

Section 241

Interlude II

1st Battalion November 1916 to April 1917

The 1st Battalion were in the Hebuterne and Serre sectors after the Somme. Continued from section 231

On the move

17th to 30th November 1916

The Somme offensive was called off on the 17th November and the Battalion moved to Terramesnils about 25km north of Amiens. They were joined by a reinforcement of 48 other ranks plus two new 2nd Lieutenants, Musk and Tandy. They had two days there, moving about 6km NW to Gezaincourt on the 19th.

At Gezaincourt they were inspected by Sir Douglas Haig on the 20th and next day moved another 7 km this time SW to Fienvillers.

On the 23rd it was off again: 11km west to Domqueur and two days later on to Le Plessiel. After another two days they moved on to Coulouvillers on the 27th where they were able to get in some company training.

Finally on the 30th they moved to Conteville.

Conteville

30th November to 16th December 1916

Conteville is about midway between Abbeville and Doullens and was where Bn HQ and A and B Coys were billeted. C and D Coys and the supporting units were billeted at Bernatre about 3Km away to the NE.

Here they spent most of the time on company training but they did manage to get some baths and opened a canteen at Bernatre on the 2nd.

The Divisional commander, Major General W G Walker VC CB visited them on the 4th. He was saying his farewells as he was due to relinquish command of 2nd Division on the 27th and return to England. The 2nd Division was also to transfer from V Corps to II Corps for its next tour of duty. Lt Col Harris was allowed home on 30 days leave starting on the 7th.

A further reinforcement of 217 men joined on the 12th and three 2nd Lieutenants arrived; G R D Bacon on the 10th and G A Pocock and H E R Merrick on the 11th.

Oneux

16th December 1916 to 9th January 1917

On the 16th they moved closer to Abbeville, to Oneux which is about 10 Km to the North East, two companies went close by to Neuville and one to Maison Rolland 4 Km away.

The weather was generally wet and cold and apart from company training there was little to do.

Lt Gen Gough, the GOC of 5th Army visited on the 20th and men were allowed some leave.

On the 24th a gang of 100 men were sent to St Riquier on 'unloading fatigues' and one assumes they were getting in the Christmas fare.

Christmas was spent quietly with no parades but football and sports.

Major General C E Pereira CB CMG arrived on the 27th to take command of 2nd Division and they were almost ready for their move to join II Corps.

Training continued for the next two weeks with a brigade exercise on the 6th January.

On the 9th it was time for duty again.

On the move again

9th to 26th January 1917

The first move began with a parade at Oneux at 11:00 on the 9th and a march to Fienvillers which they reached at 16:30.

After a two day stay they moved on to Sarton on the 11th and to Raincheval on the 12th. They reached Bouzincourt near Albert on the 14th.

They paused at Bouzincourt for a few days occupied by company training and road clearing.

The final move was to Ovillers on the 20th where almost everyone was employed on working parties.

On the 27th they moved into the front line trenches at Courcellette, relieving the 13th Essex of 6th Brigade.

During this period of static warfare in the winter of 1916-1917 raids and patrolling were the main feature in the British military policy.

Courcelette

27th January to 3rd February 1917

The front line at Courcelette consisted of a line of posts at intervals of about 200 yards rather than a continuous line of trenches. During the day the men had to keep their heads down and could communicate only by telephone. Only at night was it possible to move around.

The last part of January was spent in the posts and on the 1st Feb they were relieved by the 22nd Royal Fusiliers, although 110 men were left to garrison three of the posts, Creightons, Frasers and Windmill. The rest of the battalion marched off to Wolfe Huts and for the next three days were employed on working parties.

The 2nd Division History records:-

On 1st February 2nd Divisional Order No. 187 ordered the 1st Royal Berks (99th Infantry Brigade) to carry out a raid on the enemy's trenches on the night 4th-5th February. The objective was the "enemy's salient at the point of Guard and Desire Support Trench in M.I3.b." Besides inflicting damage, the objects of the raid were to secure prisoners or obtain identifications, destroy or capture machine guns, and observe the state of the enemy's trenches, and his method of holding the line.

No artillery preparation was to take place before " zero," but after that hour a box-barrage was to be put down round the objective. Other points in the operation order are interesting: "In the event of snow still lying, white suits will be worn by the raiding party; all identifications are to be removed from the party before they go up into the line; Stokes mortars will be employed prior to the infantry assault. An understudy to the officer commanding the party is to be selected; he will take over command immediately in the event of the latter becoming a casualty. All members of the party are warned that in the event of being taken prisoner they are only bound to give their rank and name; no other information is to be given."

The raiding party was to consist of 2 officers and 60 other ranks, exclusive of stretcher-bearers.

From the night 28th-29th January to the night 1st-2nd February the 1st Royal Berks held the right sub-sector of the line, which included M.I3.b, the objective. The battalion was relieved by the 22nd Royal Fusiliers on the night 1st-2nd, and on going into support at Wolfe Huts near Ovillers La Boiselle Village existing trenches almost identical with the objective were found and improved, and five practices were carried out by the raiding party by day and by night.

