

Section 247

Interlude II - 7th Battalion

July 1916 to March 1917

While the Battle of the Somme was raging in France, the 7th Battalion was getting ready for its own actions. Continued from Section 227

The March North 1st to 28th July 1916

On the 22nd July Lieut.-Colonel Dene rejoined from England and took over command of the battalion from Major Morony, who had acted in his absence.

The northward march commenced on the 25th July, when Amberkoj was reached. The succeeding stages were Sarageul on the 26th, Malovci on the 27th, and the front on the 29th.

The French at this time were holding a line of which the right rested on the southern shore of Lake Doiran, the left on the River Vardar. Its length was some thirteen miles, winding along a line of hills, quite bare except for a clothing of prickly scrub growing with difficulty on the foot or so of soil which was all that covered the rock below obviously a bad country for entrenching. These hills descended sharply on their northern edge, which was cut through by many ravines leading down to the valley. Beyond this were gradual slopes leading up to the Bulgarian positions, which generally over-looked and commanded those of the Allies.

The most conspicuous points on the Bulgarian side were Grand Couronne in the background N.W. of Doiran, and the long Pip Ridge running north and south a mile west of it. Each of these rose from ten hundred to twelve hundred feet above the hills held by the Allies, and formed admirable observation posts for the enemy. The position is thus generally described by Major Pike:

"We were placed on small bare rocky hills looking up all the time (and at very close proximity: often only one hundred to three hundred yards of 'No-Man's Land') at a fine, almost impregnable, series of mountain peaks. It was terrific country to fight over, consisting of a series of precipitous ravines and very steep bare slopes."

The only casualty during this period was 13598 Pte Samuel William Snow of Leyton who died 10/7/16

Relieving the French 29th July to 12th August 1916

The French trenches, owing to the scanty soil, were

poor, only some eighteen inches deep, whilst the enemy had been able to entrench himself more effectually, and was screened from view by a more ample scrub.

On the 29th July the brigade relieved the French troops in part of their trenches. Those occupied by the 7th Royal Berkshire extended from Hill 420 on the right to Asagi Mahala on the left. The 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were on their left from Asagi Mahala inclusive.

Hill 420 was severely shelled on the 1st August, but no damage was done.

On the night of the 7th-8th August Captain Gillespie carried out a reconnaissance of Castle Hill, which apparently met with no opposition. An advanced post of twenty-five men under Second-Lieutenant West was established there.

14540 Pte Tom Davis of Boxford died 11/8/1916

Kidney Hill 13th August 1916

The next operation was the establishment of a position on Kidney Hill by the capture of a Bulgarian outpost there. This was a necessary pre-liminary to the projected attack on Horseshoe Hill farther to the north, in combination with an attack by the French on the right of the hill known from its shape as La Tortue. The operation, which is scarcely noted in the diary, was apparently carried out by night on the 13th August.

It was entrusted to B Company of the 7th Royal Berkshire. Captain Pike, who was commanding B, has furnished an account of this affair. The advance had to be made by the company, with a party of Royal Engineers following, over some two and a half miles of almost un-reconnoitred country, up and down small nullahs where it was impossible to avoid much noise among the rocks.

When the Bulgar outpost which was the objective was reached, the opposition was not great, though a hot but erratic fire was kept up by the enemy for fifteen or twenty minutes. Finally the post was charged and rushed, apparently without loss.

The Reading Mercury reported on 19th May 1917:-

One of the most successful pieces of work performed by the Royal Berks was the capture last summer of Kidney

Hill and the retention of it.

Kidney Hill was about two miles ahead of the then British position. Apparently the enemy were taken by surprise:- it would seem that they had no inkling that there was any determination to retain the position.

Captain Pike with A Coy drove in the enemy's advanced posts without sustaining any casualties and for a few days the enemy were quiescent.

14th August 1916

By dawn a rough trench one foot and a half deep had been made in the rocky soil and a barbed-wire fence erected.

One-fourth of the company was left in this trench, the remaining three-fourths being in reserve one hundred yards in rear. The enemy bombardment was almost continuous. In the heavy bombardment of the 14th Second-Lieutenant Butcher and three men were wounded. In the ensuing night a rather feeble counter-attack was repulsed, a few prisoners were taken, and the dead body of an Austrian soldier was found.

