

## Section 255

## Arras

## The 5th Battalion

*Following their successful raid on the 17th March the 5th Battalion returned to training being billeted in Manin. Continued from section 245*

### Training 19/3/17 to 8/4/17

The 5th returned to billets at Manin on the 19th March. Morale seems to have been high and at last there was a feeling that the Boche were on the run. In fact they were retiring to the Hindenburg line. Capt Harry Cunvin Horsford wrote to his sister Carrie on the 19th:-

Thanks for letter. I am longing to hear from you again. I have not been able to write before but I hope you will never think that I forget you. How are you getting on with your work. I dare say you found work rather strenuous after your journey each way. Still dear old London is better than any place in France. In an old house somewhere in France I found an old stamp album so I have enclosed the stamps I found to add to any you already have. They will make a real souvenir of the war. I will tell you exactly where I found them and all about the place when I get home. How are you all at home. I hope all is well with you all. I hope to write to Frank and Algy in a day or so.

Let me have a line when you can and remember me in your prayers. Take care of yourself. The War news is good, the Boche is running away from us so surely we can rejoice for a while and hope for a speedy finish.

Love to all of you at home & God bless you one and all.

The raid of 17th March had been but one example of the very careful preparations which were being made for the offensive to be launched on 9th April. The German trench system had been photographed from the air, accurately plotted on maps and most of it reproduced in part of the training area which resembled the enemy held ground. Strong points, machine guns and dugouts were indicated. The troops were then trained in the roles they would have to undertake in the attack, with special days being devoted to co-operation with the artillery and the Royal Flying Corps.

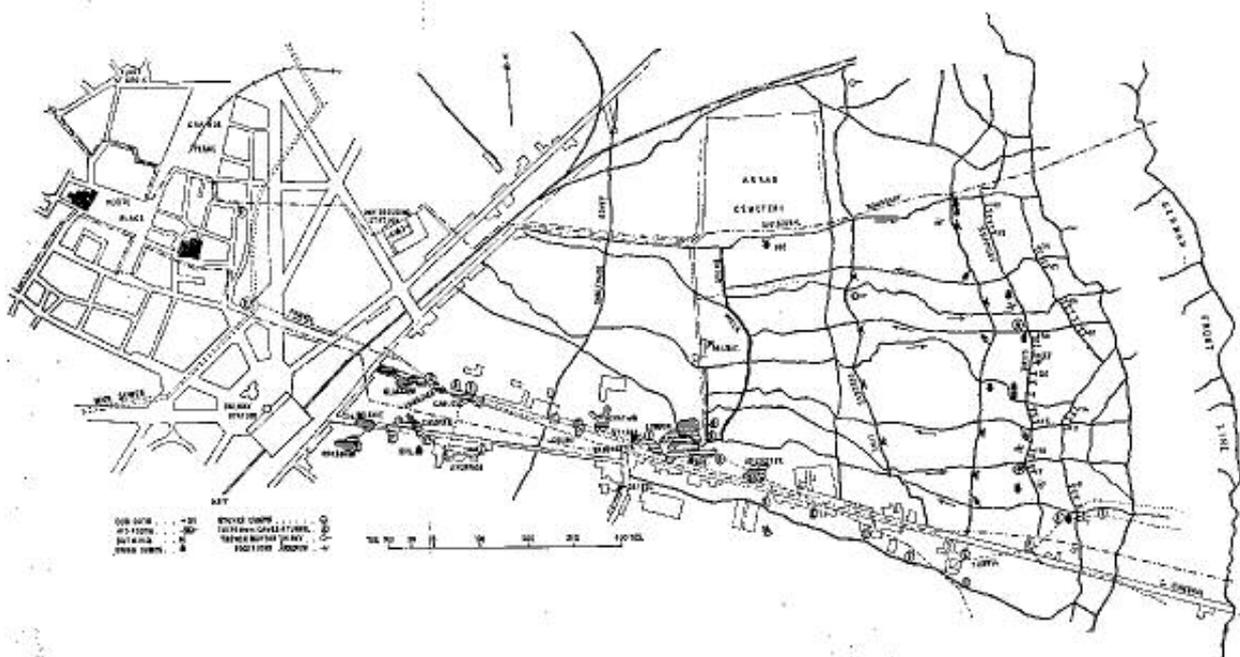
The 5th Battalion returned to Arras on the 6th April with two days to wait for the attack to commence. Two days after the start of the preliminary bombardment the 5th Battalion occupied their positions in the vast network of town cellars and underground passages and began to reconnoitre their route of approach to the front line which led through a system of sewers and tunnels.