At 6 p.m. on the 2nd, the party, under Second-Lieuts. Burgess and Aveline, moved to the Miraumont dug-outs, where a meal and accommodation were found for them.

Zero hour had been fixed for 3 a.m. on the 5th.

A personal reconnaissance of the enemy's wire was made by Lieut.-Colonel Harris, D.S.O., the Commanding Officer 1st Royal Berks, who subsequently placed the raiding party in position. [TX00600A]

4th February 1917

The 4th was spent making preparations for the raid. There were many unusual features of this raid, not the

least because a preliminary artillery bombardment was forbidden so as not to alert the enemy. It is remarkable for another reason - the Reading Mercury of 28th December 1918 carried a full list of all the participants.

One of the novel features was the use of canvas covered tripods to mark the flanks and centre of the attack. These were placed about 30 yards outside the British wire by men dressed in white smocks with white helmets to merge with the snow. Others were placed another 30-40 yards closer to the enemy lines. The side facing the Germans was painted white and that facing the British lines black. They proved very effective in keeping the line of attack.

The Reading Mercury account was:-

On the night of February 4-5th 1917 occurred one of the finest feats of its kind during the war - a raid which in its complete success and the results achieved constituted one of the notable deeds in the annals of the battalion.

The scene of the raid was the German line between Miraumont and l'Ys. In consequence of observation the British Army decided that the operation should be carried out, and the 1st Royal Berks, although not in garrison in the trench, had the honour to be selected to carry out the raid.

Picked officers, NCOs and men were chosen and they immediately set to work to dig a trench, the exact copy of that which was going to be raided. The next few days were spent in careful preparation and practice by the raiding platoon.

On the night of February 4th the platoon went up to position dressed in white smocks and with white covers to their helmets. Snow lay heavily on the ground and the ruse was naturally adopted to avoid observation by the enemy. But, white as were their smocks, the men of the raiding platoon could not help noticing that they did not approach the whiteness of the driven snow. Still they were confident in the success of their enterprise which had been so admirably planned.

5th February 1917

A party of two officers and fifty-nine other ranks was employed, and it is significant that its captures of prisoners exactly equalled its own numbers - two officers and fifty other ranks. They were supported by twenty five Lewis gunners and thirty seven stretcher bearers. The casualties of the raiders were slight, and the raid was recognized as one of the most successful of the war.

At zero hour the Stokes guns of the 99th Trench Mortar Battery opened fire on the objective. One gun was specifically detailed to use rapid fire on one particular enemy post. The Divisional artillery made up of 18 pounders and howitzers then put up a barrage around the objective. One minute later the trench mortars stopped firing and the first wave of the raiding party who had rushed forward to about 50 yards of the objective and laid down in the snow camouflaged by their white garments, leapt up and rushed forward into the enemy

trenches led by 2nd Lt Aveline. The second wave under 2nd Lt Burgess jumped the trench and ran parallel to the trench until they met the Germans who were taken by surprise and either captured or shot. What is remarkable is that they crossed three rows of concertina wire 2.5 feet thick.

2nd Division history gives a few additional details:-

At zero hour the Stokes guns of the 99th Trench Mortar Battery opened fire on the objective; this was maintained for one minute. One gun had been specially detailed to fire "rapid" on the enemy post at M.I3,b.4.9.

The Divisional Artillery (18-pounders and howitzers) then placed a box-barrage round the objective, and the raiding party moved forward to within 50 yards of the objective and lay down. One minute after zero, as the Stokes guns ceased firing, the party jumped up and rushed forward. The leading wave (Second-Lieut. Aveline) jumped the eastern arm of the salient on a front of about 40 yards, with its left about M.I3,b.9.5, formed to the left, and then went for the western arm of the salient – its objective. The rear wave (Second-Lieut. Burgess) crossed the enemy's wire, jumped the trench, turned to the left, and ran down outside the parapets, until they met the enemy, most of whom, including two German officers, they found near the front of the salient. A few Germans who offered resistance were shot. The men then jumped into the enemy's trench, and in a few minutes all resistance was at an end.

It is a pity that further details of this successful little operation were not available. The raiding party had to pass through three rows of concertina barbed wire, 2½ feet thick. Two officers and 49 other ranks were taken prisoners, 14 were killed or wounded, and a German machine gun smashed. The Berkshires were only from fifteen to twenty minutes in the enemy's line, during which they searched all dug-outs and shelters before returning to their own trenches. The artillery barrage was very effective in deceiving the enemy. [TX00600B]

The appreciation of it by the Commander-in-Chief is evidenced by the immediate grant to the officers in charge of the raid; the D.S.O to Burgess and M.C. to Aveline.

Reading Mercury:

At the zero hour in the early morning of February 5th the platoon had got into position in front of our own wire, ready for action. There was one minutes intense bombardment from Stokes mortars during which the platoon went forward as far as they dared to the enemy's lines.

