

## Section 242

# Interlude II

## 2nd Battalion July 1916 to April 1917

*After their near annihilation on the 1st July the Battalion had been transferred to the Loos area to recover. Continued from section 232*

### The Somme to Bethune [702]

2nd to 21st July 1916

The journey from the Somme to Bethune was somewhat tortuous. The first stage was a route march from Long Valley Camp to Dernancourt arriving at 19:30 on the 2nd July. Early next morning at 03:00 they entrained for Ailly Sur Somme which they reached at 05:30.

Here they had an overnight stay in billets and marched next morning (4th) to Reincourt where Major Roland Haig was given a temporary promotion and command of the battalion., Captain Hanbury-Sparrow rejoined at this point.

They had 3 days of rest at Reincourt, marching to Longeaux on the 7th to catch a train at 20:00. They were now well on their way north arriving at Pernes to the west of Bethune at 04:00 whence they marched to Allouagne which they reached at 06:30 on the 8th.

They had six days in billets at Allouagne and then moved to Bethune on the 14th for another week. By this time they were thoroughly rested but had had no reinforcements other than from a handful of men returning from hospital.

Major Hanbury-Sparrow was the second in command of the Battalion. He had escaped the slaughter of the 1st July as he was serving on Divisional staff and wrote his comments of the Hulluch area and the battalion's experiences over the next three months:-

THE Hulluch area to which the shattered division was now transferred was of a character to stir up afresh in the heart of each single individual the secret battle against Fear. Dominated by the grey slag heap of Fosse 8, and with its honeycomb of dug-outs and loopholes entangled with the remains of the Hohenzollern redoubt, it was a land of mines and counter-mines, of deep craters like inverted volcanoes, of snipers, and of Minenwerfers (trench mortars). Here was a battle-scarred wilderness in which the individual was strangely thrown back on himself. The eye was continually looking upwards to discern the great canisters coughed out by the Minenwerfer. By day they could be seen rising into the air with a cumbrous wobble, pausing for an uncertain instant at the culmination of their flight, and then swooping down in a clumsy tumble to fall with a crash. At night a tail of fire

betrayed their approach. Woe betide the man who heeded not their coming. Nothing was left of him who misjudged their approach - sometimes not even three inches of spine. Literally the man was blown to smithereens. For the whole tour in the front line men were continually keyed up watching for these dreadful monsters.

The safety of each depended on himself and himself alone, upon the man's individual judgment as to where they would fall. On such occasions authority and experience couldn't command; they could only act as a guide.

These trench mortars crashed and pulverised the ground to such a state of friability that their concussion would shake down yards of trench. Every night the loose earth would be put in sandbags and the parapet built up once more, and each day the trench mortars, like Penelope and her tapestry, would undo another piece of work.

Where the trench fell in, there keen-eyed snipers trained their rifles, and we lost many men who forgot that what was safe one hour might be dangerous the next. But our wonderful sniping officer, Poster, and his trained men gradually got the mastership over these gentry. Frequently the sniping officer would point out to you his next victim, and always he would get him sooner or later. "Such a nice-looking young fellow with a fair moustache. I 'ardly 'ad the 'eart to shoot 'im" It was the sniping officer, too, who a little later gave you the first warnings of the economic difficulties of Germany by asserting that the German dead carried nothing like the money on them that they used to. Rough, but a wonderful fellow, probably the best sniping officer in France.

Then there were the mines. One never knew when they were going up. Men would lie on the floor of the trench with an ear to the ground listening to the thud-thud-thud of the miners' picks, for as long as the miners were at work one knew they would not blow the mine. Then they would stop, and sometimes our own people would blow a mine to forestall them, just a dull underground shock that demolished their galleries. At others the mines would go up, and there would be furious work digging out alive those who had been buried. Like as-not one dug out men reduced to nervous wrecks for life, for a mine explosion might so physically dislocate the nervous system that a man of brave spirit would be turned in half an instant into a grovelling coward.

The whole period was just one terrible strain where nerves were stretched and frayed to snapping-point, and the enemy gained a definite moral ascendancy over a division that had been given no chance of getting over the shock of July 1st. The reports that came up from the Somme indicated that other divisions could beat the Germans. But ours couldn't. The men said there was a spy in it, and resigned themselves to the prospect of failure, confident that someone else would do the dirty work that they had failed to achieve. Yet this was the time when a preposterous memorandum on the fighting spirit

was circulated in which the divisional commander opined that the natural fighting spirit was at its zenith in the front line, but that the further you got back and the higher your rank, the more it was outweighed by responsibility. At the hour it was circulated two German raiding parties were making havoc in the divisional trenches and meeting with the feeblest of resistance. Stronger and stronger grew your conviction that we weren't what we thought we were. There was something fundamentally wrong with our thinking, and this thinking could only be rectified by a close examination of the depths of human nature that the war revealed.

For the greater part of these three and a half months you were second-in-command, for which you were truly thankful. The one week which you spent in the front line in command of a company you had bluffed out magnificently, because it happened to be quiet. But in your heart of hearts you knew you couldn't stand much of this trench mortaring. As second-in-command at battalion headquarters, however, you could maintain a reputation of which you alone realised the fragility, and there, for the first time for several years, you did a bit of reading. [TX00789A]

Deaths during this period were:-

<i>date no</i>	<i>name</i>
3 13693	Alfred Crease
3 39222	Thomas George Hunt
3 16326	Charles Lee
5 15281	Frederick James Moss
6 8202	William George Walters
7 Lt Col	Arthur Mervyn Holdsworth
7 9570	George W Winney
11 18325	Edwin Bateson Gill
13 17580	Frederick Carpenter
15 8687	Ernest Tedder
16 19741	Thomas John Seymour

## **Vermelles [721]**

### **21st July to 6th August 1916**

On the 21st the battalion marched to divisional reserve at La Bourse, preparatory to going again into the trenches in the 8th Divisional area near Vermelles, five or six miles south-east of Bethune. When in Brigade reserve at this time trenches, not billets, were occupied.

The first night they had billets at La Bourse but on the 22nd they moved to the front line trenches near Sailly where they relieved the 7th Cameron Highlanders around 14:00. They had the 6th Royal Irish Fusiliers on their right and the 2nd Lincolns on the left. During this first spell a number of officers joined them and virtually every night a few men were either killed or wounded, presumably by the mortars described by Major Sparrow.

On the 26th they were relieved by the 1st Royal Irish Rifles and returned to Brigade reserve at 11:00

Capt R Haigh went to hospital on the 29th

It was back to the front line on the 30th, relieving the 2nd Rifle Brigade. This time they had the 2nd Lincolns on their right and the 2nd Northamptons on their left.

At long last a draft of 70 men joined them from the 1st Worcesters on August 1st and a further 11 arrived from 46th Infantry Base Camp on the 5th.

On the 4th August they were notified by Brigade that mines were to be exploded:-

Brigade Order - Three mines will be exploded at 8.30.p.m. today

Front line trenches and all forward Saps and Posts will be cleared from Poker St to No. 3 Crater, and all Boyaus included in this area and back to the line Northampton and Vigo St by 8.15.p.m.

Officers commanding the 2nd R. Berks and 2nd Rifle Brigade will each detail an Officer to report to the Officer of the 170th Tunnelling Company R.E. at the junction of Northampton Trench and Boyau 109, at 8.20.p.m that these areas had been cleared. [TX01067A]

By the time they were relieved by the 2nd Scottish Rifles on the 7th they had the 17th HLI on their left and the 2nd Rifle Brigade on their right. This time they moved to Divisional Reserve at Sailly La Bourse.

deaths during this period were:-

<i>Date no</i>	<i>name</i>
22 15797	Ernest John Cook
23 16339	Ernest Challis
24 15718	James Green
24 7973	Herbert William Smith
24 5575	Archer George Waters
30 11805	Charles David Slaughter
31 11954	Samuel David Howatson
1 19751	Hyman Levy
1 2Lt	Edward Mackay Webster
2 10341	Albert Edward Fuller
2 8996	Alfred James Taylor
3 7601	Ernest Harris
3 8080	Thomas Newman
4 8986	William John Kimber
5 9223	Albert Edward Anger
5 17777	Henry Heaviside

## **Sailly La Bourse [807]**

### **7th to 15th August 1916**

The week in divisional reserve came as a great relief. For a brief while they were free from the German mortars and had billets.

However the War Diary gives no details of their activities while in the Hulluch area. All it records is the coming and going of officers and the numbers of casualties.

The only death recorded is 17724 Frederick Wheeler on the 7th

## **The Front Line [815]** **15th to 28th August 1916**

At 17:00 on the 15th the battalion relieved the 2nd Sherwood Foresters in the line. They had the 2nd Lincolns on their right and the 1st Royal Irish Rifles on their left. This was to be a long spell in the trenches, subject to the usual mortar attacks.

On the 17th August a mine was exploded and 2Lt Hales was ordered to take over the duties of instructing raiders:-

At 8.32 P.M. we exploded a mine at G 12 d 25. 75. The Crater is 60 ft wide and 90 ft deep.

8th Division Order - 2nd Lt Hales, 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regt will take over the duties of instructing the Raiding Class from 2nd Lt. Murray D.S.O. 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade from the 20th August. [TX01067B]

Finally the 1st Royal Irish Rifles on their left spread out and allowed them to return to brigade reserve on the 28th.

Deaths recorded were:-

*date no name*

16 200175 Alfred George Smith  
17 9264 William Barnes  
17 16313 Albert Newman  
18 11936 Alfred Henry Bailey  
18 9575 Albert Oliver Green  
22 16900 William James Parker  
23 17396 Benjamin Harry Pudney  
24 9419 Sidney George Crook  
26 9717 Frederick Ballard  
26 18554 Fred Marsh  
26 21876 Arthur Herbert Painter  
26 7857 Henry Pearce  
27 7313 William Charles Hulford  
27 27498 Victor George Taylor

## **Fouquieres [829]** **29th August to 23rd September 1916**

They spent only 3 days in brigade reserve and were relieved by the 2nd Devonshires on the 1st September. Around 15:00 they were able to march out to Bethune and on to the Divisional billets at Fouquieres.

For a week from the 4th September Lieut.-Colonel Haig was in command of the 25th Brigade, his place being taken during his absence by Major A. A. H. Hanbury-Sparrow, D.S.O.

On the 9th they paraded at 13:00 and marched off to

Brigade reserve at Vermelles, relieving the 1st Worcesters.

On the 13th September they exchanged positions with the 2nd Lincolns taking over the right subsector of the Brigade line. It was noted that the Germans were doing a lot of work on his front line, including the construction of a new trench.

They swapped again with the 2nd Lincolns on the 17th returning to the Brigade support trenches.

Death recorded were:-

*date no name*

30 17863 Richard George Bailey  
14 21905 Frederick Darch  
14 17419 Henry William Goring  
14 10514 Stephen Sayer  
15 19810 Edward Woodward  
21 21901 Albert Cook  
21 17579 William Henry Hunter

## **Night Raid [924]** **24th September 1916**

On the 24th September a party of the battalion carried out a night raid on the German trenches, with the object of obtaining information as to the strength of defences, units defending them, their numbers, etc. The party was divided into three sections. The right party (A), under Second-Lieutenant V. R. Humphreys, consisted of fourteen other ranks; the left (B), of similar strength, was under Second-Lieutenant R. C. Slade-Baker; and the covering party (C), under Captain D. E. Ward, the officer-in-charge of the whole operation, comprised ten other ranks.

A and B parties were to enter the trench at a distance of twenty yards from one another and clear it out-wards, whilst C was to support them, when in the trench, by attacking their opponents from above it, and by repelling counter-attacks. The artillery was to bombard the German support and communication trenches for twenty minutes after zero hour, and trench-mortars were to co-operate on the flanks. The raiders, who were to start from as close as possible to the Germans, were to spend ten minutes in the trench. Signals to be by reed horn blown by the Officer-Commanding raiders. The men, who were armed with bombs, truncheons, etc., and, in the case of C, with rifles, had their faces blackened to render them less conspicuous.

The attack started at 21:15. Unfortunately the "Bangalore Torpedo," intended for the demolition of the German wire, failed to explode. Nevertheless, both A and B parties reached the trench, though much hampered by wire. There a fierce bomb fight was engaged in with the Germans, who had taken shelter behind the parapets

and threw their bombs from there. After five minutes of this fighting, the raiders were obliged to retire to their own lines.

Though no prisoners could be taken, owing to the position taken up by the Germans, a good deal of useful information as to trenches and other defences, strength of defenders, and other matters was obtained.

The War Diary contains a report on the raid:-

The raiders left Battalion Headquarters at 9.15pm and proceeded up quarry alley and Boyau 116 and got into their formation in no mans land without any delay, being all clear of sticky trench by 9.50pm.

At 10.10 Captain Ward realised that the Bangalore torpedo would not be ready for firing at 10.15 and at 10.15pm when the artillery barrage opened immediately blew his horn, which was the prearranged signal to

From this period it will be necessary to deal with each party separately.

The left covering party got their Lewis Gun in position at Mud crater and proceeded to sap. This sap was unwired and unoccupied so the party went back to the Lewis gun and withdrew as soon as all were clear of the German trench, as ordered. A few bombs were thrown by the Germans into mud craters. Otherwise they met no opposition.