For his services on this occasion Captain Pike received the Order of the White Eagle, Serbia.

16th August 1916

The French had taken La Tortue, after several days' fighting to gain most of their objectives. The Berkshire Battalion on Castle Hill suffered on the 16th from the enemy's artillery, which had been switched on to that hill, apparently in the belief that the French were about to be supported from it. By this bombardment Lieutenant G. W. R. Bray, Second-Lieutenant H. D. Mosley, and two other ranks were killed, and seven men were wounded.

Reading Mercury 19th May 1917:-

Then they opened heavy artillery fire and caused a rare mess but without inflicting many casualties, the total being four killed and two wounded.

Unfortunately the four killed included two much-liked officers. Lieut G W Bray and 2nd Lieut H D Mosley who met their death on August 16th.

The French were attacking "tortoise" Hill and the enemy had put up a barrage. It was thought that the Bulgarians were about to attempt a counter-attack and our reserves went forward to an isolated hill to strengthen our front line.

Lt Bray (who had been transport officer for some time) was mortally wounded, a piece of shell piercing his lung. Second Lieut H D Mosley went to his assistance, but another shell fell and inflicted on him mortal injuries. Bray lingered on for three hours. *They were two good officers and a great loss to the battalion.* was the remark of an NCO.

It must be a great satisfaction to the friends of Second Lieut Mosley to know that he had done excellent work a short time before he was killed. He went out reconnoiter-

ing, getting right to the Bulgar positions and it was practically on his report that the subsequent British and French advance was made. Undoubtedly, had he lived, he would have received the Military Cross.

No 13349 Pte A H Harrison, who accompanied Mosley was mentioned in despatches. Another officer wounded while the Berks were holding Kidney Hill was Lieut Butcher, attached Royal Berks, who came from the Buffs and who had a bullet through the leg. Temporary Captain S A Pike (the son of Mrs Pike of St Clair Reading) was awarded the Order of the White Eagle, 5th class (with swords) by the King of Serbia for his skill in the capture of Kidney Hill.

13834 Pte A E Alexander was awarded the gold medal by the King of Serbia for gallantry in carrying messages under heavy shell fire. A shell fell on a telephone box, mortally wounding two men in an advanced position and dangerously wounded a third. Even when so badly hit the men continued with great devotion to keep the telephone going and record the progress of the fighting. "He was cheery to the last" said the officer of one of them. Alexander stepped into the breach by conveying messages till some more signallers could be sent up.

The Battalion submitted a casualty list on the 16th with 8 names on it but as only four were known to be killed on this day it is presumed the list includes men killed earlier. The list reads:-

Lt George William Reginald Bray MC of Ashburton, Devon (dow)

2Lt Harold Drewell Mosley of London (dow)

13559 Henry Charles Deall of Acton

14123 Charles Arthur Hedges of East Ham (dow)

12564 Frank Joseph Murphy of Erdington, Birmingham (kia)

14785 Frederick Herbert Pateman of Braunston, Leics (dow)

13721 Sgt George Ernest Watts of Battersea

18th August 1916

The succeeding days were "jumpy," and some valuable reconnaissances were carried out by the company towards Horseshoe Hill.

Of the attack on Horseshoe Hill, on the morning of the 18th August, little need be said, for it was carried out by the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, the history of which Battalion acknowledges the value of the occupation by the 7th Royal Berkshire of the trench on Kidney Hill.

19th to 30th August 1916

From the 19th August the battalion was at Gugunci in the rear till the 27th, when it moved to Horseshoe Hill, in relief of the Gloucestershire, who had replaced the 7th Oxfordshire after their capture of the position.

Two casualties were reported on the 24th:

Sgt Walter John Fogg of Kentish Town

Pte Charles Radbourn of Thatcham (dow)

16736 Pte Harry William Clark of Sudbury Suffolk was reported killed on the 27th

14266 Cpl Robert James Skinner of Bicklington Devon was reported killed on the 29th.

On the 30th, Second-Lieutenant J. Butler was wounded in the wrist by shrapnel and 14313 Pte George Harold Frost of Reading was killed..

