The Berkshire Chronicle account continued:-

Not content with holding the village the motto was to push on so that afternoon saw 2nd Lt Goodship and 2nd Lt Marsh, each with a small party. move off to take two woods which they accomplished with little loss. 2nd Lt Lunn of Caversham was wounded in an attempt to take some trenches. The next day was spent in making the Battalion position more secure and dealing with the small attacks on the position, none of which were successful. During all this time the enemy were shelling the position unceasingly. This was responsible for most of the casualties, only a small percentage suffered gun shot wounds and these were in most cases slight wounds.

Thus in four days the Battalion had not only made the village secure but had advanced for a distance of four[?] yards. On being relieved they went back for a four day bivouac in a wood just behind the village and still under shell fire. Every night they were treated to a bombardment of gas shells, none of which however had any other effect than causing a few tears and causing everyone to perspire in their gas masks.

In their first few days on the Somme the 8th had seen some minor action and suffered the following casualties between the 11th and 14th July:-

Officers killed 2 (2nd Lt F S Snell and 2nd Lt G E Maggs) Wounded 4 (Lt Col T B Dalby, Lt H Churchill, 2nd Lt C G M Morris and 2nd Lt A C

P Lunn)

Other ranks killed 16, died of wounds 2, missing 2, wounded 123.

The Attack on the 14th July

On the 14th July XIII and XV Corps of Fourth Army mounted a dawn attack on the German second position. Troops formed up in the darkness in No-man's-land to within 500 yards of the enemy lines. 21 Division on the left of the front was attacking Bazentin le Grand Wood and Bazentin le Petit Wood and village and the job of III Corps' 1st Division was to form a flank on its left with an attack by the 8th Royal Berks up Pearl Alley. A combined attack of the two divisions was planned for 1430 but was postponed to 1630 because 21 Division could not expel the enemy from the north west corner of Bazentin le Petit Wood and was suffering from German artillery fire. At 1500 a heavy German counter attack against the village and the northern face of the wood caused the attack to be abandoned altogether.

However acting on their orders received during the morning, the 8th Royal Berks were already on their way by 1300. They had set off an hour and a half early because of the condition of Pearl Alley, which was waist deep in liquid mud. They reached the German trench but were driven out by a counter-attack across open ground and they retired down Pearl Alley to their original line. At 2330 the Battalion was relieved by the 1st Gloucesters and went back to billets in Albert.

The Battalion (and III Corps) had played only a subsidiary role in the operations of 14th July but it is worth noting that the fourth Army attack itself was one of the clear successes of the Battle of the Somme. Surprise had been achieved and the German second position on a front of 6000 yards had been taken, including the two Bazentins with their woods and, further to the east, part of the village of Longueval and the whole of Trones Wood.

The British were only just coming to terms with the fact that their bombardments of the enemy positions were having only superficial effect. However they clung to their strategy despite the obvious evidence as the Berkshire Chronicle account published on the 18th August showed.

After the few days respite, which consisted of fatigues of carrying wire and ammunition etc. up to the front line, the battalion moved up and joined up with the Australians at [Martinpuich] It is remarkable that the Anzacs had a battalion of Berkshires on their right and another on their left. The artillery had bombarded the position at intervals for days before but at 6 pm on July 24th a further bombardment set in which lasted until 1230 am. All previous bombardments were child's play to this, for the very earth shook while the German position looked to be one long mass of flame. Everyone crouched in his little funk hole and waited impatiently for the barrage to lift and to get out. It seemed impossible that anyone could

exist after such a bombardment. At last the minute arrived for the first line to go forward. The enemy artillery were pouring out all their vengeance and making no-mans land a perfect inferno. The Germans in their trenches were perfectly quiet till the wire was reached when dozens of machine guns seemed to rise from the ground and poured out such a hail of bullets as to cause a temporary stoppage. However this was only very temporary and with a few words of encouragement from the officers, the whole line swept down on the enemy. The fighting was terrific and the enemy were there in hundreds. ... In places they were driven out but came back again and again using hundreds of bombs. By this time our bombers had got to work and slowly but surely the enemy was driven back. Just before dawn the last of the enemy were driven out or killed and the work of digging in and generally making the place more secure against a counter attack was proceeded with ...

The next day was spent in watching and waiting for the German counter attack, but other than a violent bombardment nothing happened owing no doubt to a barrage which was kept up by our artillery. ... after another day of watching the Battalion was relieved.