Directly the bombardment ceased the whole platoon dashed forward as one man and entered the enemy's trenches. The Germans were taken by surprise. For a few minutes a grim struggle took place, but the Germans, seeing that they were mastered, immediately surrendered, placing their hands above their heads and shouting "Mercy, Kamarad: bon Kamerad". The prisoners were promptly collected: it was afterwards ascertained that they numbered two officers and fifty rank and file - while about twenty German dead were left behind in the trenches.

The return was naturally far worse than going forward, as the Germans, realising what had happened, put up a terrific barrage. A few of the Berkshires were hit in getting

back to the reserve dug-out but the whole of the raiding platoon were in the highest spirits at the success they had achieved. Strange to relate, the prisoners brought in numbered more than the men who returned to escort them in..

Naturally, while the fight lasted in the German trench it was of a desperate character. One of the German officers afterwards taken, fought with great bravery and is said to have killed two of the Berkshire with his revolver before it was knocked out of his hand. This officer could speak English perfectly. He had been wounded five times having been in the was from the outset. The prisoners belonged to the 90th Fusiliers.

Unfortunately Second Lt Burgess, who had carefully trained the platoon and led them to the enemy's trenches with such dash and skill, was severely wounded in the first few minutes of the raid, but he was safely brought back. The next morning he was awarded thr DSO. Second Lieutenant Burgess rose from the ranks, recently receiving his commission from the Scots Guard.

The other officer engaged in the raid, Second Lt APA Aveline, was awarded the Military Cross. 2nd Lt Alec P A Aveline is the only son of Mr and Mrs Sydney Aveline, of 107 Castle Hill, Reading. He was educated at Reading School, where he was Captain of football and sergeant in the OTC. In 1915 he went to Sandhurst and afterwards to complete his training was among other places at Fort Nelson. Lieut Aveline had been at the front for four months and had participated in severe fighting, During the present year he was in a torpedoed vessel but was picked up.

Amongst the rank and file it would be hard to single out anyone for special bravery as all ranks worked as one and fought with great bravery and spirit.

Needless to say the 1st Berkshires were very much bucked up by the success achieved by the raiding platoon and the praise of the commanding officer of the regiment, the corps commander, the brigadier and the divisional commander were very gratifying.

Those taking part were:-

2nd Lt Alec Pendock Aveline - awarded MC
 2nd Lt Alfred Burgess - awarded DSO
 39246 Pte A Roberts
 9602 Pte F Barker
 10543 Lcpl Alfred Senes of Burghfield
 10360 Pte P F Rose of Nunhead
 39276 Pte A Eagle
 9062 LCpl H Fennell of Urmston
 30058 Pte Oliver Taylor of Sulhampstead
 39433 Pte J Margett
 33284 Pte J W Green
 15826 Pte Sidney Richard Harris
 39231 Cpl C Taylor
 37564 Sgt W Towner
 11841 Pte A W Roadis of Catford
 15318 Pte Robert Stevenson
 17545 Pte G Cardwell
 24743 Pte KJ Thornhill
 10713 Pte George Grainger of Camberwell Green
 9607 Pte H Richards of Inverkeithing - awarded MM

27291 Pte Walter John Elms of Newbury
 39245 Pte A Hopkins
 33084 Pte J Cletheroe
 18057 Pte J R Frost
 9400 Pte Joseph Warner of Stratford
 33024 Pte W Gorm
 12282 Pte Alfred Burfield Mitchell
 30057 Pte Harry Milsom of Reading
 9830 Pte W Hardy
 39262 Pte George Harry Wright of Wistow
 10085 LCpl F G Dilling of Stanford Dingley - awarded MM
 37551 Pte A Martin
 11887 Pte G Cowdry of Mortimer
 16416 Lcpl C Fisher
 10062 Pte H W C Sparks
 16621 Pte Aubrey S Lester
 33287 Pte E C Hiscock of Christchurch
 18464 Pte E J Mott
 11109 Pte Leonard E Harding
 14582 Pte John Arthur Petch of Coventry
 37580 Cpl A Gibbs
 17420 Pte H Johnson
 7816 Sgt Robert Munday
 10542 Pte A H Saddler of Oxford
 9642 Pte A J Bourne
 5847 Pte W J Ryan
 37556 Pte J Prater
 13553 Lcpl Nelson Smart of Moreton in Marsh
 10072 Pte W West
 9256 Lcpl W G Smith of Hungerford - awarded MM
 11711 Pte George Bradley
 37539 Pte Harry Parkes
 11940 LCpl Fred Farrell
 39424 Pte Arthur Frederick Tatman of Diddington
 22686 Pte F Huggins
 21020 Pte Robert McCoy of Birmingham
 15275 Pte Frederick Phillips of Ramsbury
 11925 Lcpl T J Davis
 37584 Pte J Ing
 9554 Pte E Morley
 8802 LCpl Frederick Hill of London

