

Section 243

Interval II

The 1st/4th Battalion - October 1916 to March 1917

The battalion were to experience a thoroughly miserable winter and to undergo a complete change of character as the War Office sent drafts in a deliberate policy of avoiding a concentration of men from one area in a battalion. Continued from section 233

Sombrin

1st October 1916

October, that wettest of months, in which the last fires of the Somme flickered out, quenched by the everlasting rain, was spent by us in a variety of places, mainly well behind the lines, but far from comfortable. Such was Sombrin, 9 miles south-west of Arras, where officers were faced with the unpleasing alternative of sleeping in barns or in dripping and unboarded tents.

Souastre

10th October 1916

Then we revisited Souastre after thirteen months, overlooking the ruins of Fonque-villers and the splintered remnants of Gommecourt Wood ravaged by 15-inch shells. Here again the liveliest activity was manifest. That successful finale to the year's fighting known as the Ancre Battle had been planned for October 14th, though owing to repeated postponements it was not launched until a month later. Again, day after day enormous working parties descended into Hebuterne, some to pursue mining operations under the R.E.'s, others to bury cable between the village and Sailly.

Two strenuous days (12th and 13th) spent in the trenches immediately opposite Gommecourt cost us 16 casualties. Our line here still bore witness to the terrible bombardment which had frustrated the efforts of the 56th Division on July 1st, for long sections of trench then levelled and rendered impassable had not since been opened out. Every man not on duty was employed with one or other of the multifarious details for the expected attack, while on the morning of the 13th heavy shells were poured upon us, amongst them being many 11-inch.

About this time Major Aldworth left the Battalion, to which he afterwards returned as Second-in-Command, to attend General Kentish's school for senior officers at Aldershot. B Company, as we have seen, did extraordinarily well under his command. The following N.C.O.'s

were promoted to commissioned rank at Souastre for bravery and good conduct in the field: Serjts. Wickens, Ross, Turner, Rogers, Cawley and Crust. The two latter gained command of B and A Companies respectively during 1918. These appointments were most gratifying to officers and men of the Battalion.

Beauval

15th October 1916

During the remainder of the month we moved about from place to place in the neighbourhood of Beauval and between it and the Somme. It stands greatly to the credit of the Battalion's fitness and discipline that not a man fell out during all those marches in the rain over indescribably miry roads.

Millencourt

31st October to 3rd November 1916

On October 31st an eastward move of the Brigade settled us in a camp at Millencourt, the village on the western hill looking down at Albert, on the fringe of the old battlefields. The fighting had died down, but an enemy had to be encountered more insidious and more trying to endurance and morale namely, the mud and the cold.

Lozenge Wood

3rd to 6th November 1916

After three days at Millencourt the Battalion moved forward into that featureless waste for the possession of which so much blood had been shed. For 7 miles or more east of Albert along both sides' of the great highway to Bapaume up the long slope from La Boisselle to Pozieres windmill, and down again towards Le Sars, the eye would pick out no natural landmark except a few broken sticks, once trees. The surface of the country, churned up and scooped out by innumerable shells, was literally a sea of mud; where water had collected in the hollows it was deeply stained with green and yellow, the result of gas and fumes.

The cold was coming, but at present was only sufficient to chill the mud through and through, not to freeze it into hardness. No buildings were available for the great army echeloned along this area, and few dugouts; the vast majority of all ranks lived out in rough shelters, or under the scanty protection of sodden tents. Though the

infantry were glued to their shell-holes the artillery still maintained the characteristic activity of battle areas: and the few roads and paths available for transport and communication were their constant targets, especially during the hours of darkness. The Battalion soon found that the hardships to be undergone far exceeded those experienced up to date.

On their arrival at Lozenge Wood (so-called) they took over from the 11th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders in the pouring rain a camp which consisted only of one bivouac sheet per platoon, and eight tents for officers; and any attempt at improvement was frustrated by the complete absence of material. Reserve and support lines were alike in affording no shelter of any kind, and the front trenches were naturally the worst of all, any part of which was considered to be in good condition if the liquid mud at the bottom did not exceed a foot in depth. No hot rations could be brought up, for the cooks could come no nearer than the ridge behind Martinpuich, more than 2 miles away as the crow flies. A 'Tommy's cooker' was served out to each section, but there were no dug-outs in which to use it, and in the open the mud and rain were an effectual hindrance.

