

Section 246

Interlude II

The 6th Battalion - September 1916 to March 1917

This covers the period from the close of the Battle of the Somme to the opening of the Battle of Arras on 9/4/17

Recuperation

18th Division were taken out of the line and spent the whole of December 1916 and part of January 1917 in rest billets in the Abbeville area. The 6th Battalion was at Le Titre until the 29th December when they moved to Drucat. On the 27th January the Battalion relieved the 7th Bedfords in the Front Line, facing north opposite Grandcourt on the south bank of the Ancre. During this relief a German shell landed right in the entrance of B Coy's dugout killing two and wounding 13.

The early part of February was spent in and out of trenches. Their main front line was Desire trench which had been captured from the Germans on the 18th November and which faced Grandcourt trench, still held by the Germans, at about 1000 yards distance.

The Action at Miraumont 17/18 February 1917

The Battle of Boom Ravine was more popularly known as the 'Grocery Battle' as the attack was against Tea, Coffee and Rum Trenches. Officially it was entitled the 'Action at Miraumont' conducted by the II Corps of 2nd, 18th and 63rd Divisions. The 6th Royal Berks were to be part of the attacking brigades in 18 Division. They were paired with the 8th Suffolks within 53rd Brigade with the 8th Norfolks in support.

Their objective was a feature known as Hill 130, south-east of Miraumont which would involve an advance of some 1200 yards. After capturing the three German trenches, Rum, Tea and Coffee they were faced with a formidable obstacle in the form of a Y-shaped ravine known as Boom Ravine which would stretch away to their right as they attacked. This ravine formed the boundary between the 53rd Brigade and the 54th on their right.

On the 15th February, in preparation for the Battle they moved into the Front Line once again from the junction of 16 Road and Grandcourt Trench, along a part of Grandcourt Trench in allied hands to the village of Grandcourt. The official report by Lt Col Clay read:-

On the morning of the 15th February the Battalion was

billeted in VARENNES and moved towards the line arriving at WELLINGTON HUTS about noon. The Battalion rested here and then moved up and took over the line from the 7th R W Kent Regt.

The relief was carried out without molestation by the enemy and was completed by 11-50 pm.

A long period of cold and frosty weather turned into a thaw the day before the attack was due to start. One result was that the ground became wet and greasy. The Battalion war diary recorded:

16th Feb: Weather fine but thaw setting in and going very heavy

The ground conditions also brought another danger. The artillery bombardment was timed to support troops moving relatively quickly across firm ground and was now likely to outdistance them.

At 0430 on the 17th Feb the 6th Battalion were formed up on a 570 yard frontage with their first wave just in front of Grandcourt trench. There were no assembly trenches and tapes to mark the line had been laid the night before. Each infantry man carried 120 rounds of small arm ammunition, two bombs, two empty sandbags a filled water bottle and one days rations in addition to his standard kit and rifle. Officers dressed as privates.

Col Clay wrote:-

At 1-30 am on the morning of the 16th a tape line was laid out from a point on SIXTEEN ROAD 30 yards N of FOLLY TRENCH on a bearing of 288 degrees magnetic for a distance of 570 yards for the Battalion to form up on.

This line was divided into 3 equal parts for the 3 attacking Coys. The intention was that the Battalion should attack with 3 Coys in the attacking line, C Coy on the right, B Coy in the centre and D Coy on the left.

The 8th Suffolk Regt attacked on the right of the Bn and one Coy of the 8th Norfolk Regt on the left of the Bn.

Captain Rochford wrote later:-

The long frost which lasted from November 1916 to February 1917 broke on the morning of the 16th February. The tape line laid out for this attack was actually nailed into the ground, and so hard was it to drive the nails in, that it took us five hours to lay it. Major Hoare was the Brigade Major who accompanied us on this little exploit and while we were laying the line we wondered how it would be possible to dig in in any way until the frost broke.

There seems to be some confusion as to who actually was the Brigade Major as the brigade report read:-

During the night 15th/16th Feb a tape forming up line was laid out along the whole battle front of the Brigade by Major R L BERGNE (Bde Major) and Major #F H BUDDEN Cmdg. 79th Fd Coy RE assisted by Capt and Adj G L M FACHE 8th Suff R and Capt and Adj R A ROCHFORD 6th R Berks R.