September 1916

September was an uneventful month spent at Horseshoe Hill, Table Hill, and the Ravin de Senelle, with a long turn of road-making at Gugunci from the 7th to the 24th.

29000 Pte Joseph Charles Nuth of Tunbridge Wells died of wounds on the 7th

From the 25th the battalion was at the Ravin de Senelle, below the east side of Berks Hill, and some eight hundred yards east of Doldzell. Here they were constantly patrolling and being shelled at times.

On the 25th 23675 LCpl Frank Maskelevna Wirdnam of Swindon and 8097 Pte Thomas George Sturgess of Hungerford died.

On the 30th Second-Lieutenant Cuckow, with a patrol, bombed a Bulgarian post in the Ravin des Jumeaux, which ran below the Bulgar trenches on Petit Couronne. 13397 LCpl Hubert Matteri of Islington was killed.

1st October 1916

At midnight of the 30th September-1st October two large patrols of fifty men each, under Captain Eldridge and Lieutenant Ravenshear, went out to raid the enemy trenches on the Mamelon which stood four hundred and fifty yards north-east of the village of Doldzeli in the Bulgarian lines. Doldzeli was the point at which the French left had been held up on the 16th August, and was now in No-Man's Land between the opposing lines as they had become fixed for the winter of 1916-7.

Lieutenant Ravenshear's party on the left, after passing through Doldzeli Village, was heavily fired on in front and flank and forced to retire. Captain Eldridge's party also returned after suffering only slight casualties. Altogether the losses were twenty-one other ranks wounded, mostly in Lieutenant Ravenshear's party.

There was a heavy thunderstorm at 19:30 on the 1st October, and an hour later about sixty of the enemy attempted an attack on the left of the trenches held by the battalion, but were driven off by fire. The attack was renewed at 21:30, this time with a stronger force of from two hundred to three hundred men, but these also were driven off.

No casualties are mentioned in the Battalion Diary, and the enemy attacks were evidently rather half-hearted

affairs.

Reading Mercury 19th May 1917

In October Captain Eldridge and temporary Lieut E W Ravenshear carried out a stunt with fifty men of A Company and fifty men of B. Some Scotch troops had made an attack and the raid was timed for midnight of the same day. It was found that the Bulgars were massing for a counter-attack and so the affair was naturally not so successful as would have been the case had the enemy been taken by surprise. The Berks' casualties were only two killed and thirteen wounded.

The two killed were:-

13765 Cpl Edward Charles Baron of Kilburn

18108 Pte Egbert Claude Smith of Henley on Thames.

2nd to 25th October 1916

Relieved by the 9th Gloucestershire in the night of the 1st-2nd October, the 7th Royal Berkshire went back for road-making and miscellaneous work at Mihalova Ford, some seven miles behind the front, not far from the northern end of Lake Ardzan.

13702 LCpl George Henry Durant of Bermondsey died on the 2nd

It is mentioned that, when attached to the 78th Trench Mortar Battery, Second-Lieutenant Cecil William Halfacre was mortally injured on the 19th October, five men were killed, and one injured by an accident, the nature of which is not stated. Probably it was an accidental explosion.

On the 22nd October the battalion relieved the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in the advanced line about the Ravin de Senelle.

Mamelon Raid

26th October 1916

On the 26th another raid was carried out on the Mamelon north-east of Doldzeli. The raiders consisted of one hundred men of A Company, with two flanking parties from C and B, each composed of twenty men with two Lewis guns. The C party was posted at the N.E. corner of Doldzeli Village, that of B on the hill overlooking the Mamelon.

The raid failed owing the uncut wire which was encountered, but it was ascertained that the enemy had abandoned his trench just north of the crest of the Mamelon, and had made a new one one hundred yards farther back defended by strong wire. During the raid the enemy shelled heavily, especially the left (C) flanking party.

The casualties were 3 other ranks killed, 17 wounded, and 1 missing.