The trenches themselves were in the shallow valley to the north of Le Sars, looking across to the last ridge that defended Bapaume, with Loupart Wood fringing its crest. On the left our line was extremely dangerous and weak, for it was enfiladed from the high ground in the direction of Pys; while the extreme left post in a chalkpit was not only isolated by 300 yards from the next Battalion, but had close by a covered ravine leading to the German lines. This post was, in fact, raided by the enemy soon after we had been relieved.

This first tour lasted three days, and considering the violence and the methodical character of the shelling the Battalion were fortunate in having only 17 casualties. In addition five cases of trench feet were reported, for though dry socks were sent up every twenty-four hours, this could do little to mitigate hardship. It was rather surprising that the number of cases were so small, for amongst the men was a large draft of Yeomanry having their first experience of the trenches.

Martinpuich

7th to 11th November 1916

Meanwhile a new camp at Lower Wood; about a mile behind Martinpuich, had been started, and we inhabited and improved it during the next four days.

The rain had at last ceased; and the whole country was enveloped with those dense, clinging mists so characteristic of Artois, which at least had the merit of blinding the artillery's action.

Butte of Warlincourt **16th November to 7th December 1916**

On November 16th orders came for the Battalion to make an attack on the Butte of Warlencourt in 48 hours. Accordingly that night they moved up into the trenches on the east of the Bapaume road immediately facing the Butte.

This ancient burial place rose steeply in a rounded hump 50 feet above the surrounding country about 500 yards north-east of Le Sars. Its greyish-white sides were pitted and scarred by shell-fire, but none the less in its chalky bowels it contained plenty of dugouts filled with machine gunners, who took full advantage of their dominant position. It had already been reached and even partially taken, but never held.

The attack, however, was cancelled at the last moment. Everything, indeed, had combined to make success unlikely. The flanks were not secure, the weather was again thoroughly broken and the Battalion was very weak in numbers.

Although the nominal ration strength was not much under 700, barely half of these were available for fighting purposes; in D Company at this time the average strength of platoons was only 13. In these wretched trenches the average casualties each day were about six, an apparently small number, perhaps, but equivalent in a year to twice the strength of a strong Battalion.

The wastage from sickness was also high, while many of those who carried on in the line were tired almost to the point of collapse. Nor was there any rest, comfort or security in the camps behind. There were no fires, no cookhouses, only tents without floorboards. It was very different from the winter before, when, whatever the hardships of the line (and they were incomparably smaller) men could look forward to a good spell at Authie with its pleasant aspect, its untouched houses, its estaminets, and its cheerful civilian population. Almost the only thing which could now be done for the comfort of the men was the institution of a Battalion Canteen, at which all the articles bought from the Expeditionary Force Canteen were sold at cost price.

The weary interchange between camp and trench went on for nearly another month. Scotland and Chalk Trenches, the same line which had been taken over after first going forward from Lozenge Wood, were twice revisited. On the second occasion 2nd Lieut. Cawley was kept throughout in Destremont Farm with 20 men, and used entirely for patrol work. This new experiment proved a great success, for on one of these expeditions, which started from the chalk pit already mentioned on the left, they came by surprise on a German working party, and killed about 30 without loss to themselves. Among the many other troubles in these trenches was the exact knowledge which the Germans naturally possessed of their few dugouts, which the artillery firing

(as always against captured ground) with great accuracy continually shelled.

December 8th 1916

On December 8th C Company Headquarters were blown in and three casualties caused; next day a shell hit A Company Head-quarters, with even more disastrous effect, killing 3 and wounding 6. These shelters might, it is true, be patched up, but with the earth liquefying all around and a shortage of material the result was not likely to be very secure.

Becourt

December 14th to 24th 1916

At last, on December 14th, the Battalion, now reduced in strength to 540 all ranks, moved back to Becourt Camp, a mile south of La Boisselle. It was a poor place, but situated beyond the western border of the great waste, and practically immune from shell-fire.

For the greater part of December the Battalion was commanded by Captain J. H. Goolden, who had returned during the Somme Battles after a long absence with the Brigade and Divisional Staff. Colonel Clarke was at this time on a month's leave in England, while Major Battcock had gone sick. Of the original officers who had gone out in March, 1915, there were now only four remaining: Colonel Clarke, Captains Goolden and Challoner, with the Quartermaster, Lieut. Payne. The interpreter, M. Henaut, still remained with us, and indeed stayed on, always cheerful, willing and helpful, the friend of everybody, until our departure for Italy next November.