Lewis Gunners

8665 Sgt John E Ridge of Abingdon
 18183 Pte G W G Hitchcock
 14364 Pte William Povey of Grazeley
 13486 Pte Leonard Harry May
 9541 LCpl John Lewis Gigg of Great Bedwyn
 17131 Pte Stanley George Blazeley
 8763 LCpl James Welch
 18047 Pte Harry Charles Paice of Reading
 11288 Pte William John Challis of Maidenhead
 9468 Cpl J R Davis of Dublin
 11581 Pte S F Vale

39279 Pte F Pedley
 20069 Pte Arthur Albert Gregory of Reading
 17845 Pte A Walker
 11712 Pte A Cowford
 11776 LCpl J Strong
 16577 Pte C Wheeler
 16023 Pte W Hyde
 12321 Pte Thomas Redfern of Smethwick
 39257 Pte A Stanyon
 25075 Pte William Poole of Bristol
 15647 LCpl Harry Vickers of Windsor
 39419 Pte Frederick Ford of Great Gransden
 17723 Pte A Copas
 10000 Pte S A Thorneycroft

Stretcher Bearers

10040 Sgt P B D Rumble
 12924 LCpl J Brown
 16889 Pte Harry William Bull of Dalston
 39409 Pte W Goodyer
 17633 Pte E A March of Hoxton
 39288 Pte Bertram Mitchell Clements of St Ives
 10058 Pte Thomas Henry Davis of Windsor
 31328 Pte Charles Ernest Lovell of Whitehall
 25063 Pte Frederick Werrell of Reading
 17157 LCpl J J Horn
 18862 Pte Harry S Radburn of Reading
 10448 Pte Sydney Herbert George Cresswall of Upper Basildon
 16472 Pte W Murphy
 15981 Pte F Woodley
 19646 Pte James Hewitt of Baydon
 19165 Pte W Banks
 37565 Pte T Pelcher
 16318 Pte E J Ford of Leckhempstead
 27180 Pte Richard Bettridge of Birmingham
 18154 LCpl H Skingsley
 19165 Pte G Addaway
 27101 Pte C Duke
 19834 Pte Charles Martin of Newbury
 11560 Pte A W Boteler
 15768 Pte Walter Heath of Compton
 39411 Pte G May
 37568 Pte H Waite
 39422 Pte Burrus James Hales of Wistow
 9545 Lcpl C W Waters - awarded MM
 16420 Pte W Alexandra
 9605 Pte E W Elderfield of Charlton
 11655 LCpl C E May
 39281 Pte W Mason
 30141 Pte Charles Cook of Hoxton
 28367 Pte James Sammons of Reading
 23676 Pte W S Heath of Swindon
 25307 Pte A Saxon

After the raid Battalion HQ was moved to Aveluy leaving two companies at Wolfe Huts, one in Wolseley Huts and the other in Aveluy.

The Berkshire Chronicle of 16/3/17 reported the award of medals to some of the participants

BERKSHIRE MEN IN SMOCKS

It has already been exclusively announced in this paper that the DSO was awarded to second Lieutenant Alfred Burgess and the Military Cross to Second Lieutenant Alec P Aveline of the Royal Berkshire Regiment for gallantry during a raid. This raid was one of the most successful which has taken place during the war for no fewer than 52 prisoners, including two officers, were brought back, the prisoners actually outnumbering those who returned with them to the British lines. Snow lay on the ground and the Berkshire men were dressed in smocks. So excellent were the preparatory arrangements and so dashing was the work put in by the raiding platoon that the enemy were taken by surprise, although there was some severe hand to hand fighting before some of them surrendered. The Berkshires received high commendation from their superior officers.

In the London Gazette of March 12th the awards are officially announced, the following being the details:-

DSO

Second Lieutenant Alfred Burgess: For conspicuous courage and ability whilst commanding a raiding platoon which entered the enemy's trenches and returned with two officers and 50 other ranks as prisoner. The success of the raid was largely due to the ability with which he conducted the preparatory training and also to his personal courage and example. He was severely wounded. (Second Lieutenant Burgess rose from the ranks, receiving his commission in the Scots Guards)

MILITARY CROSS

Second Lieutenant Alec Pendock Aveline - He led a raid against the enemy's trenches with marked ability and succeeded in capturing 52 prisoners. He has at all times set a fine example (Second Lieutenant Aveline is the son of Mr S Aveline 107 Castle Hill Reading and was educated at Reading School) [TX01170]

BAR TO DCM

7810 Sergeant R Munday Royal Berkshire Regiment has been awarded a bar to his DCM. The official record says:- "During a raid on the enemy's trenches, although wounded, he continued to assist his officer and the complete success of the raid was largely due to his personal example (DCM was awarded in the Gazette dated November 6th 1914) [TX01171]

Aveluy

6th to 14th February 1917

The weather had turned very cold and for the next few days they worked under the directions of the Royal Engineers in below freezing conditions.

On the 9th some responsibilities changed and Capt E B Methven took command of A Coy and Lt M C Dempsey took over as acting Adjutant.

The GOC of 2nd Division, Major General Peireira came

to inspect the raiding party. That day the weather changed and it began to thaw.

On the 14th the whole battalion moved to huts at Ovillers in preparation for another raid. The thaw was making movement very difficult as the ground was very wet.