Capt Rochford:

The troops usually termed this the 'Grocery Battle' as the trenches we were attacking were Tea, Coffee and Rum trenches. Coffee Trench was a mystery trench. It came out in aeroplane photos, was strongly wired, but no movement was ever seen in it. On the morning of the 6th Lewis [Hoare?] and I approached Coffee Trench from the orchard above Grandcourt. We found that Coffee Trench was only a trace, 6 inches deep, but that the wire in front of it had not been cut. General Higginson got our artillery on to this all day and succeeded in having the whole of it destroyed.

As the Battalion was beginning to assemble at 0445 on the 17th February, the Germans, who had been advised of the plans for the assault by two British deserters from another Division, opened up a tremendous bombardment on the points of assembly. There were many casualties and one shell fell on the 6th Battalion's HQ and Col Clay had to move elsewhere. The ground conditions and the shelling made it impossible to bring up rations so the men were faced with going into battle on empty stomachs.

Col Clay:-

The day of the 16th was spent in making the final preparations for the attack. Dumps were formed in GRANDCOURT TRENCH and GRANDCOURT VILLAGE to supply the front line after the attack.

On the evening of the 16th, 2 platoons of the 10th Essex relieved D Coy in GRANDCOURT ROAD and GRANDCOURT VILLAGE

The Coy rested against the high bank on the E Side of the road immediately S of the cemetery.

Captain Rochford, the Battalion Adjutant, commented later:

The night of the attack was the darkest I have ever known. A thaw had set in, and a mist rose about 8 or 9 feet from the ground. Once in this mist it was impossible to see a yard. We had all roads blocked and guarded and guides out with tape and wire leading up to the forming-up place. Some of the - Division had deserted that afternoon into the Boche line and had given away the hour of the attack. As a result we were shelled all night on our forming-up line.

Headquarters was in some gunpits, but so heavy was the shelling that Colonel Clay decided to evacuate them and use a shell hole. As we were leaving the gun pits, a shell burst in the entrance, knocked Col Clay and me into a shell-hole full of water and wiped out the two runners who were carrying our papers, namely Whitehouse [*12291 Pte Ernest Whitehouse*] and Mabson [*12475 Pte George Mabson*]. Whitehouse was carrying a leather attache case with the orders and maps for the battle. We never found a trace of him or the attache case.

The barrage also had the effect of disrupting British communications. Not only had the runners been killed

but the telephone wires had all been cut and it took over three hours for a message from Battalion HQ to reach Brigade HQ informing them that the Battalion had formed up.

Col Clay:-

Roads were allotted to Coys to the forming up line as follows: C Coy via SIXTEEN ROAD, B Coy via GRANDCOURT ROAD, D Coy via GRANDCOURT ROAD. Coys started to move at 2 am on the morning of the 17th to their attacking positions. Zero hour was fixed for 5-45 am. At 4-15 am A Coy withdrew from GRANDCOURT TRENCH with the exception of 3 small posts and took up its position in FOLLY TRENCH and GRANDCOURT ROAD.

Sentries were placed out 50 yards in advance of the forming up line in each Coy. Coys were in position by 4-30 am and word to this effect was sent to Brigade HQ at 4-50 am.

At about midnight the enemy had opened a slow barrage on all our lines of approach. At 4 am this slow barrage was opened on our forming up line and at 5 am increased in intensity and caused some casualties.

The night of the 16/17th was particularly dark - a thaw had set in and the going was rendered extremely difficult in consequence. The area in which the Bn formed up and its approaches were very much cut up by shell fire. This materially added to the difficulty of the operations. Telephone lines were continually interrupted.

Nevertheless, despite the darkness, the mist and the ground conditions the 53rd Brigade went over on time at 0545. The ground was a sea of mud. For the 6th Berks the attack was a great success and all objectives were taken, but they had to withdraw their line owing to the Division on their right not getting to their objective.

The Brigade report showed how appreciative the Brigadier was of their efforts:

The night of the 17th Feby was extremely dark and owing to the thaw the ground had become very sticky. The enemy also opened a heavy barrage on our forming up line about 4.0 am and continued it until about 5.15 am. This rendered the operation of forming up extremely difficult. I attribute the successful accomplishment of this task to the high qualities of leadership shown by Lt Colonels HILL and Clay, Capt ASHDOWN (8th Norf. R) and the officers and NCOs of the 3 Bns concerned, namely the 8th Suff R, 6th R Berks R and 8th Norfolk R (1 Coy) and also to the splendid discipline shown by all ranks. Fortunately the heaviest part of the barrage did not fall on the forming up line of the Bde except in the mass of the left of the 6th R Berks R and the 8th Norfolk R, consequently, except in the last named Bn, casualties from this cause were comparatively few.