The left party when the order to charge was given were not quite closed up. Further the men were expecting the Bangalore to go up or at least a delay of 15 seconds to make sure it had failed. Consequently the order to charge took them by surprise and they did not all enter the German trench together. The mat men threw their mats and got into the Germans trench, headed by Pte Byde. They went down 4 bays to the left when Pte Byde met 3 Germans who seized him and endeavoured to strangle him. Something frightened the Germans they ran up a communication trench, the last being shot by Private Byde. He could not get at the body to get an identification as it was guarded by the other two Germans and numerous bombs were being thrown. By this time several others of our men had entered the German line, a bomb fight ensued, the Germans throwing bombs from somewhere behind the parados. At the end of 4 or 5 minutes our men were driven out.

The Bangalore party had the bangalore laid by 10.15 but the primer was not inserted. apparently they had not been spotted placing it.

As soon as the charge was sounded, the NCO in charge Cpl Taylor realised it was no good trying to fire the torpedo and with one man brought back both lengths back to our front line. The remainder went on to the German parapet.

The covering party under Capt Ward charged at once and laid on the German parapet as ordered and covered the retirement. Captain Ward shot a German.

The right party were in the same state as the left party when the order to charge was given. The mat men went forward at once and threw their mats and a certain number under Lt Humphreys got into the German trench, where they were immediately held up by the wire and bombs. Lt Humphreys was hit in the head and mortally wounded. The party remained in the German trench about 5 minutes. It is reported the Germans were very

numerous here. They were driven out at the end of five minutes. Pte Rose carried Lt Humphreys back to a shell hole 30 yds from the German wire. Capt Griffin and Pte Tull subsequently brought him in, after Sgt Gibson had failed to do so unaided.

Notes. (1) As soon as the barrage opened, the Germans started throwing bombs into no mans land.

(2) There was very little hostile artillery or T.M. fire.

(3) Some shell holes in front of the German line had been covered with barbed wire and had glass lying at the bottom of them.

(4) Lt Slade Baker claims to have hit a German, making a total of 3 Germans known to have been hit, all with revolver bullets.

(5) There was very little hostile rifle or M.G. rifle, and what there was came from the right.

(6) The Germans were all wearing caps.

(7) The German trench is about 3 ft deep, very delapidated and large sections of it were full of wire, mainly gooseberries.

(8) The German sentries are in groups of 3 or 4 men each. These groups are surrounded with wire and have a passage back to the support line.

(9) No dug outs were seen.

The casualties were:

Officers. *Killed*: 2nd-Lieut. VR Humphreys.

*Wounded*: Captain D. E. Ward, 2nd-Lieut. R. C. Slade-Baker.

Other Ranks: *Killed or Died of Wounds* 3, *Wounded* 6.

After the raid they moved to Brigade reserve trenches and on the 26th Lt Col Roland Haig left on leave his position being taken by Major A G Macdonald. At this point their line was looking towards Fosse 8 and the Hohenzollern Redoubt, the scene of much fighting by the 1st battalion in September 1915.

Deaths were:-

*date no name*

24 27449 John William Butcher

24 9783 Frederick Jesse Harold Ellis

24 8865 Jesse Hobbs

24 2Lt Victor Richard Humphreys

24 11565 Jack Knight

25 9705 Charles Palfreyman

30 17433 William James Clark

## To XIV Corps [O10]

10 - 20th October 1916

On the 10th October the battalion, being relieved in trenches by the 6th Leicestershire Regiment of 110 Bde, marched to billets at Noeux les Mines. Here Lt Col Roland Haig rejoined from leave. It was now bound for the Somme area again. The first stage was a route march to Allouagne and into billets for two days with a draft of

12 men joining on the 13th.

On the 14th the battalion marched to Lilliers and entrained for Longpre, arriving at 21:00. The journey continued on the 16th proceeding partly by march, partly by motor-bus, it reached Citadel Camp at Doullens at 16:00

Thence it moved, on the 19th, to Brigade reserve in trenches in the support line near Trones Wood. The 8th Division had now been transferred from the Xth to the XIVth Corps.

Major Hanbury Sparrow gives his impressions:-

You went on ten days' leave whilst the battalion was still at Hulluch. When you got back it was on the Somme, not the green and white Somme of July, but the brown October Somme, where the roads ran a foot deep in liquid mud and the brown shell-pocked fields could only safely be crossed on the duckboard tracks. We gazed in wonder upon the churned waste, and in a dim way marvelled at the men who had burst through the barriers that always had broken our enterprises. Since Neuve Chapelle the division had never captured a yard of enemy trench; that battle had taken place eighteen months ago, and eighteen months of war is a long time. In that period it had sustained twenty thousand casualties, that is to say, it had rather more than turned over its total war strength without anything tangible to show for it. Why was it? Were we really so much inferior to these other divisions that had stormed and held positions in this steel-torn wilderness of sticky mud? Or was it rather that they could do it because of the newly invented creeping barrage? Well, we would see. For we were going to do another attack. Rumania was in difficulties and needed our help. The bellows of death must once more blow into flame the sodden embers of the mud-drowned battlefield. [TX00789B]

## Attack at Zenith Trench [O22]

22nd October 1916

On the 22nd the battalion went forward to close support trenches behind the 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment, which it was to support in an attack next day at Zenith trench. It had three companies in Larkhill, and one in Spider trenches. One man here deliberately injured himself. They were in position by 23:00. The attack was to be made by 4th Division on the right and 8th Division on the left

23rd October 1916

The attack, which had been fixed for 09.30, was postponed till 14.30. In the front line the 2nd Lincolnshire was on the right, 2nd Rifle Brigade on the left. As the leading troops advanced, the Royal Berkshire moved up into the trenches vacated by the 2nd Lincolnshire; C and B Companies leading, followed by A and D. This advance was attended by heavy casualties from German artillery fire.

Just after 15:00 C and B Companies were ordered to reinforce the Lincolnshire, who were meeting with very

strong opposition.

At 16.15 A Company was ordered to support the 2nd Rifle Brigade in the first objective, and then to attack Zenith trench from the N.W. flank. At the same time B Company was ordered, if opportunity offered, to attack Zenith trench from the front.

Ten minutes later C was ordered to co-operate with A and B. Presently it was ascertained that the 2nd Lincolnshire had failed to reach the first objective, owing to the strong reinforcement of the defenders of Zenith trench. The projected capture of that trench had failed, and at 20:00, after the attackers had retired to their starting point, orders were received for a fresh attack at 03.50.

The Battalion report on the operation read:-

Report on Operations for this period is as follows:- Acting on 25th Brigade Operation Order No. 134 dated 22-10-16, the Battalion took up position in LARKHILL TRENCH (3 Coys) and SPIDER TRENCH (1 Coy) at 11pm on the 22nd inst. At ZERO hour on the 23rd inst, the Bn moved up and occupied trenches vacated by the 2nd Bn Lincoln Regt, advancing in the order "C" and "B" Coys followed by "A" and "D" Coys, when the 2nd Line of the Lincoln Regt moved from Forward Assembly trenches. During this advance casualties were rather heavy, owing to shell fire. At 3.3pm the O.C. Bn order O.C. "C" Coy to reinforce the Lincolns. At 3.7pm O.C. "B" Coy was ordered to reinforce the Lincolns. At 4.5pm O.C. "A" Coy was ordered to support the 2nd Bn The Rifle Brigade in 1st objective, and then to attack ZENITH TRENCH from the N.W. Flank. At 4.14pm the O.C. Bn informed O.C. "B" Coy that "A" Coy was ordered to support the 2nd Bn Rifle Brigade in 1st objective and then to attack from N.W. Flank and if opportunity offered "B" Coy were to attack ZENITH TRENCH from the front. At 4.26pm O.C. "C" Coy was ordered to attack ZENITH TRENCH in conjunction with "B" Coy and under orders of O.C. "B" Coy and to co-operate with "A" Coy who was going to attack from the N.W. From information received from O.C. 2nd Bn Lincolnshire Regt and O.C. "B" Coy, the O.C. Bn informed the Brigadier that the 2nd Lincoln Regt had failed to reach 1st objective, the enemy being strongly reinforced in ZENITH TRENCH. O.C. "B" Coy deemed it impracticable to attack without further bombardment. The O.C. Bn had previously informed the O.C. 2nd Rifle Brigade that he was supporting him. The Brigadier had ordered an attack on ZENITH TRENCH from the N.W. Flank. O.C. Bn informed O.C. "D" Coy of his intentions and ordered O.C. "D" Coy to move up and be prepared to support "C" and "B" Coys. At 5pm information was received that bombs and ammunition was required by O.C. "B" Coy. O.C. Bn order O.C. "D" Coy to comply with request and ordered him to reinforce "B" Coy with two platoons, "B" Coy being now in position in GUSTY TRENCH. About 8pm O.C. Bn received verbal instructions from the G.O.C. Brigade to hold himself in readiness to attack ZENITH TRENCH with two Coys in conjunction with two Coys of the 1st RI Irish Rifles. It was suggested that the attack should be launched at 3 am the following morning, (24-10-16). Orders were shortly afterwards received that ZERO hour would be in two lines at 25 yds distance. "A" Coy on the Right and "A" Coy of the 1st RI Irish Rifles on the left, forming the first line, accompanied by a platoon of the 22nd Durham Light

Infantry, who were to dig a communication trench. The 2nd Line was formed by "B" Coy on the Right and "B" Coy 1st RI Irish Rifles on the Left. This attack failed, owing to heavy Machine Gun and Rifle fire being brought to bear on them from ZENITH TRENCH. (N.B.) The Platoon of the 22nd D.L.I. Mentioned above followed on the right of the 2nd Line. [TX01077A]

The Berkshire Chronicle of 12/1/1917 reported an incident which seems to belong to this attack:-

#### GALLANT RESCUE OF A READING MAN

Pte C Taplin [18105] Royal Berks of Reading who is now in hospital in Lincoln was gallantly rescued by some of his colleagues a short time ago. His battalion was making an attack on a certain sector when Taplin was wounded by shrapnel having his left thigh fractured. After he had lain in the hole about 20 hours QMS Allen, Pte Dance [u4476] and Pte Tuffield [18136] – all of his company – and QMS Maybury [7330] of another company, volunteered to carry him into the Berkshire lines if he would bear the pain as there were no stretchers at hand at the time. Those named took it in turns to carry in the wounded at great risk to their own lives while they were often over their knees in mud and water. After about two hours they reached a dressing station. Pte Taplin in a letter says 'I think it is one of the many acts of bravery which go unnoticed and unrewarded'

Pte Taplin was for 25 years in the employ of Messrs Huntley, Bourne and Stevens and joined up in May 1915.

Major Hanbury-Sparrow gives his recollections:-

The shattered remains of Zenith and Eclipse trenches guarded Le Transloy. The day was foggy and the attack on these two trenches was, in consequence, postponed till 3 p.m. Punctually to the minute fell the most fearful barrage you had ever heard. The Guards' artillery was backing us. They were firing a barrage such as their infantry found adequate. There could be no excuse for failure. The noise was so unbroken as to produce the effect of a grand silence through which came the rapid fire of the eighteen-pounder quick-firers like the rat-tat-tat of a giant machine-gun. The battalion, and with it the company you commanded, was in support, jammed in a communication trench. Cascades of earth rose silent in the din and fog. The air quivered and pulsed, making you feel as you had at Bois Grenier, one with the battlefield. No, you weren't afraid as long as the sound was unbroken. Let there be the least gap in the wall of sound and you'd have flowed to it, only to have got caught and jarred by the next explosion. But this unbroken continuity is your saving. You get out of the trench and run up and down alongside, seeing to things in the company, so that your sergeant-major implores you to come in.

The attack has started. You send an officer forward to report how it is progressing, for you can see nothing in the fog. He never comes back, for he is killed. Poor boy, it was his first battle!

Then comes the news. The attack has failed. Poor old Division. [TX00789C]

#### 24th October 1916

The fresh attack had the Royal Berkshire on the right and Royal Irish Rifles on the left. It was decided that each battalion should attack with one company in first

line, and one in second line twenty-five yards behind it. This attack also failed, owing to heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from Zenith trench, and at 04.30 on the 24th October the battalion was ordered back to its original position.

At 10:40 B Coy were ordered to get ready to support 2nd Middlesex and at 12:30 they moved up to take a position to the right of the 1st Royal Irish Rifles to form a strong point and to try to get in touch with the 2nd Middlesex to the right.

The Battalion report:-

About 4.30am on the 24th Oct the Battalion was ordered to withdraw to its original position in Close Support Trenches. At 10.40am on 24-10-16 "B" Coy was ordered to prepare to support the 2nd Bn Middlesex Regt. At 12.30pm O.C. "B" Coy was ordered to take up position on the right of the 1st Bn RI Irish Rifles, and to make a strong point of his right flank, and to try and get in touch with the 2nd Bn Middlesex Regt. About 9am 25-10-16 O.C. "B" Coy was ordered to return to Close Support Trench. The Battalion remained in Close Support Trenches until relieved by the 2nd Bn Devonshire Regt on the night of the 27th Oct 1916, when the Bn proceeded to Brigade Reserve in PUNCH and SERPENTINE TRENCHES. [TX01077B]

Major Hanbury-Sparrow:-

When darkness comes the battalion moves forward to the front lines. The attack is to be resumed at one in the morning, with your company in support. It is pouring with rain, and in the mud and misery the two assaulting companies cannot get deployed in time. There's a lunatic voice shouting, "Where's my steel 'elmet? Where's my steel' elmet? I'm not going over without my steel 'elmet." There's chaotic feebleness, for everyone is done to the world and the officers are too tired to exert a firm authority. You yourself fall asleep even as the barrage is descending, and though a man alongside gets buried by a shell, you don't stir from your seat on the firestep, but leave your servant to dig him out single-handed. You're just "whacked to the wide."