Boom Ravine

15th February 1917

The huts at Ovillers were now well behind the British front. On the morning of the 15th they made their preparations and in the evening the battalion took over in the front line from the 17th Royal Fusiliers of 5th Brigade with B Coy manning the line and A C and D Coys in support. The battalion was holding the whole of 99th Brigade's front. 80 of the men of B Coy were detailed to carry ammunition for the Stokes Mortars.

16th February 1917

On the 16th they took up battle positions. The battalion was now at some distance south of the upper Ancre, and the attack of the 17th was to be directed on that river and Miraumont.

The objective of 2nd Division's attack was to carry the British line forward along the spur which runs northwards from the main Morval to Thiepval Ridge about Courcellette and so gain possession of the high ground on its northern extremity. This position would both command the approaches to Pys and Miraumont from the south and give observation over the upper valley of the Ancre in which many hostile batteries were located. The main attack was to be carried out by the 99th Brigade using the 23rd Royal Fusiliers on the right and the 1st KRRC on the left with the 1st Royal Berks in support.

The 2nd Division history gives details of the equipment to be carried:-

All officers will be dressed and equipped in the same manner as the men-badges of rank may be retained; rifle, bayonet, scabbard, entrenching tool, box respirator and helmets as issued; haversacks and mess-tins on back; 170 rounds of small arms ammunition per man-bombers, signallers, scouts, machine and Lewis gunners, and the personnel of the Stokes Mortar Batteries will carry 50 rounds only; three grenades per man; steel helmets, one aeroplane flare per man to be used at certain stated times after reaching the objective, or in reply to a call from a contact aeroplane; two sandbags per man; the unexpended portion of the day's rations, water bottle filled with tea and rum; one iron ration; and a bread and cheese ration; wire cutters and flares will be carried by the assaulting waves; Very pistols and cartridges and S.O.S. cartridges for same will be carried by officers. Red, green, and white cartridges, in addition to being used for the authorized S.O.S. signals, will be employed to communicate information in accordance with a code which will be issued later; one Tommies' Cooker per man; fuses will be distributed amongst the leading waves; runners will carry out their duties stripped-i.e., no arms, or equipment

excepting the box-respirators and tube helmets; great-coats for runners will be kept at Relay Posts or at Headquarters; greatcoats or jerkins, or both, will be worn underneath the equipment at the discretion of the battalion commanders-if greatcoats are worn, the coats will be folded back off the knees; shovels and a percentage of picks." [TX00602A]

During the night there was a lot of hostile shelling and Capt N West and Pte John Albert Mills (18125) were killed with Lt J W Jeakes and 4 men injured.

17th February 1917

The weather, which had been very frosty, had changed to a rapid thaw and there was a good deal of difficulty in forming up. To Major Weston of the Royal Berkshire the Brigade Diary attributes the success achieved in this. On this day the battalion was in support, and it is clear, both from the narrative, and from the fact that its casualties were small, that it was not seriously engaged.

2nd Division history:-

Zero hour had been fixed for 5-45 a.m. on the morning of the 17th. There was no preliminary artillery barrage, 50 per cent. of the guns opening at zero on the enemy's front line, and the remainder on 200 yards in front of the British line, with lifts of 100 yards every 3 minutes; 30 minutes halt on each objective.

Great care had been exercised in getting the troops into their assembly trenches punctually and correctly. This was no easy matter, since the elements had again interfered-a rapid thaw having set in which caused seas of mud to collect along the communication trenches. Thus rapid progress was considerably hampered.

During the forming-up operations the enemy kept up a continuous barrage of varying intensity which seemed to reach a climax about 5 a.m. Showers of coloured lights went up from his support and reserve lines: he was evidently in a very jumpy condition. The effect of the barrage was not very serious, excepting so far as it concerned the 99th Trench Mortar Battery, which had all its stores destroyed and rendered useless for the purpose of the operations. The Commanding Officer of the battery was also wounded some time before zero. [TX00602B]

The attack commenced at 05:45 and the leading battalions of 99th Brigade carried the first and second objectives, though with heavy loss from the German barrage. The function of the Royal Berkshire was mainly to carry up ammunition for them, A Coy carried up SAA and water to the captured positions, C carried up SAA and bombs.

At 15:30 two platoons went up to reinforce the King's Royal Rifle Corps in the captured positions. Meanwhile the Germans were shelling heavily, aimed mainly at the communications trenches and the trackways leading to the battle line. The casualties were Captain E. B. Methuen wounded, one man killed, and eleven wounded.

The leading battalions suffered very heavily, a fact which was largely due to the hour of attack having been

given away by a deserter. The action was that which is called "Boom Ravine" in the History of the 18th Division.

18th February 1917

During the day the enemy shelling eased up and it was D Coy's turn to carry up supplies.