The units had been ordered to be in position by 4.15 am and to report completion of forming up, but no definite report had been received at Bde HQ by 5.45 am regarding the forming up of the assaulting units.

The 6th R Berks R had had their HQ blown in and all communication cut: several runners had also been knocked out. The Coy 8th Norf R on the left of the R Berks were dependent on the R Berks for communication and were thus also cut off.

C Company

C Company led the attack on the right. They pushed forward and captured, without serious resistance, the enemy strong point where Grandcourt trench crossed Sixteen Road. Here they were in close touch with the left of the 8th Suffolks. Sixteen Road itself was mopped up with the assistance of a platoon from the 8th Norfolks attached to C Coy for that purpose. There were a fair number of dug-outs in Sixteen Road and the Berkshires and the Suffolks found many Germans hiding who were taken in as prisoners. C Coy went on to Rum trench which was found to be unoccupied.

The wire in front of Coffee trench had not been cut properly by the barrage, but three gaps were found and the Company were able to get through and take the trench after knocking out the crew of a machine gun in the rear of the trench. At this point C Coy paused for a while to regroup and re-organise and when the British barrage lifted 37 minutes later they were able to push on to their final objective on the Grandcourt - Miraumont Road.

When the got there they found that the troops on their right had not made such good progress and so they were exposed to their right. The Germans counterattacked from this flank using troops retiring from the ground immediately to the north of Boom Ravine. As a consequence it was necessary to withdraw over three hundred yards back to the junction of Sixteen Road and Coffee Trench. Here touch was made with B Coy on the left and they were able to consolidate their positions

About 0730 Captain V G McArthur was wounded whilst siting a strong point and as his deputy, 2nd Lt A Birch had been fatally wounded in Coffee trench, command of the Company fell to 2nd Lt G H Tigar.

B Company

B was the centre company. At the beginning of the attack they crossed Grandcourt Trench unopposed and passed Rum Trench under a shrapnel barrage. As they moved up Coffee Trench, Capt N B Hudson was wounded. In Coffee Trench the Company was re-organised while waiting for the barrage to re-open. In the fighting in this trench 2Lts Fox and Smeeton were wounded and CSM Hine took over command of the Company. It was he who sent to Headquarters of 18th Division a message by pigeon post which read simply '*Second objective taken, CSM Hine*'

The 'second objective' was the Grandcourt to Miraumont road and when they were there C Coy were in the process of withdrawing and so they were able to regain contact.

D Company

D Coy were on the left and they met with no resistance

at all until they reached the enemy trench immediately to the east of the Grandcourt orchards. Here again the wire was not well cut but they forced their way through and captured the trench, which was not strongly occupied, without difficulty. 2Lt Tarrant at once pushed onto the sunken road from Grandcourt to Miraumont and in the dug outs on its southern side took about 70 German prisoners. He advanced a patrol beyond the road, as far as the railway and made touch with B Coy on his right and with a Company of the Norfolks on his left.

Captain Rochfort commented afterwards

'We had some unusual adventures in the attack. Lieutenant Tarrant captured thirty Boches single handed from the entrance of a dugout. One platoon of ours lost itself in the darkness coming up and found itself in the Boche line. They refused to surrender and were found in a shell hole which they had taken up, all killed. But they were surrounded by Boche many dead, showing what a good fight they had put up.'

A Company

A Coy were in reserve and as the assaulting troops went forward, A Coy moved up into Grandcourt Trench behind them. When the other companies again advanced to take the final objective, A Coy left two of their platoons together with Company HQ in Grandcourt Trench and in Folly Trench behind the starting point and used their other two platoons to garrison Coffee Trench.

Battalion HQ

Battalion HQ had been forced to abandon their original position in the gun pits so they took up a new position at the junction of Sixteen Road and Regina Trench some 1400 yards south of Grandcourt Trench.

Private A J Gosling (16070) had a somewhat detached view of the morning's proceedings:

'After watching the attack on Tea, Coffee and Rum Trenches - a wonderful sight to see the boys going over the top - I returned quite safely to the Boot Shop'

Aftermath

Once the Berkshires had consolidated themselves in their newly captured trenches the artillery barrage had moved too far ahead for the attack to be sustained. Also the German's launched a vigorous counter-attack. Thus the final outcome fell somewhat short of what had been planned. Hill 130 was still in German hands but over 1000 yards of ground had been won in the centre and the difficult terrain around Boom Ravine was in British hands.