The two companies miss the barrage and the attack is fortunately not pressed too seriously, for it would only have resulted in unnecessary casualties. In the early morning your company is withdrawn to the reserve. It is to attack later in the day.

So at last, you think, the time has come when you will really go over the top and see what it is like. It is two years to a day since you took part in an assault, and you try to foresee every conceivable contingency that might occur as you drop into the German trench. Yes, you feel at last, you could do it yourself if only the men would follow - if only the men would follow.

After breakfast you summon your company around you, and, chancing the risk of a shell, address the soaked, shivering, mud-stained men, whilst grave eyes regard you and thoughtful ears listen. You are sitting down as you speak, and this is what you say to the men as they squat round: "We have got to attack to-day, and as we have got to attack we must do it properly. For truly attacks where the men go well lose nothing like so heavily as when there is hesitation. These attacks have failed because the men haven't gone properly. The reason why other divisions succeed is because they've gone properly. I

know a whole lot of you lie in shell holes and leave the brave to go on, I could name some of you (you couldn't, but they don't know that), But you've all got to go to-day. The job's got to be done. After all, our lives aren't our own in these times,"

They see the force of that last remark, and several heads nod gravely. You are pretty sure they mean to go, and, considerably relieved in mind, send them back to the trench. [TX00789D]

Among the men were some recently arrived from England who had joined under the Derby scheme which was the prelude to conscription in England. They had had barely any training and were fearful of what to expect: Major Hanbury-Sparrow tried to reassure them:-

The battalion has a draft of Group 40 under the Derby scheme. These are married men of 41, and their bodies simply can't stick this hardship. Yet their spirit is superb, and they shame the younger and stronger men into greater efforts. For they feel so terribly the shame of going sick. Soon after your little speech, you find one of them in tears because he can't go on. Another one, shivering with ague, remarks, "It comes a bit 'ard after only fourteen weeks' training." Hard! It's a soaking hell of misery such as you had never imagined.

You speak to the C.O. (the third the battalion has had since you arrived) about these men. Neither of you know whether to laugh or cry about them, The C.O. remarks they are anybody's meat, but you both agree they must go in the attack. Suddenly you wonder on what springy stuff you are standing; looking down, you perceive it to be the half-submerged trunk of a corpse. But indeed the sunken lane in which battalion head quarters lie is full of such horrors, the stench of which, however, is more or less obliterated by the pungent reek of the constantly exploding shells. [TX00789E]

### 25th - 27th October 1916

Here they stayed overnight and at 09:00 on the 25th they were ordered to return to the close support trench to rejoin the rest of the battalion.

The battalion remained in close support trenches till the night of the 27th October, when it was relieved by the 2nd Devons and moved into Brigade reserve in Punch and Serpentine trenches farther back.

Major Hanbury-Sparrow:-

It rains and it rains. Corps headquarters may storm as much as they like at the end of their telephone and vow to hold the division in line until Zenith trench is captured, but it just keeps on raining. In your heart of hearts you believe that the effect of the rain is being over-estimated and that you and your men could capture the trench. But fortunately you are not consulted. The attack is postponed from hour to hour and from day to day, till at last three days later, and very much to your relief, it is cancelled. Corps decide the division is hopeless and order it out of the line.

The march out of the line was almost the bitterest agony of all, for the men were tired out before they started. It was impossible to move except on the duckboard tracks, and the weary trudge went on throughout the night. On either side of the track exhausted men of the incoming division were lying slowly drowning in the mud. What

could you do except give them the contents of your flask? For you must push on, push on, with your men and get them to shelter somehow before they too collapse.

In the morning it was as if an epidemic of jaundice had broken out. The battalion was yellow with exhaustion.

Two days later we heard the incoming troops had taken Zenith trench with the loss of ten men. Zenith trench! It was the Nadir of the Division! [TX00790F]

The casualties during these days were: **Officers.** *Killed* (5): Capt. M. H. Hissey. Lieuts. E. Baseden, F. A. J. Oddie. 2nd-Lieuts. C. W. Griesbach, W. C. Hales. *Wounded* (7): Major A. G. Macdonald, D.S.O., Capt. E. C. Griffen. 2nd-Lieuts. J. C. L. Davies, F. A. Lloyd, B. K. Berry, W. J. Robinson, Rev. W. Elwell, C.F. (attached). **Other Ranks:** Killed or Died of Wounds 50. Wounded 143. Missing 10.

## Reserve and Reorganisation [O28]

### 28th October - 7th November 1916

On the 28th October the battalion was withdrawn from Brigade reserve moving to F Camp and, from the 29th October to the 2nd November, they were at Citadel Camp.

121 men joined from Base camp on the 1st and seven officers, on the 2nd Three of these were transferred from the 1st/4th Bn 2Lts P H Leppard, 2Lt W A Bartman and 2Lt W D Lennard.

From the 3rd to the 7th November it was in billets at Méaulte.

## Arrival of Lt Howse[N07]

### 7th November 1916

On the 7th November Lt R P Crosbie and 2Lt Harold Edward Howse joined the battalion at Meaulte. Lt Howse was a South African who had come to Britain to join the war and had served with the 3rd Royal Berks (see section 151) His letters and diary recall his trip from Rouen.

[24th October] On the way down the Solent we were all on deck to catch any glimpse of the passing shipping and the signs of a naval war. There was little to be seen, however, save a brilliantly lighted hospital ship standing in to port; and the dark forms of our escorts.

[25th October] After a good sleep in the saloon, I awoke to find we were off Le Harve [sic], and were waiting for the pilot to take us in. Dawn was breaking, and the cliffs of France were close ahead. How strange it was, this first sight of that martyred country - it was to prove almost the gate of a new life to me...?

"We passed the quaint old town and into the smoother waters of the river. At once the scenery began to charm; high hills covered with the last autumn foliage, and chateaux crowning the heights, quaint villages along the river bank, and men and women waving to us from the houses. Our flag and the tricolor were everywhere, and as we passed up the winding river we realised some-

thing of the reality of that Entente Cordiale of which we were to hear so much in France. At midday the smoke of many chimneys appeared in the distance, and at 1 o'clock we drew alongside the quay at Rouen, and set our feet on French soil for the first time.

"Here I am in France. I have a very few moments. I am not in the firing line, and will not be there for several days. We arrived here (Rouen) at midday to-day. I cannot tell you all about our voyage by sea and river, through scenery of absolutely unparalleled beauty. My letters from here must necessarily lack topographical detail in future.

Well and happy I am ready for the Bosche. I have already seen many of them - as prisoners. [TX01083A]

[29th Oct Sunday] He goes with brother officers to the Sunday service, [at the Cathedral] and is duly impressed. Thereafter a verger, "dressed in a most gorgeous costume, took us round the Cathedral, showing us all the monuments and points of interest in the place. He spoke French only, but we managed to make out a good deal of what he said, and it was very interesting. Some parts date back to the 12th century. Notable are many relics of the mediaeval English occupation."

In the afternoon they take tram for Bonsecours, on a steep hill some four miles away, and thence get the "stupendous view over the valley of the Seine and the city of Rouen. And yesterday it was very fine, with a double rainbow, and the setting sun glinting on the wet roofs of Rouen.": [TX01083B]

[5th November] "I left Rouen on the first Sunday in November. I did not know where I was going, and owing to many stoppages on the way, our train had not got anywhere definite by Monday evening.

[6th November 1916] But on Monday night, as we crept slowly along, I heard the sound of the guns in the distance,

[7th November] and early on Tuesday morning someone with a lantern shouted into the compartment, 'All officers of the Nth [7th] Division detrain here. In great haste we did so, hurling our kits out of the train, and ourselves after them. Away in one direction there was a great noise of guns going on, and I assumed that that was the way to the war. Anyway, I had some coffee in a Y.M.C.A. tent, and, just at dawn, guides turned up to show us the way to our battalions. Mine was at the time resting in a little village a mile or so from Albert, on the Somme front. So there I trudged and reported myself to the adjutant I had some breakfast, and then met the officers of the battalion, being posted to B. Co. I found that they were making preparations to go into the trenches on the following day. So I spent the day getting my steel helmet, identity disc, and so forth, and that night slept like a log in the cottage that was our billet. [TX01083C]

2nd Lt Howse had joined his battalion at last.

## **Divisional Reserve[N08]**

**8th - 19th November 1916**

On the 8th the battalion went into Divisional reserve at Briqueterie joining the 2nd Lincolns at camp in Montauban.

Howse:-

"Next morning, after breakfast, the battalion paraded at 10 to march to the trenches. The day was fine, but the ground exceedingly muddy, and marching not at all pleasant. At midday we camped alongside the famous Trones Wood, which had been taken by our men about two months before. Away on our left was the grim and scarred outline of Delville Wood, where the South Africans put up so glorious a fight. The scenes of the heaviest fighting of the war were all around us, and the shell-torn ground was covered with the little memorials to those who had fallen there. We stayed near Trones Wood one night, and it was very fascinating to me then to watch our howitzers firing, and to see the novel sight of fighting in the air. The sky was full of planes that day. [TX01083D]

On the 9th they again returned to the front line, where they relieved the 1st Worcestershire Regiment in the left sub-section. They had 12 officers and 506 other ranks in the front line having left behind 7 officers and 66 other ranks at Carnoy.

Howse:-

The following afternoon we marched past Guillemont and Ginchy into the line. Our line ran then in front of Les Boeufs, and the Hun held the village of Le Transloy. We reached our trench after much floundering through the most frightful bit of ground that could possibly be in France. The Hun shelled us shortly after our arrival, but my company had no casualties. [TX01083E]

On the 10th the Brigade Diary reports:-

10-11-1916 On the Left a Patrol consisting of 1 Sergeant and 6 men had not proceeded far when they were observed and fired at, but they went on till about 100 yards from our trenches. A Platoon was sent out to join them but they too were observed and came under heavy machine gun and rifle fire and the enemy called for artillery support. The project of digging in a line starting from the point reached by the first patrol was, therefore abandoned and the platoon was brought back to its original position.

Casualties - 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regt: Wounded 1 Officer and 5 Other Ranks. [TX01067C]

They remained in the front line until the 11th, when they went into Brigade reserve at Hogs Back trench, where they suffered heavy casualties with 15 killed, 75 wounded and 4 missing. another 29 fell sick. The battalion war diary gives no details of any action or shelling but the brigade diary reported:-

11-11-1916 The 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regt was relieved, to Support, in the Hogsback Trench. The enemy used gas shells freely, particularly round the Batteries and along the Hogsback Trench.

As 58 of the wounded were gassed we may assume they were subjected to this gas attack.

Howse wrote home a week later:-

This time last week I was in the trenches. We were having fine weather, and except for some heavy shelling there was very little doing on our part of the front, chiefly owing to the fact that the earth was literally a sea of mud after the recent long and heavy rains. I was comfortable, more or less, housed in a deep dug-out, and was having

a chat with none other than C. W., whom I met with his company in the same trenches as we held. It was very pleasant, this sudden and unexpected meeting in such a strange place, and we had a long chat and smoke together down in the bowels of my dug-out. And over our mugs of coffee, with shells bursting harmlessly overhead, we discussed the latest news from Walmer, and the tidings we had received of friends, some in various theatres of war, others wounded, others gone on a long journey, neque redibunt."

Well, on Saturday night we were relieved, and I had taken two platoons of men out of the trenches, and was moving towards another trench slightly to the rear, when we suddenly heard shells whizzing about us and bursting in a peculiar manner. Of course, when an ordinary shell bursts, it kicks up the dust a lot and makes a huge noise - "whiz-z-z-z-z: crash ! ", but these shells were coming "whiz-z-z-z-z flop," with not much noise, and very little explosion. We soon we found, out the reason. They were gas shells. There was a pungent smell in the air. I ordered all the men to put on their gas helmets, and as soon as I had seen to this I put mine on, but at night when you have a lot of men to look after, you must take your thing off to shout and give orders. So that I got a good whiff of it. I got the men into the trench, but the dear old Bosche continued to bombard us for over five hours. Luckily, - miraculously - no one was hit where I was, and my company escaped with only a few casualties. The Bosche wasted a lot of ammunition. [TX01083F]

[12/11/16] Anyway, I felt alright next day, and I sent you one of those printed post-cards, and also wrote to Mr. Mason.

13/11/16] On Monday morning I had to march my company to X-, about two hours before dawn when the fun started. I had not gone far before I started to vomit and spit. Then I knew what was up. This new kind of gas the Bosche is using has no effect for twenty-four hours, when it starts to turn you inside out. I reached our destination, and then the men started to collapse. All Monday they were bad, so that I had to send several to the aid post. The doctor of a neighbouring battalion ordered me to go back to a dressing station as I was "cyanosed," whatever that may mean. Anyway, I couldn't leave the company without an officer - this wasn't the company I had with me when the gas came, but another one I took over when its officers were knocked out - so I waited till the afternoon, when an officer came and relieved me. [TX01083G]

They returned to their recent position in the front line for the 14th and 15th. relieving the Royal Irish Rifles

On the 17th they marched back to Sand Pits Camp near Meaulte and on the 19th entrained at Edge Hill station to move to billets at Metigny.