At 22:00 they were relieved by the 17th Middlesex and B, C and D Coys returned to Bruce Huts. at Aveluy

8491 Pte Arthur Aubrey Taylor was killed and two men were reported missing with 7 wounded

Aveluy

19th to 24th February 1917

At 07:00 on the 19th A Coy arrived at Aveluy having been delayed in being relieved. The day was spent cleaning up although 200 men were detailed for fatigues.

For the next 4 nights there were fatigue parties with up to 460 men employed. Lt Col Harris went off to 5th Army School for two days on the 23rd and when he returned the Battalion moved to huts at Ovillers, exchanging billets with the 23rd Royal Fusiliers

Ovillers

24th to 27th February 1917

At Ovillers they learned of the German withdrawal behind Irlles and Pys and they were put on standby to move at short notice. The retreat had begun on the 21st and British hopes had been raised, thinking it was as a result of the II Corps offensive to capture the high ground around Miraumont. In fact it was a strategic withdrawal to the much more heavily defended Hindenburg Line which gave a line which was about 24 miles shorter and much easier to defend.

On the 27th 150 men were sent to Pozieres about 2Km away to pitch a new camp. In the afternoon the Battalion moved there en bloc.

Pozieres

27th February to 3rd March 1917

The next day (28th) the Brigadier came to inspect the camp after a period of training for Lewis gunners and rifle grenadiers in the morning.

Training continued for the next two days made easier by a marked improvement in the weather which was now warm and sunny.

There was still fatigue duty for some men on the 27th, 28th and 1st.

Pys

3rd to 9th March 1917

The front line was now well to the north east of Pys and

the 2nd Division held a sector to the east of the village between the Australian Division and the 18th Division. On the 3rd March the battalion relieved the 24th Royal Fusiliers. Patrols went out at night and found several gaps in the enemy's wire.

The 2nd Division History picks up the story:-

From frequent reconnaissance of the enemy's wire in front of Grevillers Trench it was evident that without considerable artillery preparation the thick entanglements were practically impassable. On 1st March, therefore, the Heavy Divisional Artillery began wire-cutting operations. Only a few guns were in action, as the German retirement had been rapid and fresh gun positions had to be secured and registration completed before the Field Artillery could also take part in the operations. The terrible nature of the ground over which the guns had to be moved made progress very slow. But by 2nd March all batteries were registering, and the Loupart line was kept under fire practically all day long.

At 7 on the morning of the 3rd orders were issued for the attack on Irlles and Grevillers Trench. The 2nd Division was to secure the latter position, including the Lady's Leg Ravine; the 18th Division, on the left of the 2nd Division, was to assault Irlles; and the 2nd Australian Division, on the right, was also to co-operate in the attack with artillery, Stokes mortar, and machine-gun fire.

The 99th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd Division had been detailed for the assault on Grevillers Trench and the Lady's Leg Ravine.

The 1st Royal Berks (right) and the 1st King's Royal Rifles (left), with one company of the 23rd Royal Fusiliers, were the assaulting battalions of the Brigade. The latter relieved the 5th Infantry Brigade during the evening of the 3rd March, the relief being completed by 10 p.m., which, seeing the nature of the ground, was a very fine performance. [TX00603A]

On the 5th the battalion was relieved and moved into close support. The weather was turning cold again and it snowed on the 7th.

While in support there were many calls on the battalion for fatigue duties with 250-350 men out each night.

The Germans did not seem to be behaving normally as the 2nd Division history recalls:-

The wire-cutting proceeded slowly, and the proposed attack for the 5th March was delayed until the formidable belts of entanglements were sufficiently smashed to allow the passage of infantry. There were three rows of wire—the first about 8 feet deep and waist high; the second similar to the first; and the third higher and stronger than the first two, having an "apron" in front. But all day long the guns pounded the enemy's position with but little retaliation, for the Germans had also begun to withdraw their forward artillery in accordance with "Alberich" [the plan for withdrawal to the Hindenburg line]

The Intelligence reports during these early days of March 1917 are interesting, bearing as they did on the attack about to take place. From the statements of prisoners taken on the 2nd March it was learned that orders had been issued by Ludendorff to his troops to hold Grevillers Trench for fourteen days—i.e., until the 16th March. These prisoners also stated that Beaumetz and Hermies, six and eight miles respectively east of Bapaume, were to be

evacuated, and that both places were already being cleared of civilians.

To keep up the *moral* of his troops, which had been seriously affected by the retirement, the enemy issued frequent reports of the "success" of his movements. On 3rd March one report stated: "The fact that our movements have been universally successful during the last few days, and have cost us practically nothing, is due to the skill and bravery of our troops. Regimental historians will tell us in the future how delighted our officers and men were to return once again to open warfare."

Strange that troops who fought bravely, as undoubtedly the Germans did, should be "delighted" to retire from positions which had been soaked with the blood of their comrades in gallant efforts to maintain them. Queer mentality that could see "success" in an enforced retreat, the abandonment of much war material, and the loss of thousands of troops—killed, wounded, and missing. But humour was never a part of the German temperament.