The casualties (exclusive of sick) during this year of severe fighting amounted in all to 779, including 24 officers. As a result of these losses, and the impossibility of finding adequate local drafts, the Battalion during the latter half of the year gradually lost its exclusive Berkshire character, which at the beginning of the war had been its unique possession.

25th December 1916

Christmas was spent in the huts at Becourt with a wild gale blowing; the festivities and feasting of the previous year at Authie were not possible, but at least the men could congratulate themselves that were not in the trenches.

Bresle

28th December 1916

On the 28th we moved back through Albert to the village of Bresle, which lies just north of the great straight highway from Amiens to Albert. Here some houses yet remained, and contact was re-established

with the vestiges of civilisation. The Brigade, drawn up in a hollow square, was inspected by Lieut.-General Sir W. P. Pulteney, the Corps Commander, and earned his praise. Boxing competitions, concerts and football matches reappeared in the intervals of work.

Citerne

9th January 1917

A train journey on January 9th took us to Citerne, a quiet, comfortable village, intact of war, in the French area south of the Somme. The inhabitants were most friendly, accommodation good, and each officer found a bed at his disposal. The three weeks' respite from the rigours of the line was the more appreciated as the great cold had now set in, which was to continue with almost unmitigated intensity until the middle of April. There was much to be done in the way of training, for the new platoon organisation had now come into force. Its object was to make the platoon a self-contained unit of specialists, with its four sections divided into riflemen, Lewis gunners, bombers and rifle-bombers. This was obviously to require from the average man a higher standard of specialisation than before, and consequently threw greater responsibility on the platoon and section commanders. It was, in fact, found impossible during the course of the 1917 campaign fully to attain this ideal, as the time available for the training of new drafts was not generally sufficient.

Cappy

28th January 1917

Another train journey on January 28th took the Battalion by a circuitous route through Amiens, past Villars-Brettoneaux to Hamel, two names destined next year to become famous in the fighting history of the Australians. Hamel was soon exchanged for Cappy, a village high above the southern bank of the Somme, overlooking its great loops, and the wide-spread marshes and pools all frozen stiff. Although only about 2,000 yards behind the trenches from which the French started to the assault of Frise on July 1st, it was not badly knocked about. Houses and barns were available for billets, but the men suffered considerably from the cold, as fuel was very scarce, and the frost was now at its height, the thermometer marking 20 or more degrees of frost every night.

Then followed a few days in the great French Adrian Huts, each holding a Company, in a camp by the edge of the Somme Canal a few hundred yards further east.

1st to 15th February 1917

The month of February passed uneventfully, though unpleasantly, in alternatives between the trenches west of Peronne and Cappy. Until the 16th the extreme cold continued unabated, so that all the water which was brought up in petrol tins each night from Cappy froze

solidly in transit. Another result of the severe weather more appreciated by the men was the hardness of the trenches, which made most of the ordinary trench fatigues impossible.

16th to 28th February 1916

A thaw, however, set in on the 16th, and a mist arose over all the country, which lasted for many days, and made it possible for the enemy to carry out unobserved his plans for the great retirement.

Though further north throughout this very bitter weather fighting was incessant round Miraumont and the approaches of Bapaume, here inactivity prevailed, and the month cost the Battalion no more than nine casualties. There was also little sickness, and strength and fitness were well maintained.

March 1917

March came in with a return of frost and snow, but the front was gradually waking into life. It was obviously the German policy to mask the moment of their withdrawal by lively activity, and their artillery and machine guns showed considerable vigour. On the other hand, though the British had not yet realised that the front was about to give along a stretch of 86 miles it was clear from the events round Bapaume that the enemy had for the first time begun to entertain the idea of ceding ground voluntarily. Hence raids for purposes of identification again became frequent.