The larger German dugouts on the Somme Front are entered through a steel door. From it you descend a 30 ft. staircase in which the risers and treads of each step are well made of wood. At the foot of the stairs you find spacious rooms in which floors, walls and roofs are closely boarded. The connecting passages are equally finished and a second 30 ft. staircase descends to a second group of rooms treated the same way Each of these larger dugouts could easily house a whole platoon and give it complete security under severe artillery fire.

That this kind of information could be published in the British Press at the same time as the General Staff were still sending British Troops over the top on the proposition that their bombardment had killed off all the German opposition, when every such attack was in the face of murderous machine gun fire and the fact of and the mechanism for the survival of the Germans, relatively unscathed was glaringly obvious, beggars belief.

25th July to 8th August 1916

For the remainder of July the Battalion saw little front line action, being in support or reserve positions. From the 25th July to the 13th August they were based in Baisieux Wood where fresh drafts were received and the Battalion was re-organised. Training in 'open warfare' was carried out and night assaults were practised.

9th August 1916

Military Medals were awarded on the 9th August for good work and bravery at Contalmaison to:-

16357 Cpl A Andrews
18749 Sgt S G Andrews
17958 Cpl F Belcher
14328 Pte W A Ayres
10518 Pte R Slyfield
13486 Pte L H May

14th August 1916

On the 14th August they moved into Brigade reserve on the northern edge of Mametz Wood and at noon on the 18th they relieved the 1st Black Watch in the front line north of Bazentin le Petit.

Casualties for the rest of July were:-

Officers wounded 3 (Capt C E Beale, Lt D J Footman and 2Lt Clarke)

Other ranks killed 12, wounded 18, missing 2

The Attack on the 18th August

As part of III Corps operations north of Bazentin le Petit, planned for the 18th August, the 1st Brigade of 1st Division was to capture the remaining portion of the Intermediate Line, a German trench running east from the road leading from Bazentin le Petit to Martinpuich. Part of the Intermediate Line was already held by the 2nd Brigade. The attack was to be made by three companies of the 8th Royal Berks: D on the right, B in the centre and C on the left. A Company was in reserve. The 10th Gloucesters were on their right.

18th August 1916

On the morning of the 18th the 8th relieved the 1st Black Watch in the front line north of Bazentin le Petit

The bombardment began at noon. While the relief of the Black Watch was still underway some heavy artillery shells fell in the Royal Berks trenches, coming, it was believed, from our own guns. This shelling cut communication between the companies and so demolished Lancs Trench on the left that a platoon which had been detailed to attack from this direction was unable to reach its starting point. Many men were buried and the Battalion was effectively split into two. So it was decided that the parties which should have assaulted from the left should join in the frontal assault.

The three companies attacked at 1445. At first there was little resistance but when the first wave came to within about 100 yards from the intermediate line, they came under machine gun and shell fire. Smoke discharged by the 15th Division blew across the Royal Berks' front and caused the left company of the assault to lose direction. The majority of this company bore too far to the right and eventually joined with the other two companies who came under heavy machine gun fire which prevented further progress. A small party on the right of the assault reached the Intermediate Line but failed to enter it. The remainder of the assaulting troops with their only officer, Captain Birch, tried to consolidate a shallow trench about 100 yards from their front line and held it for some considerable time under very heavy shell fire but were eventually forced to retire to

their original line at 1600.

During the night the 1st Cameronians managed to establish a strong point in the angle of the intermediate line and the 8th Royal Berkshires took over this strong point from at dawn on the 19th.

The failure of the Battalion to reach their objective was due, according to the battalion Commander, to:-

- i) Lack of time for preliminary organisation and for the troops to gain some knowledge of the ground.
- ii) The intensity of the enemy's machine gun fire which caused many casualties, especially in the right company
- iii) The loss of so many officers.

Nevertheless the Reading Mercury on 16th September published an account of the battle under the headline 'How a Wood was Won'

After some days rest the order was given for the Battalion to be ready in ten minutes. At 3 am we went into a kind of dip. Within an hour we were in action. It was a counter attack on [Mametz] Wood. The fighting was of the most desperate character and was in progress over two days before we were relieved. The bombardment on both sides was terrific, and although it was slow work. owing to the strength of the enemy, he was ultimately driven out of the wood.