For a week the general attitude of the enemy had been "inactive." He had made no attempt to mend his wire, which day by day was being blown to bits, or even repair Grevillers Trench itself, which, as "zero" day drew near, more and more resembled tumbled and shapeless masses of earth. Few enemy patrols were seen. Hostile sniping and machine-gun fire were alone kept up from Grevillers Trench, but these were checked and did not cause much trouble. There was, however, considerable aerial activity, the enemy's machines flying continually over the Divisional area, and were as constantly engaged by British airmen. [TX00603B]

On the 9th they moved to the north of Pys ready for an attack on the 10th. The Royal Berks were on the right with the 1st KRRC and one company of the 23rd Royal Fusiliers on the left.

Grevillers Trench

10th March 1917

In preparation the 99th Machine Gun Company were ordered to sweep Grevillers trench and prevent the enemy issuing from Loupart trench. Their job was to lay down heavy fire on the German trenches to the right and to bring enfilade fire from Pys to the Ladys Leg ravine. The 99th Trench mortars had to repel bombing attacks and deal with the enemy machine guns.

2nd Division History:-

Thus on the night of the 9th-10th March, when the assaulting troops were all assembled ready for the attack, the line ran as follows: On the right, the 1st Royal Berks; on the left, the 1st King's Royal Rifle Corps, with one company of the 23rd Royal Fusiliers on the extreme left flank of the Rifles. The three remaining companies of the 23rd Royal Fusiliers were in reserve. The attack was to be supported by the 22nd Royal Fusiliers, organized into three companies—one company with eight Lewis guns in Grundy Trench, one company to carry for the Berkshires, and one company to carry for the Rifles. The 99th Machine-Gun Company was ordered to "Sweep Grevillers Trench; cover the ground between Grevillers Trench and Loupart Trench and prevent the enemy issuing from Loupart Trench; cover the flank of the attacking battal-

ions, and especially to bring heavy fire to bear on the trenches on the right front of the attack; bring enfilade fire from the direction of Pys on to the Lady's Leg Ravine." The 99th Trench Mortar Battery was to follow up the attack and assist the infantry in clearing the Lady's Leg Ravine, repelling bombing attacks, and in dealing with the enemy's machine guns and strong points reported in the vicinity of the junction of Coulee and Grevillers Trenches. The 5th Field Company R.E., one company of the 10th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (Pioneers), and two sections of the 6th Infantry Brigade Machine-Gun Company, were also attached to the 99th Infantry Brigade. [TX00603C]

As soon as the 99th Brigade had got into position the Royal Engineers began boarding the trenches and building and repairing dug outs. Bridges were built over the ditches ready for the assaulting troops.

Between 01:00 and 04:00 hot soup and rum were issued to all the men who had been issued with their iron rations, sandwiches and water/rum mixture.

At 04:00 all was ready but the weather had warmed up and the hard frozen ground replaced by a 'slimy disgusting morass of mud' and visibility was reduced to less than 30 yards by the mist.

At 05:15 the artillery and machine guns opened up and this was followed by the infantry moving forward but keeping 60 yards behind the barrage. After 6 minutes the artillery shifted 100 yards ahead and the assault began over a 1500 yard front, 900 yards of which were Grevillers Trench and 500 yards of Lady's Leg trench. A Company on the right had set up a defensive flank but the German line opposite, by Loupart Wood was strongly held and rained heavy MG fire onto the Berkshires. However the trench mortars and machine guns did their job. and the Berkshires were able to push on and take their objectives.

The enemy had been thoroughly cowed by the barrage and the trenches were taken at once. The Germans continued to shell the newly captured line but made no attempt to retake it.

One German officer and about one hundred men were taken, with three machine guns and two light trench mortars. For some reason the Battalion diarist took the trouble to record the serial numbers of two of the machine guns (8248 and 3395) but could give no details of the action.

The 99th were very appreciative of the cover they had from the Divisional guns and the Brigadier wrote:

My Brigade has implicit confidence in the accuracy and skill of our 2nd Division gunners which has never been misplaced. [TX00603D]

The casualties were *Officers. Killed:-* 2nd Lieut. A D Brazies. *Wounded:* 2nd-Lieuts. Layers, Denham. *Other Ranks: Killed* 10, *Wounded* 83, *Missing* 1.

2nd Division history:-

At nightfall on the 10th March Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4 Strong Points were held by the 1st Royal Berks, No. 5 by the 1st King's Royal Rifles, and Lady's Leg Ravine (with No. 6 Point) by D Company 23rd Royal Fusiliers, under the orders of the Officer Commanding 1st King's Royal Rifle Corps. The remaining troops of both the Berkshires and Rifles were disposed in Grevillers Trench and the Old British line. At 5.30 p.m. orders were issued for the relief of the 99th Infantry Brigade on the night 11-12th March by the 6th Infantry Brigade. [TX00603E]

11th March 1917

On the 11th the shelling continued and patrols were sent out at night to report on the state of the enemy wire. It was found to be badly damaged by the British artillery. They suffered one man killed and 12 wounded. That evening the battalion went back to billets at Albert, arriving at 04:00 on the 12th.