An unidentified Sergeant recounted his experiences in the Berkshire Chronicle of 24th April 1917:-

The attack was launched at 5.45 am and three companies went over with A Coy in support. First of all three trenches which were named Rum, Coffee and Tea, had to be captured and this task was soon accomplished, the

enemy putting up but little opposition. But a different story has to be told when it comes to taking the final position, viz the Ravine. Here the Germans were very strongly entrenched. They had machine guns galore and dug-outs that could be counted by the dozen. The fighting was of a very fierce character with plenty of bombing. We ultimately occupied all the dugouts, our bombers doing splendid work. In fact bombing formed the chief part of the fighting. We lost some men through them going beyond the position without clearing the enemy. The fighting was all over by 8.45 am. We consolidated the position and got in readiness to meet a counter attack. This however the enemy did not attempt, although they shelled us very heavily. We had the misfortune to lose all our Company Officers, wounded. Acting Company Sergeant [Hines] received the Military Medal for carrying on after the Company Officers had been wounded, taking over the charge of one of the companies in directing operations in a manner calling for the highest praise. Private G E Court won a similar decoration for carrying messages under heavy fire.

Consolidation of the newly won positions was aided by the mist which rose from the ground as the Ancre valley thawed out.

Casualties had been heavy: six officers had been wounded (Capt V G McArthur, Capt N B Hudson, 2Lt A Birch, 2Lt A J Fox, 2Lt F J Smeeton and 2Lt S J Kydd) but 2Lt Birch later died from his wounds. 19 other ranks were killed, 121 wounded and 48 missing. The majority of the casualties had come, not from the fighting, but from the barrage while they were assembling.

Acting Sergeant Major Hine was awarded the MM for his role in taking over command of B Coy and Pte G E Court got the MM for carrying messages under heavy fire.

The German Retreat 18th Feb to 18th April 1917

The 18th February was spent consolidating the new positions and on the 19th the 6th Battalion was relieved by the 10th Essex and moved to Aveluy where they remained until the 3rd March.

On the 10th March the 53rd Brigade attacked and captured Irlles and Grevillers but the 6th took no active part in the fighting although they did provide carrying parties for the attacking battalions. On the 11th the Berkshires relieved the 10th Essex and 8th Norfolks holding Irlles and the posts around it.

The Germans had planned their retirement behind the Siegfried Line for mid March but as a consequence of the British advance the order for the withdrawal was given on February 18th and started 4 days later on the 22nd. II Corps War Diary recorded on 2nd March:

The past week has witnessed the first retirement unaccompanied by heavy fighting which the enemy has undertaken on the Western Front since trench warfare began.

As a consequence the Battalion had little open fighting during the rest of March and on the 26th it was moved, along with the rest of 18th Division, by rail to Lumbres for training. There they stayed until 18th April when they formed part of First Army's strategic reserve.

Official Report - 53rd Brigade

Parts of Brigadier General H W Higginson's official report has already been quoted above. The following extracts sum up the action:-

In the meantime the 6th R Berks R were also advancing on COFFEE Trench. RUM trench was found to be unoccupied but COFFEE trench was found to be fairly strongly held with much uncut wire of the knife rest pattern in front of it.

The attack however was pressed home with great gallantry, parties working through gaps in the wire and getting round the flank of the enemy. A considerable number of prisoners were thus captured. During the assault on COFFEE Trench the casualties amongst the Officers of the right and centre companies were heavy. Capt N B Hudson was wounded, 2nd Lieut A Birch mortally wounded and 2nd Lieut A J Fox and F J Smeeton wounded. The command of the right Coy then devolved upon A/CSM Hine.

The left Coy of the 6th R Berks R and the Coy of the 8th Norf R had encountered no resistance up to this point and reached their first objective about 6.0 am.

At 8.41 am the 6th R Berks R pushed on to the Final Objective which was reached about 7.0 am. The line then ran approximately from about R.10.b.3.8 along the GRANDCOURT - MIRAUMONT Rd to the Railway about R.10.a.2.6 where touch was established with the 8th Norf R.