### Casualties

Between the 10th and 15th the casualties in the ranks were very heavy, being:

*Killed 15, wounded 75* (56 of them gassed; two died later of wounds). Lieutenant W. D. Lennard was wounded on the 11h, Lieutenant G. H. Carter and Second-Lieutenant W. A. Bartman on the 12th, the former dying of his wounds. On the same day

Lieutenant H. E. Howse was gassed (not fatally), on the 14th Lieutenant W. H. Flint was wounded.

## Metigny [N20]

20th November to 24th December 1916

It remained at Metigny from the 20th November to the 27th December, busy reorganizing and training after the heavy losses on the Somme Front.

During this period the GOC of 8th Division, Major General H Hudson was replaced by Major Gen W Heneker on the 10th December.

Major Sparrow recalled the old commander visiting the battalion and a dinner for officers who had served a year in the Division:-

The old divisional commander had been kind enough to go out of his way to find you in order to say goodbye, for, as he said, you had been one of the longest with the division. Which was true enough, for at a dinner held about this time for those officers who had been a year and upwards with the division, only some thirty or forty attended, including doctors and A.S.C. Unquestionably you had been very lucky. Equally unquestionably it couldn't go on much longer. Therefore enjoy yourself hard whilst you can. It was whilst you were at this place that you ran on foot a seven mile race against the doctor, who was mounted on the worst of the battalion "hairies." You lost, but not by much, for, considering everything, you were extraordinarily fit. Then there were mounted paper-chases, football, bridge, and singing. Gramophones would start at breakfast and go on all day. Sometimes you would drop into the cottage opposite the mess just to hear the old Madame chuckle at the affected voice of Jones of the Lancers. "Ah come from the Army, The Army Ah come from," etc. It tickled her to death, that record.

If an officer valued his peace of mind, he never talked French to the peasants. "Comprends pas" was the only safe thing to say if one wished to avoid being plagued to death with demands for "Reclamation - toujours la reclamation." Only our Australian padre used to go round of an evening and sit with them in their kitchens, listening to the women crooning over their knitting the wistful: "Apres la guerre finira; Et les Anglais partiront."

Or discussing - and the padre said it was their sole subject of conversation - babies This same chaplain used to spend a good deal of time with the men in their billets, and so he got to find how they were thinking that, given a little give-and-take, peace could easily be made now. He also got to learn the real horror some of them felt for fighting on Sundays. "They genuinely think it wicked," he declared. [TX00790E]

The first inkling they had was a call from a neighbouring battalion:-

HE came with the suddenness of a cyclone. One day the divisional commander called and said good-bye; the next the C.O. of the battalion in the adjacent village rang up hurriedly to warn us to look to our guard. The New Man, he said, had just passed and raised hell, had hauled him over the coals and threatened to send the adjutant home in disgrace. "Look out," he reiterated, as he rang off.

We were billeted in a rest area when we received this

warning. For the first time for twelve months the men had been able to get away from the feeling of impending death. Whatever might be the ultimate fate in store for them, they were being given a month's respite, a month of security, a month of life, and they luxuriated in it.

They were wonderful men, marvellous in their docility, their cheerfulness, and the fewness of their wants. What were they thinking of it all? To judge from the daily piles of colourless letters that the officers had to censor, nothing, just nothing, except a deep longing to be at home. Sometimes one was almost overwhelmed by the realisation that their slum cottages and slatternly womenfolk could raise a love far deeper and more sincere than any you could feel. The war was making you grow out of your home; with the men it seemed to be having exactly the opposite effect of driving them in. Take leave, for instance. The one thing that would definitely have raised a mutiny in the British Army would have been to have allotted leave by merit and not by strict rotation. Once you had tried the experiment in your company. There was an instant rumble which made you hurriedly abandon your project.. [TX00790F]

Major Sparrow was aware that the new broom was going to upset his men but on the whole he approved of the new man's approach:-

Into this Arcady was sent the new General and at once the fur flew. Within a fortnight the greater part of the big wigs had disappeared. Never had there been such a fevered replacement and displacement since the September massacres of the French revolution. Each day the tumbril carted off some victim, and through it all rode; strode, and drove the General, exclaiming: 'That guard's a disgrace!' 'Why aren't those buttons cleaner?' 'Get wire put in the men's caps.' 'Those jackets are filthy. Scrap the lot and damn the expense.'

Like an electric shock the imperious will jarred through the division. For a moment you stood open-mouthed, not daring to believe. Then, as the axe fell on some other head, you knew it was really: true. Bourq had come again. Here at last was something in which you truly believed. From that moment the General could do no wrong in your eyes, and had he kicked you out the next day you'd have gone without a murmur, in full confidence that he was right in thinking you worn out and only fit for the scrap-heap.

In truth, the G.O.C.'s methods were very simple. He had one limited object which he kept clearly in view, and that was to vivify the morale of the division by a martinet discipline and the most fastidious attention to turn-out. Once this was gained, you gathered he thought the rest would come, and because you knew his methods were sound you swore by him. For what he was achieving was the liberation of the thinking mind from fear. Instead of having one's energies consumed by the struggle with fear, discipline was to take on that task and the energies could be set free to think how to beat the Germans.

This was really the virtue of the rehearsed attack that came in about this time. Enemy trenches, photographed from the air, were duplicated upon the ground behind, and the planned attack rehearsed so often that the man's mental task was simplified to that of merely getting himself to his appointed place by a fixed time. It is probably difficult for anybody who did not experience these methods to realise that so far from making the movements wooden they actually engendered greater elasticity, for the mind, released by discipline and

certainty from the numbing pressure of fear, was able to think coherently and thereby make adjustments for the unforeseen. It is difficult to credit, but it was so, and with this feeling of certainty confidence grew.

For discipline was not the meaningless, wooden obedience that people believe it was. Rather it was the vehicle by which the superior will permeated the subconsciousness of the troops, and this was the real *raison d'etre* for smartness, cleanness, saluting, and so on. There is not the least doubt that close-order drill and rifle exercises were ceremonies by which the superior will made its presence felt. Military punctiliousness was not an obsolete relic of the past, but the channel by which the troops gained strength. For they, permeated by this higher will, put something of it into the regimental spirit, so that the men served proudly what they themselves were building up. This improvement in the collective tone was only achieved by the suppression of the ego, which subconsciously was continually in revolt and always trying to throw off the dominance of discipline. It was, therefore, impossible to relax discipline for any length of time without this ego, weak yet defiant, appearing and corroding the fine spirit that had been built up. That was why brass buttons which required daily cleaning were always more effective discipliners than black buttons-they were a daily disciplinary exercise. The difference between naval and marine discipline probably owes more to the uniform than is generally realised. Supposing a battalion of infantry were put into naval uniform, it is almost certain that discipline and with it fighting capacity would markedly, decline, that is, with the English race at the particular stage of development of the present age. Only a soldier can fully comprehend the virtue of spit and polish. Here's to the health of the brass button, and may it long survive! [TX00790G]

Major Sparrow was critical of the incessant bayonet practice that was imposed on the men. He could not recall seeing any of the enemy bayoneted.

Individuality undoubtedly could have been put to more use than it was, but for the bayonet-fighting gallows.

Oh, how you abominated those swinging, strawstuffed sacks and the Scottish colonel with his "Long point, short point, jab." It was the rage, this brainless bayonet-fighting. It was impossible to do wrong in the eyes of the staff as long as you were inciting your men to stick their damned bayonets into these bloody sacks. Minor tactics were at a discount. Any officer, too lazy or incompetent to think, had only to get his men to stick bayonets into sacks to feel he was doing a first-class bit of training. You were second-in-command again and you used to go round switching off the subalterns from these sacks with, "The enemy' are shooting at you from that hill with a machine-gun. Do something about it." A pause. Then, "You've already lost half your platoon whilst you've been making up your mind." "Now you've lost the whole of it and you're dead too, simply because you will waste your time with this nonsense instead of practising tactics." For nonsense it was. Of all the thousands of dead you had seen in your two years of fighting you had not, so far as you were aware, seen a single man killed with a bayonet. [TX00790C]

Men were steadily returning from hospital and batches arrived from base; 8 on the 20th, 39 on the 3rd, 19 on the 7th, 18 on the 8th, 9 on the 10th and 93 on the 14th. One man was returned to base on the 26th as being

under age and another on the 24th was sent back to England to be commissioned.

Major Sparrow did not like the new policy of deliberately mixing up men from different areas, a lesson learned when whole communities lost their men folk in one fell swoop when a Pals unit was wiped out:-

The division had hardly settled in the line when it was pulled out and sent back once more to the old rest area for a further fortnight's training. The inhabitants, who had abused us horribly when we were there before, now gave themselves away in their relief at finding we weren't the Guards, and were very reasonably civil. Once more you fell from your high estate of second-in-command and reverted to company commander. You didn't enjoy these continual come-downs, but the Record officer for some reason didn't realise you were there and so kept sending up senior officers. But at this time the chief activity of Records was to send drafts of other regiments to reinforce battalions, thereby doing everything to break down the regimental spirit we were striving day and night to build up. For instance, Records sent us a large draft of Midlanders with whom we had not got the smallest connection, whilst they sent our men off elsewhere. Yet such is the transferable element in man that we were as quickly able to absorb them as they were to give us good and loyal service. It was commonly reported that this mixing-up of drafts was a deliberate policy imposed upon Records, but if it was true it was making an awful fool of units. [TX00790A]

## Christmas 1916 [D24]

24th-27th December 1916

Howse rejoined his battalion on December 16th to find them looking forward to Christmas.

"Our preparations for Xmas proceed apace. You may assume that at Christmas time I was one of the fortunate ones in France. There are some peace spots in this war, and this is one of them. In spite of unfavourable circumstances we hope to have as merry a Xmas as possible. One hopes that we shall have some real Xmas weather, with a white-covered landscape and a keen frosty air. There seems to be every possibility of this. Snow is hanging about, waiting to honour Xmas in the good old way. But the cold cannot harm me now. I sleep in a bed at night here.

"And what about peace? Everybody is very excited about, this offer from Germany, which may be the beginning of the end. The terms may be discussed, and even if they are not accepted there is a general feeling that very soon this book of waste and horror may be finally closed and put aside for ever."

Nothing very much is happening. One day he finds two old Rondebosch school-fellows in a platoon he has on a route march. But, no, he has not gone into the tanks, though he has seen the dear old things, and they are all they claim to be. Some of the stories about them are marvellous, true ones. Some day he may tell them what he has seen; meantime, let them read "The First Hundred Thousand" if they want to find out about his life. Also, "My commanding officer has sent in my name for it, job in a 'Labour' battalion, as he wants me to have a complete rest from the trenches. He says I am not fit after the gas, though I am really right as rain. Anyhow, I am not keen on the job, though it is, of course, a fairly safe one, and you

will probably be glad to hear of this. One makes roads and things behind the firing line."

He wrote home on Christmas Eve

" B.E.F., Christmas Eve, 1916.

"Xmas Bells - Ring in the thousand 'years of peace.'"

" Now I know that you at home are wondering how I am spending this anniversary of the birth of Christ. You are picturing muddy trenches, heaps of snow, and heaps of Bosche, and me in the middle of it all, trying to keep warm before a brazier, in which the wood is too wet to light. I wish I could cable to dispel that horrible imagination you have probably conjured up. There are fellows unfortunately who will spend to-morrow under circumstances like these; but with me it is far otherwise, and I am duly grateful.

"I'll tell you where I shall eat my Xmas dinner. In a living-room of a cottage in a little French village behind our lines, a tiny straggling village, not deserted by its quondam inhabitants. Our little cottage is inhabited by a dear old French peasant woman, who has a husband and a son 'à la guerre,' four officers of B. Co., those officers' servants, and numberless rats, - and a nanny goat. The nanny goat sleeps with the dear old peasant woman. In front of the cottage, which probably housed some of Napoleon's troops in days gone by, is the village street, and behind it is a garden with Brussels sprouts, and then the rolling country of France behind that. This rolling country is very like a sunny land I know somewhere far away.

We shall feed well to-morrow. Sundry francs have parted company with us, and a duck and a chicken has said good-bye to a French farmyard forever. Also we have nuts and raisins, puddings and cakes, fish and soup, and, what no Christmas can lack, crackers. These have been sent to the Tommies' by folk in England. I have a box of cigars from Chillingworth House.

"The dear old French peasant woman has been wonderfully good to us while we have been here, and we have put a few francs together to get her some kitchen utensils as a Xmas present. My French is proceeding apace, as we talk to her a good deal, and she sometimes roars with laughter at our attempts. A sort of pidgin French has grown up out here, and it passes everywhere. She is in the room as I write, and she has just intimated to my servant that he will probably be drunk to-morrow. 'Vous beaucoup zig-zag demain.' I think it is a delightful expression. She is a dear old soul, and we get on awfully well with her.

"Yes, we are going to have a good Xmas. We have hung some mistletoe from a beam in the ceiling, and have threatened to kiss madame as there are no English girls here to be caught beneath the bough. She says 'No bon pour moi,' being British Army French. (At this moment the old dame is explaining to the servants the meaning of 'legume,' and there seems to be a good deal of argument about it.)

"And the men are going to feed well, too, on pork and chickens. The mortality among pigs in this part of France during the last few days has been something too terrible. There is some speculation as to whether our consignment of some hundreds of puddings will arrive this afternoon for the men. Each man has got smokes enough to last him, well ten cigars and a box of cigarettes each.

"It has been an absolutely perfect day, with clear sunshine. We may have snow, I rather hope we do. But there will be no shells here to-morrow. We are as safe as you are. I wonder what sort of a Xmas hate will be on in the line. Of one thing I am certain. There will be no Xmas hate, 1917. All the talk is of the 'fin de la guerre.'