Reading Mercury 19th May 1917:-

A successful raid was carried out by A Company under Captain Pike and temporary Lieut Ravenshear in December [sic]. The Berkshires got through the Bulgars first line, but owing to the enemy's second line being on the reverse slope of the hill the bombardment had not broken the barbed wire but the Berkshires reached their objective and brought back rifles and other booty. Temporary Lieut E W Ravenshear has been mentioned in despatches; he has done good work in raids

Private Waterman of Reading, employed by Messrs H & G Simmonds showed great pluck in cutting wire in the enemy's second line under a constant rain of shell fire and bombs, sticking to his job most gallantly. The Berks casualties were 17 rank and file wounded, one sergeant dying of wounds.

27th October to 22nd December 1916

The information as to the position of the new enemy trench was confirmed next day (27th) by a search party under Sergeant Barrett.

On the last day of October the battalion was withdrawn to Corps Reserve at Rates, and later at Mihalova. At both places it was busy at the usual digging and road-making till the 16th November, when it went into the main line in relief of the Gloucestershire Regiment at Mamelon Franc.

On the 23rd November it moved into front line in relief of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in the D sub-sector, where nothing noticeable occurred till it was again withdrawn to Corps Reserve at Rates on the 1st December.

Its next turn in front, in D sub-sector, began on the 18th December, and on the 22nd Second-Lieutenant P. H. Williams was wounded at Battalion Head-quarters by a shell.

23rd December 1916

On the 23rd a raid was made on Hill 380, the next spur eastwards of the Mamelon in the enemy line, by Captain R. A. B. Chancellor with D Company, whilst a feint was made by Second-Lieutenant Eastwood with thirty other ranks and two Lewis guns to divert attention from the main body.

Captain Chancellor's party assembled at Green Ravine, at 18:38. The first wave of attack, under Lieutenant Hayter, advanced as far as the N.E. edge of Green Ravine, but was unable at first to go farther, owing to "shorts" from the British barrage. When the barrage lifted, this wave advanced to the enemy trench which was found practically destroyed and most of its wire blown away.

The second wave, under Second-Lieutenant Thompson, then attempted to go forward beyond the trench, but suffered so severely from the fire it encountered that it

had to retire. Captain Chancellor had been wounded early in the attack. He continued to lead his men till he was again wounded, this time mortally, when command was taken by Lieutenant Troup; who now retired after the dead and wounded had been evacuated.

Before doing so an R.E. detachment laid demolition charges in the enemy's dugouts, and a Bangalore torpedo in the uncut portion of his wire. A reserve of two platoons, which had been left in Green Ravine, was not called up into action.

His conduct in this affair gained the Military Cross for Second-Lieutenant H. B. Thompson.

The casualties were: Capt. R. A. B. Chancellor, died of his wounds, 2nd-Lieuts. Hayter and Thompson wounded, and of other ranks 5 killed and 29 wounded or missing.

Reading Mercury 19th May 1917

Towards the end of December the Berkshires suffered the loss of another promising officer in Capt R A B Chancellor, the elder son of Mr & Mrs Beresford Chancellor of Wargrave. The raid was preceded by a four-days bombardment and in the course of the enemy's retaliation Lt P H Williams, ward of Mr H T Pugh, the Reading education secretary was on December 22nd severely wounded in the right thigh and left foot, one of his toes having to be removed. The enemy had been shelling with some 5.9s and broke all the telephone wires. As signal Lieut Williams was out with his men repairing the wires when a shell came knocking him over and causing the injuries described. The raid which was carried out by D Company was on Hill 380 and was led by Capt Chancellor. He was hit on the way out, but refused to be brought in and continued to lead his men, when he was again wounded, this time mortally. Acting csm Vickers was killed on the same occasion. Great credit is due to Lieut Troup. He stayed behind and saw the whole company back into the trenches, being the last man to come in. Second Lieut Hayter, Manchester Regiment attached Royal Berks was wounded in this affair.