As the historian of the 12th Division noted:

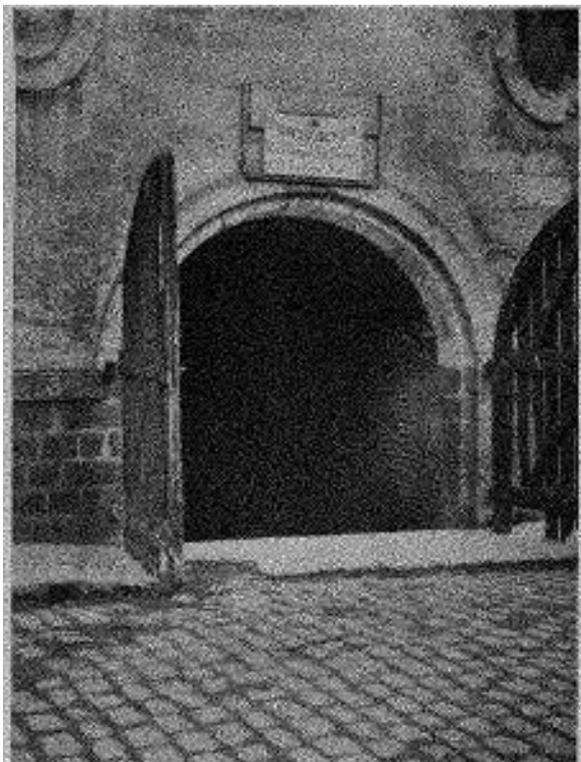
It was possible to go from the entrance of the main sewer near the Petite Place to half way across No-mans-land underground.

### The Battle Plan

The Battle was to be opened by the 3rd Army and the 5th were part of 35th Brigade, 12th Division, VI Corps. The principal objective was the capture of Monchy le



MAP No. 31 ARRAS TRENCHES



The Sewer entrance at Porte de Fer

Preux. 12th Division were to capture in succession three lines east of Arras known as black, blue and brown. 37th Brigade would capture black line, 36th Brigade would pass through to take blue line. During this phase 35th Brigade would be in reserve and then they would pass through the other two brigades to take brown line. The Royal Berks were therefore to be in reserve for the first two phases of the attack. Their time would come in the third phase when, in attacking brown line, they would advance south of Houdain Lane to take Battery Valley whilst the 7th Norfolks on their right would take Maison Rouge. At this point they would be overtaken by the 9th Essex and 7th Suffolk respectively in the capture of brown line and the 5th Royal Berks would support the 9th Essex. 12th Division had the 3rd Division on its right and 15th Division on its left.

### The Battle Opens 9/4/17

The Royal Berks were brought into the vast underground cellars beneath Arras on the 8th and had a brief chance to rest.

On the 9th the 5th Battalion began their movement at 0445 and entered the great sewer of Porte de Fer around 0515. They emerged at a point known as Broad Walk at 0715 and were ready in their support positions by 0800 B Coy on the right supported by D Coy and A Coy on the left supported by C Coy. The event was supposed to have been captured on cine-film but a gas shell burst nearby and the camera-man was put out of action.

At 1030 they received orders to move up and advance

towards the German second position, the blue line, 1800 yards away on the high ground named Observation Ridge, even though it had not yet been captured as planned by the 26th Bde. The movement was made in lines of platoons in single file. The advance was unopposed at first but B Coy came under fire from German machine guns on Heron Work to their right and the advance was delayed 45 minutes while this was dealt with. One platoon of B Coy worked their way around the German post at Holt and captured the garrison of 35 plus their machine gun. This completed the capture of blue line. The result was the Germans were disorganized and retreated in disorder to the great delight of 35 Bde. Many Germans were overtaken and seemed very willing to be taken prisoner.

At 1145 movement began again and Houdain Lane was reached with only a few casualties. As the 12th Division history recalled:

[With the blue line in British hands the plan now was] to capture the Feuchy-Chapel redoubt and its surroundings, and to pierce the line just west of Orange Hill. On the capture of the blue line the Germans, becoming disorganised, were caught on the run, and the 35th Brigade had the joy of seeing them retreating in disorder. Those overtaken were only too willing to obey instructions and move down the main road to Arras to report as prisoners.

The events of the day were recorded in the Reading newspapers culled mainly from reports made by men who had been wounded and were recuperating in England. - The *Berkshire Chronicle* of 22/2/1918 gives an overall account:-

Easter Monday 1917 will ever be a memorable day in the history of the 5th Royal Berks for on that day they bore no small share in one of the great successes won by the British Army on the Western Front. While a staggering blow was dealt at the enemy who was forced back on a wide front, with the loss of over 10,000 prisoners and upwards of 100 guns our losses were comparatively slight. The division, to which the 5th Berks belonged, captured about 20 Officers, 1206 prisoners, 41 Field Guns and Howitzers, 28 Machine Guns and two Aerial Torpedo throwers, and the 5th Berks alone took 25 guns and many prisoners.