The Allies have refused the German offer, but there is something in the air that veritably smells of peace, - not very far distant.

"I hope you have had a good Xmas. Had you known of my fortunate circumstances you would surely have done so."

During the Christmas celebrations the Doctor disgraced himself:-

Sparrow

A hard drinker and foul-mouthed in his cups, he often used to tell the tale of how he and his friends took a "surfsighreen" (siren) to the Governor-General's ball, and danced in a ring round her to the dismay of all that was respectable in Sydney.. The soul of good nature, he never minded singing, "You're moy pretty little baiby," whilst the pianist cried with laughter, for rude Boreashad absolutely no ear. But he had other songs which were less respectable. The previous Christmas he had been knocked down by the parson for starting one. Not that he required much of a shove, for it was Christmas night, we were out of the line, and the Doctor was very much "on." That same night, however, a little later he was sent for, as a man had been taken seriously ill. This was unfortunate, for the Doctor was by this time in the mood of the man who took his temperature with his fountain pen and reported it black. However, he was sobered down and sent off with a teetotaller as escort, but the night air and the ascent up into the loft where lay the man was too much for him.. He returned to the mess, and having failed to get out. Of his fleece-lined mackintosh-for the double lining completely defeated him, he was sent to bed. In the morning when asked how he felt he replied, "Aw, feel as if a'd swallowed mer blankit." [TX00793N]

## Back Areas [D27]

27th December 1916 to 27th Jan 1917

Here, at Metigny and at various camps in the back areas, the battalion continued training and recouping till the 27th January 1917, when it returned to front-line trenches at Rancourt.

Howse:-

27th Dec:-" On Boxing Day at 4 a.m. I joined the Works Battalion I told you of, and Madame was up at that unearthly hour to see me off. I am now within sound of the guns again, but comparatively safe. So don't worry. I sha'n't need to keep my head down much for a bit.

"Those delightful people in Berkshire sent me a splendid parcel for Xmas, and it formed part of our Xmas dinner.

"Peace notes seem to be flying all over the place, and most people are daring to hope for an early end to this banging I can hear going on now I am, as the Tommies say, in the pink."

He seems to be now in. the neighbourhood of Bray, and

the day after his arrival the town was subjected to a long range bombardment, of which, in spite of casualties, he says nothing at the time.

[31st Dec] "You would be interested if I could describe this place in detail, but owing to the exigencies of the military situation I can give you only a few impressions. First of all there is a most unearthly noise going on. It is incessant, and one scarcely notices it now. We are all sitting in our mess, which is a dug-out fitted up as comfortably as could be. We have a fire in the fireplace, and most of us are writing letters at the table. At night I sleep on a bed made of wire netting, with plenty of blankets. I really hope they leave these places standing after the war, so that you can come and see the strange life of this underground world.

"At present we are doing very little, and to-day, Sunday, is a complete rest. Tonight is Old Year's Night, and we are going to have a sing-song to the accompaniment of our guns and the Bosche shells. It will be a strange way of ushering in the New Year. To-morrow will be 1917, and what hopes will be born then. Victory and Peace we seek, and may they soon come, so that we can creep out of our holes and breathe the free pure air of home again.

## Front Line [128]

28th January to 2nd March 1917

Major Sparrow compared the return to the front line with his experiences with the 1st battalion in 1914. He was also bitterly critical of the refusal of the High Command to allow British troops to construct deep shelters like the Germans and French did:-

We returned to the Somme, platoons marching at intervals of a hundred yards to avoid losses from aircraft, every platoon spick and span, every section of fours exactly dressed, every file covered off, packs square and buttons bright. Left-left! Left-right-left! - even as the other battalion had once marched out of Hazebrouck. Our tramp rang out in the frosty air. We had seen the Somme green, we had seen the Somme brown, how we were to see it white. Our picks rang out on the frozen mud, our patrols crawled in white jackets on the snow, and shells, when they went off, exploded on the top of the ground, so that everyone of their many fragments was a danger.

The trench that you yourself were in had originally been dug by the French, who had started the two shafts of a deep dug-out. This was all the cover we had, these two unventilated shafts, for the British never allowed deep dug-outs in the front line. At the bottom of one of these shafts were company headquarters with a brazier on which the cooking was done. Next on the stairs sat and slept the signallers and orderlies, and still higher crowded anybody who was off duty. The 'fug' was terrible, terrific and staggering, and whenever conditions permitted you would drive the men out and try to get the place ventilated.

The wisdom of allowing no deep dug-outs in the front line was very doubtful, for it imposed a great strain on the troops. The idea behind it was, of course, to prevent the men from huddling in them instead of doing their duty during an enemy attack. And whilst this immediate object was achieved, yet the nerves of the troops were so worn by this continual exposure in the open that it is questionable if their resistance was any greater, whilst it

is certain their casualties were very much higher. Once again at the bottom of things lay this problem of non-commissioned officers. Had they enough authority to get the men out the instant the barrage lifted? The opinion of the Higher Command is clearly shown by this policy of dug-outs. Once again we see how the character of the men themselves was the real cause of so much of their losses. Had we but had N.C.O.s like the Germans, we could have built dug-outs like the Germans, and saved countless casualties. But not having such N.C.O.s, the front line troops were kept in splinter-protects and in the vicious circle that was set up the N.C.O.s themselves became casualties before they had found their feet.

But here on the Bouchevesnes front the shelling was not bad, for, though we didn't know it, the Germans were already withdrawing their stores to the Hindenburg line. So we lost but few from shell fire, whilst the better discipline of the battalion, and indeed of the whole division, kept down a sick rate which otherwise in that hard cold might have been severe.

In the last half of February the battalion was withdrawn again to train for an attack. [TX00790B]

At Rancourt the battalion continued taking its turn in the trenches in what appears to have been a fairly quiet time. The Brigade Diary of the 30th Jan described the front line:-

The front line consists of a series of posts not connected up and with only a little wire. The ground is a swamp of shell holes and any length of trench dug at once caves in in spite of revetment. The support line consists of two bits of trench - Bean on the Right and Bread on the Left. The enemy from Sallisel, U 15 c overlooks all the ground to the road in U 14 c 1.0. and D 13 d and D 14 c.

Blue Avenue - the only Communication trench is impassable. Reliefs are carried out across the open. There are two main duckboard walks to the front line.

The enemy is very much in the same position. He is quite inactive but carries on intermittent shelling of the back areas [TX01067E]

On the 31st the same diary recorded the defences:

Notes on the defences of the Rancourt Section:

On taking over the line, the front line posts were shallow, with large gaps. The wire was very weak and not continuous. It was only in the Right Sub Sector that the Support Company was at all well placed. The Reserve Battalion was too far back. The work of the Brigade was therefore concentrated on the front system and its immediate communications. Dugouts to hold the Reserve Battalion are now well under way in Hospital Wood. The Personnel of the T.M. Battery is up to work on Emplacement and Ammunition Store. Andes Lane, Abode Lane and Alex Trench are being reclaimed. Three new posts have been constructed. The hard ground had rather hampered digging. [TX01067F]

The 2nd Battalion went into Brigade Reserve from the 8th to 10th February, and then proceeded by lorry to G.H.Q. Reserve, where it remained till the 21st, when it marched to Bray-sur-Somme to trenches at Junction Wood. This was a particularly trying relief owing to the appalling nature of the ground and of all the communication trenches. Several men of the front line battalions in 11th Brigade were completely bogged down and had

to be dug out. By the time they got into position they were utterly exhausted and had to send out parties to search for stragglers who had fallen by the wayside, often having to dig them out of the mud. Major Macdonald was sent off to take temporary command of the 11th KOYLI

They moved on to billets in Bray by march on the 25th and on the 28th February to Linger Camp Curly.

It went up to Brigade support on the 2nd March, and into front line that night. Captain R. W. Wood and three men were wounded, and one man was killed on this date.

### **Pallas Trench [303] 3rd to 5th March 1917**

In the night of the 3rd/4th March the battalion slipped to the left to take up battle positions.

On the morning of the 4th it was engaged in a big attack which had been carefully practised in rest billets on a model of the trenches. The attack was on Pallas trench, which ran south, from a point opposite the S.W. corner of Moislains Wood (which itself was S.E. of St. Pierre Vaast Wood) in the direction of Moislains.

It was very dark still when the men left the trenches, following the barrage. The slope of the hill in that direction caused the first wave and its "moppers-up" to bear a little too much to the left.

The support company, thanks to Captain Scobell having taken a compass bearing, moved quite straight. The first wave passed over Pallas trench, and, whilst this as being mopped up, the second wave reached it and passed on to join the first, which was now well past Fritz trench, the next trench parallel to Pallas. It had been so damaged by the British artillery that the wave following the barrage, still in darkness, had failed to recognize it. There was no resistance in either Pallas or Fritz trenches. Some of the men even got into Bremen trench, the next beyond Fritz.

When the mistake was discovered, they retired to Fritz trench and consolidated their position there. About 16:00 on the 4th, the support company in Pallas trench was so heavily bombarded that it could only muster twelve men under Lieutenant Cahill. He was reinforced by two platoons of the Rifle Brigade, and a Lewis gun from the Irish Rifles.

The casualties were: Killed 2Lt J A Nealon, 2Lt J A Gray, 2Lt G H Parsons and 43 ORs, 11 ORs died of wounds, Wounded Capt A A H Hanbury-Sparrow, tCapt W B Scobell, Lt B Haye, 2Lt H S Gunson, 2Lt E G Faulkener-Smith, 2Lt P D Harrison and 173 ORs, 20 ORs were reported missing.

Col Haig wrote to 2Lt Gray's father:

"I regret to inform you that your son second lieutenant J

A Gray was killed in action on the 4th inst. He was killed observing in a battle near ----. I am very sorry to lose him as he was a very brave man and an excellent officer. I deeply sympathise with you in your irreparable loss." [TX00879]

The chaplain wrote:-

"I am very sorry to give you bad news. It is that your son was killed in battle last Sunday. I buried him with several others on the field of battle yesterday. I am not the chaplain of the Royal Berks but for three months I lived with General --- at the brigade headquarters and was in constant touch with your son. He was an awfully good fellow and was always ready to do one a good turn. The regiment loses in him a good officer and many of us who knew him have lost a friend. Please accept my sincere condolence. [TX00879]

### 5th March 1917

During the day the Germans made several attempts to counter-attack, which were all repulsed. One, at about 04:00 on the 5th, was more successful, and about three hundred yards of trench were lost on the right of the battalion.

The platoon sent up to assist there, under Lieutenant Parsons, reached Fritz trench to the left of the place intended, and there Parsons was killed. Captain Hanbury-Sparrow, whose gallantry was highly praised by Colonel Haig, was wounded for the second time in the German counter-attack.

A counter-attack by bombing down Fritz trench was now organized by Captain Cahill and Lieutenant Prest. It is a little difficult to follow in detail Colonel Haig's account of the different fights between Germans and British between Pallas and Fritz trenches during the 5th.

The report made by Col Haig read:-

Battalion Report on operations 4th to 5th March 1917 carried out by the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment.

Map14 - 8 Division

Before the attack the Battalion was in rest billets. The attack was practiced many times on copy of German Trenches and was finally done by the Battalion without any Officers or Company Sergeant Majors to direct.

Attacking strong positions was practised by Companies separately and would have been practiced by the Battalion as a whole had time availed.

Attached please find Battalion Orders, Forming up Orders and detailed instructions for the attack.

The Attack

At Zero the men left the trenches without hesitation and followed the barrage closely. It was very dark and both first wave and moppers up bore a little too much to the left. This was probably caused by the slope of the hill.

The Support Company went in, quite straight, owing to the fact that Captain Scobell, who was in command, on arriving outside our wire again took a Compass bearing. The moppers up arriving in Pallas trench began mopping up.

The first wave which had passed over Pallas Trench was joined up by the second Wave and followed the barrage very closely, in the darkness they missed Fritz Trench, which was badly damaged and some of the men got into Bremen Trench. When this was discovered they retired in perfect order to Fritz Trench and immediately started consolidating same.

There was no resistance in either Pallas or Fritz Trench. A machine gun being captured by the moppers up, under Captain Clifton of the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt who informed me that the enemy were just going before it when they were captured. He handed the machine gun over to 'A' Company who used it with good effect in the block to the right of Pallas Trench.

On the 5th, during the afternoon, Lt Cahill sent it down to Battalion H.Q. Neither the gun nor the man have since been seen. It is supposed that the man was killed and the gun lies between Pallas Trench and the old British Line.

About 2 minutes after Pallas Trench was reached I had a message from 2nd Lt McDermott.

Captain Hanbury-Sparrow sent a message about 6.30. informing me " All objectives gained and enclosing a sketch of the new positions. That position is the one we now hold. I forwarded Sketch to Brigade H.Q. at 7.30. In the same message he informed me that he had re-organised Companies. About 8 o'clock I got a message from Captain Scobell "Germans sniping only and think we can hold counter attack. Trench Mortars have only six rounds of ammunition."

About 9.0.am. Telephonic communication was cut to the Brigade and was not repaired until late in the afternoon of the 4th. It was again cut about 4.0.a.m. on the 5th. It was again repaired about 11 o'clock, was again cut in the evening and was not again repaired.

About 9.0.a.m. I received a message from Lt. Prest, O.C. 'C' Company "Am in Fritz Trench and consolidating. Enemy have been seen moving up Brenner Trench and going up Moslains Avenue and also moving up to the left. The enemy artillery are active ? And get support on Bremen Trench."