Second Lieut H B Thompson was awarded the Military Cross for his gallantry in connection with this stunt. The official story was as follows:- " He led his men in the face of heavy fire over the captured trench and took up a position in readiness to meet a possible counter-attack. Later, although wounded, he took out a patrol and obtained most valuable information" The raid was carried out at dusk, and at dawn Second Lieut Thompson went out with a couple of men and brought in two or three wounded men who were still lying there. He also collected the accoutrements which had been dropped in the raid and made a thorough examination of the damage we had done, sending in a detailed report on his return. The battalion were delighted when it became known he had been awarded the Military Cross for his great pluck. We greatly regret to state that in the official casualty list of May 9th Second Lieut Thompson was reported wounded and missing.

24th to 31st December 1916

On Christmas Day the 7th Royal Berkshire went back

into the main line, where they received the congratulations of the G.O.C. 78th Brigade, and of General Kennedy commanding 26th Division, on their conduct in the raid.

4th January 1917

The year 1917 opened with the battalion in the front line in D sector. On the night of the 4th January Second-Lieutenant Lambert (Worcestershire Regiment, attached 7th Royal Berkshire), with a raiding party, started from Trench D 10 and had gained half-way through a gap in the enemy's wire when they were fired upon and bombed.

In the retirement Second-Lieutenant Lambert was found to be missing, and was believed to have been taken prisoner. Four days later a Bulgarian prisoner stated that he had died of wounds received in the raid, and he is recorded as killed in the official list for the Worcestershire Regiment.

Reading Mercury 19th May 1917

A little later to the above incidents Second Lieut Lambert of the Worcestershire Regiment attached Royal Berks lost his life. He was on observation one night and was shot on the Bulgar wire and captured. A deserter who came into the Berkshire lines said that Lieut Lambert was shot through the stomach and head and that he died an hour after he was brought into the Bulgar lines. He added that the enemy sent for a man who could speak English to see if he could do anything for him but Lambert died before he reached the camp.

In addition to those already referred to as having been honoured the colonel has been mentioned in dispatches. So has temporary Second Lieut G F Bate who did some good reconnaissance work and 13077 Sergt T A Whitbread while 13070 Pte W Brooks has received the King of Serbia's silver medal.

5th January to 28th February 1917

After a turn in the main line, from the 9th to the 17th January, the battalion passed the rest of the month uneventfully in the front line, in which it remained from the 17th January to the 9th February. Such long tours of front-line service were quite exceptional on the Western Front, and their prevalence on the Salonika Front indicates the less strenuous fighting and general conditions there.

On the 20th February it was in E sector on Horseshoe Hill, sending out the usual patrols, regarding which there is nothing special to record.

The rest of February, the whole of March, and the first three weeks of April are bare of incidents of any importance. The battalion was in various parts of the line, or in reserve.

The winter of 1916-17 was terrible. The weather was commented on in the report in the Reading Mercury dated 19th May 1917:-

The weather on the Balkan front this winter has been literally terrible owing to the blizzards which have been experienced. January was an awful month but towards the end of February there was an improvement, so ?? has been the weather that it was practically impossible for a sentry to face it. Very often when a man was relieved he could stand his greatcoat upright so stiffly was it frozen. The last winter was certainly much worse than that of 1915 but December in the latter year is spoken of as having been particularly severe. In summer there is a good deal of malaria and dysentery.

March 1917

From the 1st to the 7th March the Battalion was in the main line, and on the 13th Captain Hilling was wounded by a shell when in front line in E sector.

On the 19th the 78th Brigade, on relief, moved into the area hitherto occupied by the 79th in front line in C sector.

Here it was relieved on the 24th, and went back to Pivoines and Bare Hill near Rates. During this relief Second-Lieutenant L. T. Rivett was wounded.

Retrospect

After the stabilization of the line in August 1916, operations on the Doiran-Vardar front had been confined, in the words of General Milne's despatch of the 14th November 1917, to

"minor operations undertaken with a view to continually harassing the enemy, entrenched in mountainous and rocky country, and to inflicting as much loss as possible, both in material and personnel."

The chief raids and patrol encounters in which the 7th Royal Berkshire were concerned have been narrated above.

Now, under instructions from the Allied Commander-in-Chief, General Sarrail, offensive operations were to be commenced.

Sources

Petre pp289-295

Reading Mercury 19th May 1917

Official History pp154, 191 and 251

Continued with Section 267