2nd Division history:-

Preparations were begun on the morning of the 11th to continue the attack. Bombardments and wire-cutting were carried out by the cc Heavies" along the Loupart line, many batteries of the Field Artillery were in the process of moving forward to new positions, but the going was terribly heavy. "The difficulties of this position," said an officer belonging to the Divisional Artillery, "are appalling, yards of mud to go through, and all ammunition has to be brought up to the Bapaume road and pulled up here in ammunition packs on horses."

During the day the enemy opened a heavy bombardment with 5.9's, but did not hinder preparations for the attack. Shortly after 2 o'clock on the morning of the 12th the relief of the 99th Infantry Brigade by the 6th Infantry Brigade was completed, and the former marched back to billets in Albert. The 6th Infantry Brigade was disposed in the following positions in front of the Loupart line: 1st King's on the right in Posts 1, 2, and 3; 13th Essex on the left in Posts 4, 5, and 6 (Lady's Leg Ravine); the 17th Middlesex Regiment was in support round Courcelette, and the 2nd South Staffords in reserve at Wolfe Huts. The 5th Infantry Brigade moved forward and occupied the Support Brigade area-Ovillers Huts. [TX00603F]

Albert

12th to 15th March 1917

At Albert the battalion were able to rest. 2nd Lt Marcel Simons joined them on the 12th. On the 13th 250 men were given baths and then sent on permanent fatigues to Cromwell Huts. The remainder got their bath the next day after which another group (a sapping platoon of 52 men) were also sent on permanent fatigue.

On the 15th they moved again to Ovillers.

Ovillers

15th to 19th March 1917

When they got to Ovillers 200 men were missing on permanent fatigues. Major Weston returned from leave on the 16th and two days later, on Sunday 18th they moved to Tofrek Camp near Pozieres.

They stayed there only one day working on roads and then retired to billets in Albert at 20:00 on the 19th

Albert

19th to 25th March 1917

At Albert the diarist reported that 200 men were still on permanent fatigues and that is the last we hear of them. Presumably they were transferred to another unit.

The next few days were taken up with training, mainly for the Lewis gunners and the rifle grenadiers.

Four more 2nd Lieutenants joined them on the 22nd, Herbert, Henley, Miles and Palmer.

The 2nd Division left II Corps on the 25th and moved off to join XIII Corps in First Army in the area of Pernes.

During the first 20 days of March in which the Division had been in the line there had been a great impetus for salvaging war material; hence the number of fatigue parties supplied by the Royal Berks. In these 20 days the Division recovered no less than £23,000 worth of material and for the period 18 Jan to 20 March the total was £121,000. The results were so spectacular that General Pereira was asked in a private letter from Q Branch of General Headquarters how he had managed it.

The Move to XIII Corps

25th to 30th March 1917

Their new base in XIII Corps was to be at Tangry. They set off from Albert on 25th marching NW to Harponville which they reached at 15:00. The next day it was marching again to Amplier and on the 27th on to Bonnières. The roads were very bad owing to the wet weather and three men fell out on the 26th

The march continued at 07:00 on the 28th to Blangerval which they reached at 13:00. As the crow flies it is about 10 Km. Their billets were not ready so they had to wait outside the village for a while and have their dinner there. Luckily by now the weather was improving. They were able to rest the next day at Blangerval before leaving at 09:10 on the 30th for the last stage (20 Km) of the march. They had to eat their dinner on the march and arrived at Tangry at 15:30.

Tangry

30th March to 7th April 1917

Tangry is about 4 Km north of St Pol and here they were able to find good ground for training even though there was heavy snow on the 2nd and 3rd.

As soon as the weather improved on the 5th the officers were ordered to turn in their spare kits which meant relinquishing one blanket and a leather jerkin each. 47 men joined as reinforcement that day.

On Good Friday (6th) Capt W J Green and Lt P M Pugh were awarded the Military Cross.

Captain Fullbrook-Leggatt was on leave in England and took the opportunity to get married. The Berkshire Chronicle of 4th April reported:-

A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Captain C St Q O Fullbrook-Leggatt DSO MC Royal Berkshire Regiment, second son of the late Charles O Fullbrook-Leggatt and of Mrs Fullbrook-Leggatt of Knightslee Reading and Mary Katharine, youngest daughter of Colonel G H Bittleston late Royal Artillery and Mrs G H Bittleston of Ashleigh Tavistock. Captain Fullbrook-Leggatt won his DSO very early in the retreat from Mons. He has been three times mentioned in despatches. [TX00830]

The next day the battalion moved to Orlencourt.

Orlencourt

7th to 10th April 1917

Easter day was spent at Orlencourt with C and D Coys at Monchy Breton. The weather by now was fine and warm. A party of 57 men and 6 officers under Capt V G Stokes went off to the XIII Corps training depot.

The good weather did not last. On the 9th there were occasional showers but by the 10th it had turned to snow and hail showers at frequent intervals. Unfortunately the battalion had to move that day to go first to huts at Etrun and then on the 11th to the support line trenches. They were about to join the Battle of Arras

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Continued in section 251