Lt. Birley, Brigade Major came up about 11 o'clock and asked for news and the situation. This had already been sent in. I sent many Power Buzzer messages throughout the day and thought they had been received.

About 5 o'clock Lt. Belcher came to see me from the Brigadier and told me to commence thinning out. He asked me to use Lamp Communication but the lamp had already been broken by shell fire.

At 3.55.p.m. on the 4th I sent a message to Brigade saying "Lt. Cahill Support Company Pallas Trench reports being very badly shelled and he could only find 12 men left. I am sending up 2 platoons of the Rifle Brigade and one Lewis Gun of the Royal Irish to support him"

On going up the line at 5.30.p.m. on the 4th inst I was informed by Captain Clifton, whom I first saw, that the Worcester's had gone too much to their left and he had extended his line to conform to this. I found a gap between him and 'A' Company, 2nd R. Berks, so I told him to extend his right and keep in touch with 'A' Company. I also ordered him to put an Officer in charge of his right platoon and also an Officer in charge of the Stores Dump. I also told him that 'B' Company R. Berks would relieve him before dawn on the 5th inst. Owing to

the counter attack next morning I was unable to do this so I sent up two platoons of the Royal Irish Rifles who took his place. These did good work, under Lt Bailey.

Before I saw Captain Clifton, I met Captain Scobell, wounded. I then went and saw Lt Cahill, Acting Captain of 'A' Company, who told me he had just stopped a bombing attack with Rifle Fire and Rifle Grenades from 'A' Company. I went down to our left again, crossed to Trinity Trench on the right of the Worcester's. Whilst doing so the Worcester's sent up the S.O.S. and the German barrage began at once and became intense, causing me some delay.

About 6.15.p.m. I got in the Worcester's line and worked along to the flank on our right. Everything had been done which was possible in the way of consolidating. The men having worked well. At that time they were firing at the Germans (who were still trying to get forward) with the greatest possible coolness, never wasting a shot.

No stores had arrived barring a few bombs and S.A.A. which my Battle Platoon had carried up.

The Block on the right of Pallis Trench was rather short. The one in Moislains Avenue was correct.

Shortly after my return about 9.0.p.m. the Brigadier visited me at Battalion H.Q.. At 9.20.p.m. I sent a Report to Brigade of my tour round the new line.

At about 4.30.a.m. an Officer of the Royal Irish Rifles informed me that the Germans had counter attacked on my right and I had lost 300 yards of trench. I sent him back a message that I would send the Battle Platoon up to him. This I did but from what I can gather Lt. Parsons (who was killed) did not keep enough to the left and came under very heavy Machine Gun and Rifle fire between Pallis and Fritz Trenches where he and Sgt Dance were killed. The Platoon went on by itself and got into Fritz Trench near Moislains Avenue. They afterwards assisted in the Counter Attack and did good work.

Captain Hanbury-Sparrow was surrounded during the German Counter Attack, for the second time, and had to withdraw. I can not speak too highly of the gallantry this Officer has always shown in action, which is worthy of the highest reward.

Captain Cahill and Lt Prest organised a Counter Attack, Lt Prest bombing down Fritz Trench and Captain Cahill supported him with Rifle Grenades, Lewis Gun fire and Bombs from the new Trench got between Pallis and Fritz Trenches.

I should like here to point out the good work the Rifle Grenadiers did. It is undoubtedly this co-operation which was the success of our counter attack.

The Rifle Brigade (2 Platoons and 3 Officers) attempted to wire our new trench between Pallis and Fritz but had to desist, all the Officers being hit. The whole party behaved with great gallantry. I cannot help thinking that a heavy barrage should have been placed on the enemy trenches on our right, while this wiring was attempted. I had previously sent a Pigeon Message asking for a strong barrage on our right flank.

Telephone communication was opened with the Pallis Trench two minutes after it was captured but the line was almost immediately broken and in spite of gallant efforts of Sgt. Rice it remained cut till I was compelled to run a wire up the Communication Trench dug by the 22nd D.C.I. The Signallers got a wire through during the afternoon of the 5th inst. It was of the utmost use as

Captain Cahill was able to report that the enemy were lining up to attack and our barrage started just before that of the enemy at about 6.0.p.m. on the 5th inst. A wire was also got through from Pallis to Fritz Trench immediately after this Capture, but was destroyed at once and could not be repaired.

The Royal Irish Rifles had already begun to relieve my Battalion, and the S.O.S. delayed it so much that the relief was not completed until 3.50.on the 6th inst

#### The Artillery Barrage

The Barrage in the attack was excellent and our men were able to follow it closely suffering few casualties. The S.O.S. barrage was also most prompt and heavy.

#### The Machine Gun Barrage

This was of extreme value and when I sent up the S.O.S. on the evening of the 5th inst the first rocket had hardly risen when the Barrage opened. I think the formation attack worked well. I am of the opinion that double sentries should always be thrown out in the shell hole during the night after successful attack, especially if it is not possible to put out wire. They should be 30 to 40 yards out, with the tape running back to the captured trench for signalling purposes. This should be done at broken intervals.

Altogether 5 Counter Attacks were made on our new front one of which was temporarily successful and if it had not been promptly dealt with might have caused much trouble.

8-3-1917 Roland Haig Lt. Col. Commanding 2nd R. Berks. [TX01057]

#### Major Sparrow gives his version of events:-

I THINK we all realised that, cost what it might, this attack must not fail. It became, so to speak, the symbol of our worth, for we knew we were being given a task well within the capacity of decent men. As far as could be foreseen, we were provided with everything that we might reasonably require. We had artillery and troops in abundance; the operation had been rehearsed over and over again with dummy trenches, and every man knew exactly what was his task. There could be, and there would be, no excuse for failure. If we failed, we would be disgraced not only in our own eyes, but in the eyes of all who knew.

For yourself, this attack was certainly going to be crucial. For you had been given the honour of leading, the storming companies of the battalion. You were about to find out something more about yourself, whether, in fact, you could "do it." It was all an unknown world to you, for though you had been with the battalion eighteen months this would be the first time that you had ever properly been over the top. It wasn't altogether a question of mastering yourself as of mastering yourself plus the wound, and of at last putting into practice that which you had preached for so long. Yes, you were a queer mixture of old campaigner and debutant, as you trudged at the head of your company towards the assembly trenches. The dark night was dimly lit by Very lights that, rising and falling far to left and right, marked the backbone of the slumbering dragon of war. And a light snow was falling.

The thaw had come and the resultant mud was of a quite phenomenal stickiness. Nevertheless this did not prevent you from taking to a communication trench rather than facing in the open a thin barrage of five-nines, and, little

though the men relished squelching through the glutinous, poached-up mud, they were at least spared the unnecessary casualties that befell the next company. They, preferring the shells to the mud, lost their company commander and several others before they got to the assembly trenches.

But, delayed though they were by the mud and the casualties, the companies arrived in position round about midnight. This left five hours in which a man might count with reasonable confidence upon life. After that; who could tell?

It's a queer feeling, waiting, when one knows not if one will ever pass another night or see again the dawn. Under such circumstances even the stench-laden air of the battlefield smells like balm, and the cold, tortured earth is sweet to the hand as spring turf. One draws in deep breaths of air, tainted maybe with decay or pungent with high explosive, and one cherishes it as if it were the clean wind of the mountains. An instinct is warning us to charge ourselves with earth impressions, even as a battery is charged with electricity; for we may be going to a world where all there is of earth is but a fading memory. As for yourself, after overseeing rather perfunctorily the various things that required doing, you climbed out on to the parapet - for the trench was very crowded - and lying down let the night soak into you. The occasional shell, the stray bullet, the ceaseless rise and fall of Very lights served merely to enhance the gentle velvety blackness and the essentially kindly feel of the slush-covered earth. Even the thin wet snow that fell feebly and intermittently seemed like a succession of soft kisses. Truly this earthlife was very lovely and desirable. Could the next world, if there was such a thing, be half so wonderful? So you lay until the hour came when the men had to deploy on the forming-up tapes. This they did with the minimum of noise, for all knew their places, and chewing-gum had been served out to encourage their taciturnity. You move up fifteen yards ahead of the front line, and sit down again. It looks brave; it isn't. For the real reason you do it is to ensure yourself being well clear of the inevitable counter-barrage on our front line. The minutes race on. The luminous hands of your watch show the hour has come. You get up. Far, far behind a gun thuds, and its shell gurgles overhead like a watery express train. One hurried breath, one longing glance to where dawn's left hand is faintly streaking the eastern sky, and then upwards of two hundred guns crash out, and the German trenches leap with stabbing flames.

Advance! - red shards fly off like shooting stars. Advance! The field guns sound like maxim guns. For'ard, hoic for'ard! On! The pulsing air proclaims the counter-barrage its loud roar lost in this intensity of sound. "For'ard!" you cry and "Forward!" shout the men, going like fox-hounds with a screaming scent. Ahead, the trenches leap with flashing flame. Around, the roar robs everything of sound, so that cascades of earth rise and fall, silent, as though part of a silent film. Only a machinegun penetrates the din with its rattle, but it's quickly silenced. The German trenches are very near, and you seem to be walking alongside yourself.

You stop and check with your compass the bearing of the advance, thereby deliberately letting the front ranks get ahead. It's getting lighter. You can tell by your watch that the barrage has just lifted off the German front trench. You hurry after the men. Whatever happens, they mustn't lose their momentum.

You come on a group of four grouped round a German

who is crouching in a shell hole. Mustn't lose their momentum. You come up, revolver in hand. Mustn't lose their momentum. The German holds out his hand, imploring you not to be an excitable idiot. Mustn't lose their momentum. Bang! "Get on! Catch up the barrage! Mustn't lose their momentum," you murmur as a sort of apology to the quivering corpse.

It's two parts light, and all you can see is a wilderness of shell holes. Have we passed the first trench or not? Just ahead a group of three, a German linked arm-in-arm with two Tommies, is walking forward. The back view of the group looks ludicrously convivial. The Boche will be able to tell you. You run after them. "Fritz trench?" you demand of him as you get up. The young Boche looks utterly bewildered. "Pallas trench?" you shout, this time trying the name of the support trench. The wretched German gapes unhappily as if he thought he was dealing with an absolute lunatic. It occurs to you he's about right, for after all it was most unlikely they called them by the same names as we did, in which case he'd have no idea what you were asking. "He'll show us, sir," said one of his escort. "Come along, Fritz," and, wheeling about, the party resume their advance; leaving you to locate your position by other means.

Fifty yards ahead a long line of men, clear against the dawn, are standing straight under the curtain of the British barrage, waiting for it to go forward. But your watch reveals that the barrage is now past the furthest objective.

The position has been stormed!

The division has found itself. [TX00791]

### 6th March 1917

It appears that the Royal Berkshire were still holding a new trench between these two in the night of the 5th/6th when, at 03.50 on the latter date, their relief by the Royal Irish Rifles was completed, and they retired to Curlu on the Somme.

### Casualties

The casualties in these two days of heavy fighting were  
**Officers.** *Killed* (2): Lieut. G. N. Parsons; 2nd-Lieut. J. A. Neaton *Wounded* (6): Capts. A. A. H. Hanbury-Sparrow, D.S.O. W.B. Scobell. Lieut. B. Haye. 2nd-Lieuts. H. S. Gunson, P. D. Harrison E.G. Faulkner-Smith. **Other Ranks:** Killed or Died of Wounds 63. Wounded 170. Missing 16.

## Retreat to the Hindenburg Line[306]

### Nurlu 6th -7th March 1917

At Nurlu, on the 6th in the afternoon, the battalion was inspected by the General-Officer-Commanding XVth Corps, who read a message of congratulation from the Commander-in-Chief.

### Junction Wood 8th - 10th March 1917

From the 8th to the 10th the battalion was in Brigade

reserve in Junction Wood.

#### **Fritz Trench 11th - 15th March 1917**

On being relieved by the 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment, it proceeded to the front line in Fritz trench till the 13th, and then had two days in Brigade support at Lock Barracks in Albert and Bouchavesnes.

#### **Pallas Trench etc 16th March 1917**

On the 16th March its disposition was, C and D Companies in front in Fritz trench, with advanced posts in Bremen and German Wood trenches, B in support Pallas trench, and A in reserve in the old British fire trench.

The German retreat to the Hindenburg Line had now begun.

#### **Fritz Trench 17th - 18th March 1917**

On the 17th, as it was ascertained that the enemy had evacuated his trenches. A patrol of the 2nd Berks started down Bremen trench at 10:00 but did not find any Germans This was duly reported to Brigade and orders were given to push out patrols along all possible approaches to the German trenches. B Company was sent forward to hold an outpost line on the Canal du Nord east of Moislains, the main line of defence still being Fritz trench.

#### **Junction Wood 19th - 23rd March 1917**

Here the battalion was relieved, on the 19th, and went back to Junction Wood till the 23rd.

Lt Howse had the opportunity to write home:-

March 23rd " This month has seen a startling change on this front. We were ready and knew something of the sort was going to happen shortly. The Bosche has declined battle with our Spring offensive, and has gone hack several miles, hoping to disorganise our plans, and perhaps to do much execution to our troops from his more favourable new positions. He has ceased to be the victorious Hun of 1914.