Raid

7th-8th March 1917

One of these was most successfully carried out by the Battalion on the night of 7th-8th March without any loss to themselves. The raiders were under the command of 2nd Lieut. Hampshire, and were divided into three small parties, each of 8 men. The portion of trench to be entered was shut off by a 'box barrage,' which, falling on both flanks and on the support line, enclosed it, so to speak, in a frame of shells. The wire was fully cut, and no difficulty was found in penetrating the enemy's line, but all the birds had flown beyond the limits of the barrages on either side. Accordingly, as no prisoner had been caught, a second attempt was made at 2.45 a.m. Again an entry was easily effected on the left; the party worked further down towards the south owing to the enlargement of the barrage, and finally found a small dugout, which was bombed. This had the effect of producing two Germans, who were carried off. The object of the raid thus happily accomplished, Hampshire and his men returned.

The flanks throughout had been strongly held by the enemy, who fired rapidly if inaccurately, and caused no casualties whatever. The only effect of this action was to prevent the entry into their trench of our right-hand

party towards La Maisonnette, which could not get through the the hostile wire, but returned undamaged. The two prisoners were found, on examination, to belong to King Constantine's Own 88th Infantry Regiment, and had their shoulder-straps adorned with a crown and the letter K beneath.

The G.O.C. of the Division sent special congratulations on the success of the whole operation. For their conspicuous share in this success, 2nd Lieut. Hampshire received the M.C., Sergt. A. C. Evans, Corpl. H. Hart, Lance-Corpls. J. Mazey and G. W. Hutchings the M.M.

17th March 1917

Shortly after this the results of the weary and bloody months on the Somme battlefields became manifest. On March 17th-18th the enemy began his general retreat. The 48th Division was in the forefront of the pursuit south of the Somme. The 1st/7th Royal Warwicks were the first British troops to enter Peronne, and the flag which they planted on the ruined towers is now carefully preserved and treasured in the Imperial War Museum.

Our Battalion was in reserve at Cappy practising Advance Guards. Open warfare was no longer relegated to the dim and uncertain future, but became the certainty of the moment.

20th March 1917

On the morning of the 20th operation orders were issued which began: '*The Battalion will move to Peronne at 11 a.m.*' For the first time since they went abroad, they could advance unmolested over enemy country. The weather at last showed a delusive promise of spring, and the sun shone. Hopes ran high and all were pleased beyond measure to be leaving the mire and clay for the green untouched country beyond.

They went over the forsaken trenches, crossed the Somme by a bridge thrown over at Bezancourt Farm and entered Peronne. The little town, after its long history as a French fortress, after the battle of Mont St. Quentin and the German occupation of 1870, had now been laid utterly waste. Few houses had been previously damaged from shell-fire, since the French gunners had purposely spared the place, but now the destruction by the hand of the enemy was complete; it had been organised with the greatest care to make impossible military and civil occupation. In the suburbs the fruit trees had been felled; children's toys and all manner of debris, wantonly destroyed, lay about the streets. The Battalion was billeted in the remains of the barracks, and was joined during the evening and night by the rest of the Brigade.

21st March 1917

Next day a march was made south-east along the Cologne Brook, which was crossed at Doigut. The roads were being everywhere busily repaired, the tall poplar trees which had been felled across them were being dragged out of the way, the great mine-craters at the

crossroads were being filled up; the whole countryside was alive with labour repairing the damage for the advancing army. For some days the time was spent in outpost duty in the old style between Peronne and Roisel, and working on the defences which were being provisionally dug, till touch was fully restored with the Hun, and the limits of his retreat became clear.

24th March 1917

On March 24th the 5th Cavalry Division passed by, riding eastward, a sign of the new conditions of warfare. At Flamicourt, one of the adjacent villages used as billets for the Battalion for several days, were several interesting signs both of the carefulness of the enemy and of his hasty departure. In the street outside almost every house were great heaps of tin and zinc ready to be carted away; at another court was a pile of copper stripped from our shells. Here, too, for the first time was seen that inspiring yet most pitiful spectacle, a number of the civil population released from German captivity. The proof of victory, they were also an incitement to vengeance; their faces, from which all life and hope seemed to have departed, were a testimony to the misery which they had endured for the last 30 months. Among them were the inhabitants of Tincourt, whom the Germans, by a refinement of cruelty compelled to halt on the rise overlooking their homes and there to witness the destruction. Meanwhile, in the bitter weather that had returned, incessant pressure was being exerted against the stubborn German rear-guards, who were being gradually pushed eastward towards the much-vaunted defences of the Hindenburg Line.

Sources

*The text is taken almost entirely from
Cruttwell*

Petre 150-154

Cruttwell 93-105

Continued in section 263