This was accomplished by our machine gun fire, bayonet, grenade, hand to hand fighting and bombing. Our losses were heavy but those of the Germans, consisting mainly of the Prussian Guard were greater. They even had machine guns in trees Capt H R Fenner (now wounded) displayed great bravery all through. His pluck won the admiration of all, he led his Company splendidly. Sergeant Major Robinson also was exceedingly courageous, he has been recommended for the French Legion of Honour. One of our snipers, Private Grey, got the MM for his gallantry. For two days and two nights the Doctor whose name I do not know, looked after the wounded. Poor man - he went blind at the finish. One of our privates named Hunt [19467 Pte Jack Hunt] was killed after he had fought with great bravery. He ultimately had a hand to hand fight with a Prussian Guardsman and our chum, getting the worst of it went under.

Battalion casualties for the 18th August were:

Officers killed: 2/Lts WN Conyers, CGB Harrison, WH Bissley wounded : Lt SF Stileman, 2/Lts GR Goodship, SAG Harvey, TW Prout.

Other ranks: 160

In Support **19th August 1916**

On the 19th, the day following the attack, 2/Lt Edward Sidney Joy was killed on patrol. One of the 8th's chaplains reported to his parents:

Your son went out to reconnoitre the ground after there had been a severe action. I understand that soon after he went out he was hit in the head but bravely went on to do his task and had just gained the information required when another bullet hit him and killed him instantly. One

of our men attempted to get him in and two others volunteered to go out thinking he was just wounded, but it was too dangerous to allow them to go out.

20-28th August 1916

From the 20th to the 28th August the Battalion was in support trenches north of Mametz Wood. From there they moved to High Wood where they relieved the 1st Cameron Highlanders.

30th August 1916

On the 30th August at 1315 It was seen that the enemy opposite the Royal Berks' trench in High Wood was preparing to make an attack but the German attack was driven off by machine gun fire from High Wood. As they tried to retire they came under enfilade fire from the Lewis guns of the Royal Berks and suffered many more casualties. The enemy tried to enter a sap on the Royal Berks front to the west of High Wood but this too was repulsed. It was thought in retrospect that this was merely a feint for the German's main attack which fell onto the Division to the Royal Berks' right. The Battalion was relieved by the 2nd Royal Sussex and returned to Mametz Wood.

The Attack on the 3rd September

Fourth Army plans for the attack on the 3rd September included attacks by XIV Corps on Guillemont, by XV Corps north east of Delville Wood and, on their left, 1st Division of III Corps on Wood Lane and the German front line at High Wood. On the 2nd September the Battalion moved in to support the 1st Camerons. Two companies, A and B were placed at the disposal of the O/C 1st Camerons and occupied Rifles Trench south east of the wood.

Zero hour on the 3rd September was noon. The 1st Camerons attacked Wood Lane with all four companies in line and with the detachment of the Royal Berks alongside them. In the centre and on the left the Camerons took the trench after hand-to-hand fighting and gained another 100 yards before beginning to consolidate. At 1500 the Germans counter-attacked from the Switch Line north east of High Wood. They enfiladed the left of the Camerons who, together with the men of the Royal Berks, retired to their original line at about 1530. An hour later the right of the battalion also retired, having taken some 80 prisoners.

The Reading Mercury published an account of the engagement on the 4th November 1916:

It was to the right of High Wood that the Battalion went over with [the Cameronians] The Battalion were in the reserve trench on Saturday Sept 2nd and went into support at 3 am on Sunday morning. A mine went off at noon, this being the signal to go over, the objective

being a ridge and a sunken road. Some of the Berkshires were wounded by our own barrage - the communication wire being broken - but the objective was gained. The Germans had been subjected to heavy bombardment for two or three days previously and it seemed that nothing could live against it, but when the shelling ceased, the enemy came out in droves for a counter attack. However the Berkshires and their comrades were quite prepared for them and with their machine guns did a great deal of havoc. One of the enemy who was evidently carrying phosphorous bombs went up into the air in flames and fell backwards. Lt Baker was wounded, going into the support line.

Battalion casualties for the 3rd September were:-

Officers killed: 1 (2/Lt LG Edens) missing 2/Lt CH Chambers (later recorded as killed) 1 2/Lt DW Prout (later reported as killed) wounded Capt JHG Lawrence, Lts G Baker, SE Davenport, 2/Lt GF Marsh

Other Ranks: 100

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