"In his retreat he has carried out his usual devilry, burning towns and ravishing fields in the country, except where we made him skedaddle sooner than he expected. In some towns he has seized the young French women and carried them off with him. I heard a pathetic story from an old French woman yesterday. She had a daughter of 22 years of age in one of the liberated towns. Her daughter is apparently not among the refugees, and she fears the worst. She still hopes against hope, but they have done it in other places, and the Bosche is ever the same. With tears in her eyes the poor old dame said, ' Ah, c' est triste, la guerre n'est pas bonne.' If England never fought a righteous war before, surely this is one.

"I suppose after the war there will be flocks of tourists \_to all these places in France which have been so battered about. Some of the ruins are indescribably grand. A fine church, or a glorious chateau, with walls rumbling and towers battered by shells, makes an appeal that is both

solemn and pathetic. And here and there amid the ruins one comes across a crucifix or a statue of the Virgin an enduring symbol of the fact that God's presence abounds in the midst of desolation - ' not one jot nor one tittle shall pass away.' But other ruins, the more battered ones, are merely sickening. To see a heap. of debris, with here a baby's bonnet, here a bed, and there some little table ornament scattered in the confusion, and to realise that in July, 1914, -this was a town, with all the luxuriance and prosperity of an approaching fruitful harvest it is too awful to be grand. It sickens one at first, but one grows strangely callous afterwards. "But rest assured of this, the Bosche has been paying a terrible price for this - such a price as he never dreamed of" [TX01085F]

#### **24th March 1917**

On the 24th it advanced again to relieve various battalions which had pushed forward as the Germans evacuated more trenches. Headquarters, along with B and D Coys relieved the 4th Grenadier Guards at Ochard, A Coy relieved the 1st Welsh Guards and C Coy the 2nd Middlesex.

#### **25th - 29th March 1917**

It was out of the front line during the day of the 26th, moving to tents shelters and dugouts in Hennois Wood, but returned the same evening to relieve the 2nd Lincolnshire in the main line defence.

deaths

#### **25th March**

26823 Pte Charles Henry Hatherell of Tilehurst

#### **28th March**

17037 Pte Edward William Titchener of Stanford in the Vale

#### **29th March**

37200 Pte John Boyd of Holyport  
37447 Pte George Clarke of Farcet

### **Sorel Le Grand [330]**

#### **30th March 1917**

On the morning of the 30th an attack was made on the village of Sorel-le-Grand. This turned out to be a bloodless operation.

Six patrols, each twelve men and a N.C.O., were told off from A and C Companies with one officer from each. The rest of these companies were in support and the other two in reserve.

When the patrols entered the village, towards 05:00, they found the German rearguard was gone.

By 07:00 an outpost line had been set up east of the village. There were no casualties; indeed, the casualties of the whole period 6th March to 3rd April only amounted to six other ranks killed or died of wounds, and nine wounded.

The report to Brigade read:-

### **Battalion Report on Operations on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 1917.**

Acting on instructions received from the Brigade the attack on Sorel-Le-Grand was ordered to be carried out as per attached copy of Operation Orders issued by me, and instructions given at a conference held with the O.C. Companies.

At 4.0.a.m. Companies were in position about W. 19 a 80.05. At 4.45.a.m. patrols moved forward. At 4.30.a.m. I proceeded, in company with the Adjutant and three Orderlies, to the Nurlu-Fins Road. Nothing could be heard except a few rifle shots from the direction of Sorel, and a certain amount of Machine Gun fire from the direction of Heudicourt. At 5.15.a.m. I moved forward to the sunken road at

Y 24 a 4.5. Still not hearing anything and being too dark to see what was going on in the village, I returned to the Nurlu-Fins Road to a Post at Y 23. b 3.4. Before reaching there, a runner arrived from 'D' Company with a message stating that our patrols had entered the village. I sent this message to the Brigade from 'B' Company's H.Q.

I then noticed our men moving about in Sorel-Le-Grand. I at once proceeded to Sorel myself. I then saw Captain Cahill, the O.C. Operations, who reported that only 4 Germans were seen, who ran off when fired on. An Outpost Line was at once established on the N.N.W. & E. side of the village. At this time it was not known who occupied Fins. Two German Posts were observed on the South side of Dessart Wood. Subsequently a Field Gun opened fire about W. 2. c. Square, at my post on the North side of Sorel. This was reported to the Brigade. A patrol was sent forward to Fins, who reported Fins was held by the Rifle Brigade. At 7.10.a.m. a message was sent to the Brigade reporting occupation of Sorel.

31-3-1917 – Roland Haig, Commanding 2<sup>nd</sup> R. Berks. [TX01056]

Lt Howse had rejoined the Battalion in mid March. He recalled in a letter home:-

"I joined them just after they had captured a village, and were in reserve. After a few days of comparative ease we went forward and occupied an outpost line near Nurlu. The weather was very bad and wet. Then one morning before daylight, at 4 o'clock, another officer and I were sent with a handful of men to capture the village of Sorel le Grand. We entered the village and found that the Hun had evacuated it a few hours before. He shelled us all that day, and some of my men were hit. Next night we relieved a battalion that had just captured a wood in front of the village. Of course you must realise that all these villages are smashed to atoms - not: a house standing - not a tree-and the ruins filled with offal, Then we moved back for a short rest to Equancourt, where Hun aeroplanes bombed us. [TX001085A]

### **1st April 1917**

The night of the 31st March/1st April was spent in front line about Fins, and on the latter date the battalion was in the main line of defence, Nurlu-Equancourt. The Germans at this time were nearly at the end of their retirement to the Hindenburg Line.

Lt Howse was bursting to recount what was happening but he was very security conscious - he wrote:-

"All the most interesting news is absolutely taboo. It is sometimes a very great temptation to tell you of the places and events I have seen, and it would be easily done, for we censor our own letters as officers, - but they have put us on our honour, and we must close our mouths and wait till after.

It is thus difficult to know what to write. One gets tired of repeating that our men are splendid, that the Hun is having a bad time, that the sky is full of aeroplanes, and the earth full of mud. These are truisms; except perhaps the extent of the mud. -You want to be up to the waist in it to realise that!" [TX01085E]

On April 2nd he wrote:-

April 2nd:- "No, news just, now. You will see all about us in the papers. More I cannot tell you." [TX01085G]

### **3rd April 1917**

On the 2nd April the battalion replaced the 2nd Lincolnshire in the outpost line.

## **Metz en Couture [404]**

### **4th April 1917**

On the 4th April it was engaged in an attack on Metz-en-Couture, with Gouzeaucourt Wood as its objective.

A 2nd Royal Berks patrol had reached a line within a few hundred yards of the south of Gouzeaucourt Wood and discovered that the enemy were holding a strong position in a sunken road. They suffered several casualties as they came over the ridge.

The new attack was in co-operation with the 20th Division.

The battalion orders were:-

Operation Orders by O.C. 2nd R. Berks

1)The enemy are holding Sorel-le-Grand with a rearguard consisting mainly of Machine Guns.

2)Our outposts are round the village from N 17 d 7.2. on the West to W 19 a 80.05 on the East.

3)'A' & 'C' Companies 2nd Royal Berkshire Regiment will assault and capture the village

4)The attack will be made by 6 strong patrols each consisting of 12 men and an effective N.C.O. 2nd Lt Howse will be in command of 'A' Company's patrols and 2nd Lt Shaw in command of those of 'C' Company.

5)The remainder of each Company will be in support

6)Captain Cahill will be in command of the operation.

7)The assault will be made from 'D' Company's most easterly point, W 19 a 80.05.

8) A' Company's patrols will be responsible for the left sector of the S.E. corner of the village to W 13 c 85.50.

9)As soon as our patrols have got into the village O.C. Operations will at once move forward with the remainder of 'A' & 'C' Companies and will occupy ground gained.

10) The village having been won outposts will be placed on the North West, North & East sides



Map accompanying Battalion Orders for the attack on 4th April

11) 25th Machine Gun Company will co-operate but no gun will be fired unless our troops are fired on by the enemy. In that event, a barrage of 10 minutes duration will be placed on the West side of Sorel-Le-Grand from about V 24 c Central. This will take 4 guns, of the remaining section, 2 guns will be in position at Sorel Wood W 25 a 85.30., 2 guns will be at the cross roads at V 18 c 1.9. These last four guns will only be used in case of counter attack by enemy from the North & East

12) Dress, fighting order, water bottle to be filled, and 2 bombs per man to be carried.

13) Companies to be in position one hour before Zero

14) Zero hour 4.45.a.m.

15) Artillery will be ready to put up a barrage W. of Heudicourt in case of counter attack from that direction, In the event of a counter attack developing from the N. a barrage will be placed about 500 yards N of Sorel -Le-Grand

16) Signalling communication will be established as soon as the village is captured.

Signed H T Forster, Lt & Adj, 2nd R.Berks. 8.10.pm. 29-3-1917 [TX01075]

The attack was finally arranged for 14.15, having had to be postponed on account of snow rendering the work of the artillery difficult. At the prescribed hour the battalion

moved off in line, with the 20th Division on its left.

About 15.30 the right company reported that it was held up by rifle fire in front of the enemy's wire, and was digging in. The support company reported to the same effect. Colonel Haig then ordered the right company to try and work round the flank.

At 15.50 another message reported the enemy being reinforced and about to counter-attack the Berkshire right. To meet this, C Company was sent up from reserve, its place being taken by a company of the 2nd Lincolnshire.

Ten minutes later Colonel Haig ordered the left company to try and get round under cover of the hill on his left. Soon after this, Metz-en-Couture was taken by the 20th Division, and, as there was now a considerable gap between its right and the left of the Berkshire, the 2nd Lincolnshire were ordered to send one company to fill it.

With this reinforcement on his left, Colonel Haig ordered A Company, under Captain Cahill, round to the left to try and get into Gouzeaucourt Wood from the west.

By 21:00 A Company reported having entered the wood which its patrols were searching.

Lt Howse:-

"Moving forward again, we made a big attack on Good Friday. It snowed during the attack. At first we were held up by Bosche barbed wire and rifle fire, but we worked round their flanks, drove them out of their position, and captured a village and wood behind it. We lost a fair number, but the Hun lost more". I had some narrow escapes, but came through as sound" as a bell. After another day, during which the Hun put up al fairly heavy strafe, we came out for a time to Nurlu. [TX01085B]

The Report from Lt Col Haig read:-

Operation Orders by Lt Col 2nd R. Berks, 4th April 1917

Reference Map 57 C. S.E. 1/20,000

1) On April 4th the 20th Division will attack and capture Metz-en-Couture and are also going to establish a Strong Post on the Spur at about Q 21. d. 1.3.

2) The 25th Infantry Brigade, in conjunction with the 20th Division on its left will advance to an approximate line W 5 d 7.5. when the line will join that held by the 24th Brigade - W 5 d 0.6, W 5 c 7.8., W 5 a 3.4., Q35 c 6.2., Q 35 c 0.5, Q 29 a 3.0.. and Q 21 d 8.1., which will become the line of defence of the Brigade and will allow observation into the village of Gouzeaucourt. This line will be as far as possible just behind the crest and will have observation posts thrown out in front.

3) The 2nd Rifle Brigade on the Right will cross the line W 10 d 5.9. to cross-roads W 4 a 0.4. at Zero.

1st Objective – 135 Contour W 6 a 0.0. and buildings at Q 35 c 6.2.

2nd Objective – High ground 135 Contour Q 35 a. this will be gained when – Gouzeaucourt Wood has been entered by the Royal Berkshire Regt on the left and will be the point where the two Battalion join up.

4) 2nd R. Berks Regt will cross the line cross-roads W 4 a 0.5. at Zero + 45 minutes.

Objective – Gouzeaucourt Wood and line Q 29 a 3.0. to Q 21 d 8.1. On reaching this Objective a defensive flank will be formed along the high ground between 135 Contour on Q 35 a and Q 29 a 3.0. Boundaries between battalions for the attack will be Fins-Gouzeaucourt Road (inclusive to right battalion) up to W 3 b 5.2. thence to Q 34 b 6.0. to Q 35 a 1.5. (that is the junction between Battalions in the new line)

5) 'B' Company will attack on the right, 'D' on the left, 'A' in Support and 'C' in Reserve. The attack will be delivered in two lines at 200 yards distance, lines to be extended to 5 paces interval. Boundary between Companies will be a line drawn between W 3 a 0.75. cutting Gouzeaucourt Wood at Q 33 b 8.8. thence to Q 28 b 20.85.

'A' Company, on reaching their objective will form a defensive flank between ourselves and the Rifle Brigade at Q 35 a.

'C' Company will move up into our present front line as soon as evacuated by the assaulting troops. 'C' Company will rendezvous at 'A' Company's H.Q in Dessart Wood one hour before Zero. O.C. 'C' Company will report personally to O.C. Battalion at advanced Battalion H.Q. as soon as his Company is in position in the front line.

2nd Lincoln's will be in Support and will rendezvous in the Valley at V11.5.

6) The advanced guard artillery will support the advance by firing on any strong point reported. White Very Lights will be fired if it is wished for our artillery to lengthen and to show our position to the Artillery

On coming under hostile shell fire, a report will be sent back if possible of suspected position of Battery.

7) Two sections of 25th M.G. Company are detailed to support the 2nd R. Berks.

8) The imperative necessity of ordering the advance of troops with artillery, Machine-Gun, Lewis Gun and Rifle Fire must be realised by all ranks. Covering fire must be provided for, prior to each stage of the advance, and the smaller Units must be on the look out to help neighbouring Units in this way.