Owing to all the officers and NCOs of the right Coy who reached the BLUFF having become casualties I have been unable to ascertain exactly what occurred on this flank. It appears that shortly after the arrival of the right of the right Coy at this point it was found that touch had been lost with the R Fusiliers on the right and the Coy was attacked in flank by the enemy, losing a considerable number of men killed and some prisoners. Capt V G McArthur, who was in command, finding he could not hold on, withdrew the remnants of his Coy to about R.10.b.3.3 where a strong point was established. While doing so Capt McArthur was wounded. This was about 8.0 am. The centre Coy, finding its right exposed, withdrew its right to about R.10.a.6.3. The left Coy met with little resistance and with the Coy of the 8th Norf R on its left pushed on to the final objective which was gained about 7.0 am, about 70 prisoners being captured in the dugouts on the S side of the road. I am of the opinion that the capture of this left part of the objective was greatly assisted by the Stokes Mortar barrage which had been arranged on this area. Six Stokes Mortars under

Lieut J Cromie were placed in position about R.9.d.4.9 during the night 15th/16th Feby. These mortars fired 500 rounds on the enemy trench E of the orchards during the 16th. From zero til plus 19 these guns barraged the enemy trench running N & S from R.10.a.05.35 to R.10.b.07.05. At plus 19 they lifted from R.10.a.07.05 to R.10.a.05.20 till plus 22 when firing ceased.

It was now about 8.0 am and all BOOM RAVINE had practically been cleared by the 8th Suff R in their area. About this time the 8th Suff R observed troops of the 54th Inf Bde on their right coming back over the skyline from the direction of S MIRAUMONT trench: a small party of the 6th R Berks were also seen retiring from the BLUFF. 2 Lewis guns were immediately pushed forward to cover this retirement.

The question of the effect of the deserters was raised in the report:

One of the chief features of the attack was the heavy hostile barrage opened on our forming up positions during the early hours of the morning. This is accounted for by the fact that the enemy acquired information of the impending attack from deserters from the 2nd Division.

When our barrage opened the enemy reply opened at and was not heavy. From 9.0 am onwards throughout the 17th the hostile artillery fire was directed on certain defined area: BOOM RAVINE, COFFEE and GRAND-COURT trenches. It was not however sufficiently intense to interfere with the work of consolidation. At 4.30 pm the enemy shelling of the valley and bank in R.10.d was very intense and counter-battery was asked for.

The attitude of the enemy infantry was not aggressive: a considerable amount of sniping and machine gun fire took place but nothing was attempted by him in the way of a counter attack.

The following German losses were noted:-

The enemy losses in killed are estimated at 135. 267 prisoners were taken including 5 officers. 3 machine guns, 2 trench mortars and a considerable amount of ammunition, grenades etc fell into our hands.

In conclusion Brig Higginson noted:-

a) The absolute necessity of a forming up line was proved on this occasion. Had it not been for the tape it would have been impossible to have formed up correctly. When no roads or defined tracks exist, the route to be taken by companies from their rendezvous to their position of assembly must be marked.

b) Our barrage was very good. Owing however to the darkness and mud the majority of the men in the assaulting wave were unable to keep close to it.

c) Most officers were at first of opinion that zero hour was too early. It was quite dark at 5.45 am and this caused some confusion and loss of direction. After further discussion however, they have come to the conclusion that the darkness saved many casualties from MG fire as the troops were moving down the exposed northern slopes from GRANDCOURT trench into the ANCRE valley. I consider that no fixed rule can be laid down as regards hour of Zero. every case must be considered separately. Facilities for forming up, formation and condition of the ground, distance of objectives etc. all affect the point in question. There are however certain principles which can be formulated.

Zero hour should be just before the first streak of daybreak in the following cases:-

(i) When the forming up line is under view of the enemy and no cover is available.

(ii) When troops have to advance a long distance down a forward slope to reach their final objectives.

(iii) When attacking a re-entrant.

(d) The necessity of ensuring that wire in front of enemy objectives is out is of vital importance. It is courting failure to attack trenches unless the wire is cut and even if the attack succeeds, it is generally at the expense of heavy casualties. Wire cutting must be finished 2 days before the attack. Wire cutting on the day previous to the attack causes retaliation from the enemy at a time when troops are moving up to their battle positions.

(e) Battle HQ of Bde and Bns should not be in positions the approach to which can be observed by the enemy. The battle HQ of the 6th R Berks R was not specially shelled until two days before the attack. The enemy evidently observed the movement of orderlies etc, to and from the position of the dug out and knowing its exact location, was able to bring accurate fire on to it. In this particular case there was a covered way to the dug out but it evidently was not used by everyone approaching it.

18.3.1917 (signed) H W Higginson, Brigadier General, Commanding 53rd Infantry Brigade.

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