9) O.C. 'B' Company, 15 Corps Cyclist will work along main Fins-Gouzeaucourt Road after the capture of this objective. They will keep touch between the left of the 2nd Rifle Brigade and the right of the 2nd R. Berks.

10) One SAA limber from each Battalion will form the SAA Reserve and will rendezvous under 2nd Lt Cremer on the road about W 7 a 5.4.

11) A contact aeroplane will be in the air during operations both to keep contact with our own troops and to watch for hostile troops and movements. This aeroplane will show its identity by firing one White Very Light. This signal will be repeated periodically. Red flares will be carried by all Companies which will be lit by advanced troops when called for by the aeroplane.

12) Watches will be synchronised by telephone at

10.0.am. 4th April.

13) Advanced Battalion H.Q. will open at Zero – 1 hour at W 3 a. The new line will be consolidated, when won, without delay.

Dress: Fighting Order. Packs to be stacked in Dessart Wood and a man from each Company left in charge. Water Bottles to be filled. Picks and shovels will be carried at the rate of 3 shovels to each pick.

14) Zero hour is approximately 2 P.M. but will be notified later

4-4-1917, 7.30.a.m. Signed H Forster, Lt & Adjutant, 2nd R Berks. [TX001058]

#### The battalion report read:-

Battalion Report on Operations of the 2nd Royal Berkshire Regiment on the 4th April 1917.

On receipt of the Brigade Operation Order No 188 Operation Orders were drawn up and issued by me at 7.30.a.m., 4-4-1917, for the attack at Zero + 45 minutes.

This was afterwards cancelled by the Brigadier and at 11.30.a.m. I received orders for the Battalion to attack at 2.15.p.m. This was owing to the snow and difficulty the Artillery would experience in seeing their objective, and the White Very Lights. The barrage was therefore changed to a timed barrage.

At 2.30.p.m. I sent a message to the Brigade that the Battalion moved off well to time with the 20th Division. At 3.0.p.m. a belated message was received from Lt. Hinde, who had been out on patrol and was still out, in which he said that between 30 and 40 of the enemy had been observed marking out from Q 26 b 7.5. also a small fire. The wire runs parallel with this road. This Lt Hinde observed from Q 33 a 6.7. At 3.30.p.m. I received a message from O.C. Right Company saying "we are held up by rifle fire in front of enemy barbed wire and can not get on, am digging in with entrenching tools." At the same time I received a message to the same effect from O.C. Support Company.

I sent a message at 3.35.p.m. directing O.C. Right Company to try and work round the flank.

At 3.50. I received a message from O.C. Support Company "The enemy is reinforcing on our right and is threatening to counter attack". This I sent on to the Brigade and asked permission to reinforce with my Reserve Company. This was granted and 'C' Company moved up to the Right of my line. At the same time a Company of 2nd Lincolnshire Regt moved up into the trenches vacated by my Reserve Company

At 4 o'clock I got on the telephone to O.C. Left Company and told him to try and work round to his left and see if he could get through on that side, under cover of the Hill.

At 5.15.p.m. a Company of the Lincoln's reinforced my left. As soon as I was reinforced by this Company on the left I gave orders to Capt Alloway to send 'A' Company, under Capt Cahill, round to the left to try and enter Gouzeaucourt Wood from the West Side.

At 6.o'clock orders were issued that the 2nd Lincoln Regt would attack with 3 Companies on the right between the 2nd R. Berks and the 2nd Rifle Brigade on the right. This was cancelled owing to the fact that a contact Aeroplane thought it saw Yellow Flares in Gouzeaucourt Wood which afterwards proved to be sheds burning in the Wood..

At 7.25.p.m. I sent the following message to the O.C. Left Company who was the Senior Officer with the assaulting troops. Contact Aeroplane reports that yellow flares have been seen in E. of Gouzeaucourt Wood. As the 20th Division use yellow flares it is thought dangerous to put artillery on to the Wood and the attack by Vigour has been countermanded. 'B'. 'C' & 'D' Companies will each send forward one strong patrol, under cover of darkness, these you will follow up in force. Tell 'B' Company Vigour to send out two strong patrols and 'A' Company Viking 1 strong patrol. Patrols to consist of 1 N.C.O. and 12 men, also tell Vigour to support 'A' Company, Viking, in working round the left flank.

Shortly after sending this message I had orders to return 'B' Company, 2nd Lincolns to their Battalion so the latter part of my message was cancelled.

At 9. o'clock I received a message from O.C. 'A' Company, who had been ordered to attack the Wood from the W., "have entered the Wood and established a Post at G 27 b 10.8. my patrols are searching the Wood."

At 9.15. p.m. I received a message from Victor ordering me to establish outposts originally ordered in Brigade Operation Order 188.

I at once went to see my Company Commanders and issued instructions to that effect. I saw the Companies off to the Wood and returned to my advanced H.Q.

At 'Stand to' on the 5th I went round my outposts and found that in the darkness outposts had not been placed as far N. & E. as they should have been. This was immediately rectified. We are now in touch with the 20th Division on the left and the 2nd Rifle Brigade on the Right.

Our Casualties being:- Killed 16, Wounded 27 + Officers 3 a total of 46.

This in my opinion is not excessive considering the difficulty of the attack, the snow ,and the amount of ground gained and I think it shows excellent leadership on the part of my Company Commanders. We now hold out Objective.

I wish to add that good work was done by my patrols sent out the night before, the enemy being harassed during our attack by patrols under 2nd Lt Hinde and 2nd Lt Curtis. These officers remained out about 18 hours in close touch with the enemy and when the enemy did retire, shot down 10 of them.

Sgd Roland Haig, Lt. Col Commanding 2nd R. Berks [TX01066]

The report of the Brigadier was:-

Brigade Report on Operations carried out by 25th Infantry Brigade on 4th April 1917

1) During the night of April 3/4th the 2nd Rifle Brigade pushed forward Posts which reached very little short of the Objective given in Brigade Order No 188 (Appendix A, appended) South of the main Fins-Gouzeaucourt Road.

The Windmill at Q 25 c 6.2. was strongly held by the enemy as was also Hill 135 at W 6 a 0.0., but Posts were established close to these points.

At the same time the 2nd Royal Berkshire Regt patrols reached a line within a few hundred yards of the South of Gouzeaucourt Wood, and one Officer Patrol, succeeded in establishing themselves about Q 34 a 9.5. from which point they inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy

on the morning of the 4th. They were not however of sufficient strength to make much effect upon the operations

2) Owing to heavy snow on the morning of the 4th and consequent bad visibility it was decided that it would be necessary for the artillery to work by time table and not by light signals as originally arranged. Fresh orders were issued to this effect (Appendix B)

3) About 12.45.p.m. I was visited by the Officer Commanding one of the Batteries of the 33rd F.A. Brigade which was to cover the advance by fire on Gouzeaucourt Wood. He informed me that his battery had only got into position by 10.00.a.m that morning, that no registration had taken place and that any form of registration was impossible owing to poor visibility.

4)The attack along the whole front was held up in its initial stages by heavy rifle and machine gun fire. The enemy were holding a strong position in the Sunken Road running through Q 27 d, Q 33 a and b and trench running S.E. in continuation of it, protected by two rows of barbed wire and the 2nd R. Berks had several casualties as they came over the ridge and under very heavy fire from the road and from the edge of the Wood. At the same time the 2nd Rifle Brigade were held up by the fire from the Windmill, Q 35 c 6.2., 135 contour, in Q 35 a and Queens Cross.

5) Further artillery support along the S. edge of Gouzeaucourt Wood-Queens Cross and higher ground in Q 35 a, was asked for at once. This was arranged for, to continue until 3.55.p.m. Or longer if required.

6) At 3.50.p.m. Lt Col R Haig, DSO reported that the enemy appeared to be about to counter attack on his right and asked permission to move up his Reserve Company. This was granted and its place taken by 1 company 2nd Lincolnshire Regt.

7) As both Battalions were still unable to get on, further artillery support was asked for at 3.55.p.m. This was at once arranged for on Gouzeaucourt Wood-Queens Cross Road, from Q 27 b to Queens cross, with the heavies firing on roads in Q 22 a and Q 23 c.

8) About 4.20.p.m. information was received that the 20th Division had captured Metz. Further reports indicated that there was a considerable gap developing between the left of 2nd R. Berks and the right of 20th Division.

At 4.40. pm. Orders were issued to the 2nd Lincoln Regt to send up one Company to close up this gap.

9) About the same time it became apparent that there was another gap of considerable size between the 2nd Rifle Brigade and the 2nd R. Berks. The 2nd Rifle brigade reported at 4.7.p.m. that they were digging in, in front of the Windmill but could make n further progress on their left. Four Machine Guns were being used to sweep the end of Gouzeaucourt Wood and Queens Cross.

At 5.46.p.m. Lt. Col. R Brand DSO reported that he had visited his Companies who were digging in about Q 3 a Central, and that there appeared to be a gap of 800 yards between his left and the right of the 2nd R. Berks.

10) As a result of this I decided to return one of the 2nd Lincoln Regt holding the old line in front of Dessart Wood by a Company of t6he 1st R. Irish Rifles and employ the three Companies of the 2nd Lincoln Regt, who were not yet involved, to make a fresh attack on Queens Cross and the S.E. corner of Gouzeaucourt Wood. Arrange-

ments were made for artillery support and orders were issued 5.40.p.m. (Appendix C)

11) At 6.30.p.m. A message dropped by contact Aero-plane reported that Yellow Flares had been seen about Q 28 a 8.0. on the W. edge of Gouzeaucourt Wood. As the 20th Division were using Yellow Flares the attack by the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt was cancelled. Orders were issued for strong patrols to be pushed out supported by formed bodies of troops, at dusk, to endeavour to gain the required objectives

12) The Brigade Observer reported having seen some of our scouts approaching the S. of Gouzeaucourt Wood. These appeared to reach within 150 yards of the Wood without being fired on.

At 7.45.p.m. a report received from the 2nd R. Berks to the effect that Gouzeaucourt Wood had been entered, a post established at Q 28 a 0.8. and that patrols were searching the Wood.

By 6.0.a.m April 5th the whole of the objectives had been gained with the exception of the Hill at Q 35 c 6.2. and Hill 135, Q 6 a 0.0.

13) Early on the morning of April 5th a Trench Mortar was brought up the Fins-Gouzeaucourt Road to a position about 350 yards from the Mill on the N. edge of the road. About 30 & 40 rounds were fired into the Mill in the course of the morning and by 3.0.p.m. patrols reported that the enemy had evacuated. The Mill was at once occupied by the 2nd Rifle Brigade.

14) During the night 5/6th April Patrols reported Hill 135, at W 6 a 0.0. clear of the enemy. A Post of one platoon was at once established by 2/Rifle Brigade at this point.

15) Casualties on April 4th were as follows

	Killed		Wounded		Missing	
	Off	O.Rs.	Off	O.Rs.	Off	ORs
2nd Lincoln Regt	-	2	-	6	-	-
2nd R. Berks	-	16	3	27	-	-
1/R. Irish Rifles	-	-	-	-	-	-
2/ Rifle Brigade	-	4	1	18	-	4
25 M.G. Coy	-	-	1	-	-	--
15 Corps Cyclist	-	-	-	6	-	-
Total	-	22	5	57	-	4

In view of the fact that the enemy held a good position, in some strength, and that the attacking troops showed up very clearly against the snow, these do not appear excessive.

Reports on Operations from Officers Commanding 2/Rifle Brigade and Officer Commanding 2/R. Berks are attached as Appendix 'D' & 'E'

5th April 1917 Brigadier General, Commanding 25th Infantry Brigade. [TX01065]

### 5th April 1917

At dawn on the 5th April the battalion found itself in the wood, in contact with the 20th Division on its left, and the Rifle Brigade on its right.

### Casualties

The difficulties of the attack were considerable in the snow, and Colonel Haig does not consider his casualty list excessive under the circumstances. It was:

**Officers:**(names not stated) Wounded 3.

**Other Ranks:** Killed or Died of Wounds 23; Wounded 22.

A curiously large proportion of killed to wounded.

The dead were:-

no NAME

4th April

37589	Pte Lewis Arthur Bates of Epsom
21920	Pte William Bristow of Reading
22148	Pte Bert Charlton of Strichley
37297	Pte Edward Stanley Davis of Westcliffe
21988	Pte Percy James Day of Bedminster
27296	Pte Harry Albert Downes of Birmingham
7432	L/Cpl Ernest Garrett of Furze Platt
15648	Pte Roland Cuthbert Gillingham of Abingdon
9288	Pte William George King of Oxford
18222	Pte Charles Henry George Mayfield of Cheltenham
37475	Pte Ernest Newstead of Boston
16547	Pte William Orchard of Abingdon
19295	Pte Edwin James Rixon of Fawley Green
33371	Pte John S coles of Plymouth
11438	Pte Arthur Stephenson of Shepherds Bush
25888	Pte George Thorn of Reading
37312	Pte Albert Edward Waite of Reading
11738	Pte Edgar Whichello of Aston Tirrold
37485	Pte Thomas Yates of Manchester

At the end of his report Colonel Haig adds a tribute to the good work of his patrols, sent out on the night before the attack under Lieutenants Hinde and Curtis.

These officers, remained out about eighteen hours in close touch with the enemy, and when the enemy did retire shot down ten of them."

### Sources

Petre pp83-89

The Land Locked Lake by Col Hanbury-Sparrow

War Diaries

Berkshire Mercury

*A South African Soldier and Student*

*Continued in section 262*