The Berkshires were preceded over by another division who took the first two objectives, the task of the Berkshires being to capture Halifax trench which was three miles from the first German Line. The Berkshires consisted of A B and D Companies and one patrol of C Company, the remainder being engaged in carrying work. At 10 o'clock the Berkshires and the rest of the Brigade left their trenches and passing through the ranks of the other division pressed across the open to their objective. Progress was fairly easy for, in soldiers parlance, the Boches were rather 'windy' and they fled back on Monchy."The Huns ran so fast we could not keep up with them" wrote one of the rank and file with gusto. Considerable trouble was, however, experienced from snipers and machine guns, and some casualties were sustained before these pests could be exterminated. One of the most formidable obstacle to be overcome was Fonchy Redoubt which was a mass of trenches, and here the Berkshires were held up for a time by snipers. Another serious obstacle was Battery Valley. Here one particular battery was firing at our men from 300 yards - point blank range - but the Berkshires lost no time in picking off the

gunners. As already stated no fewer than twenty-five guns were captured. About seven o'clock the battalion reached its objective having traversed three miles. It was a glorious day in the history of the battalion for they had made a splendid advance and had many prisoners and much booty to their credit, and, perhaps best of all, they had got the Boches on the run. They were quite happy and even the heavy snow which commenced to fall did not disturb them, for they were expecting to be relieved. That is however another story. [TX00379A]

Another member of the battalion placed the successes on the planning of Col Willan. He said:-

"A great deal of the success of the performance is due to the manner in which the attack was engineered by the Commanding Officer (Colonel Willan) The coolness which he displayed was remarkable and there is no doubt that in this he set all those under him an excellent example and imbued in them that confidence which has stood us in such good stead. The Germans not only suffered losses in killed and prisoners, but also a number of batteries were captured and in one instance just before reaching the village we turned one of their own field guns on the Huns. The attack was so arranged that the enemy were taken by surprise. Over the top the Berks men went with a determination that suffered no resistance and were on the enemy before they could hardly realise what was happening. We rished their trenches, bombed the dug-outs and by the time the last one had fallen into our hands there was not a single German left in any of those which we captured. There were many who were fortunate enough to escape. And you should have seen how they ran. It was really extraordinary the pace they set up in order to avoid coming in contact with us. When we had accomplished about half the journey an attempt was made to rally some of the enemy. But the majority were not having any. The machine guns which fell into our hands helped us to a material extent, as they were the means of reducing the intensity of their fire, but the Germans were well supplied with snipers who did some amount of damage. My platoon officer, although wounded soon after the start, gallantly stuck to his post and when I was knocked out at the last trench he was still leading his men. One sergeant tackled three Germans single-handed and in the end came out on top, and the way in which our bombers carried out their duties was simply splendid. Right through the piece the enemy could do absolutely nothing with us" [TX00379C]

The Reading Mercury picked up a somewhat different tale in its edition of 1/9/17

Our Division went over at 8.0.am. To reach our Objective we had to advance between 4 and 5 miles and take four trenches. The enemy offered desperate resistance to our advance against what they realised was a strategic position. They used their artillery most vigorously putting up a heavy barrage, which they maintained throughout our attack. Our artillery too was wonderfully active, literally battering in the German trenches. There is no doubt the enemy was strong in gun power on this occasion. He had prepared great concentrations of guns but in spite that the Division fought over the great stretch of ground with the greatest gallantry and in a most impetuous spirit. As we advanced to take the first line we at once came under blasts of fire from machine Guns which were in the first couple of lines and a barrage fire which was frightening in its intensity. After a very warm tussle we succeeded in carrying the first position and I think we were successful in taking a Gun but I know we 'bagged' at least a couple, later on. We stormed the other lines successfully and after we had taken the fourth line

the Germans launched three counter attacks. Most of their attacks were silenced by our artillery. We had gained our Objective with losses which could not be described as heavy.

### Capturing the German Battery

At 1245 the two leading companies of the 5th Battalion who were operating on the left, passed over the ridge and down the western slope of Battery Valley. It was called this because of the strong presence of German field artillery there. The British Official Historian described what lay before them:

A dramatic scene of a type rare in this theatre of war was unfolded. The whole of Battery Valley was dotted with German artillery: some batteries already abandoned; some having got their teams up making off as fast as they could; but several others firing point-blank at the British infantry at ranges of only a few hundred yards.

Covered by the guns of 35 MG Coy the 5th, alongside the 9th Essex, encountered four enemy batteries firing at almost point blank range (200 yards). Capt Horsford leading A Coy was struck by a piece of shell and had his shoulder blown away. He died shortly afterwards but was listed as wounded. Lt John Milnor Ready who had been reconnoitering took over A Coy and *led them with fine judgement.*

Writing to Capt Horsford's widow, the adjutant of the 5th carried on the pretence that despite appalling injuries no pain was suffered.:-

I cannot tell you how terribly grieved we all are over your husband's death. Please accept my most sincere sympathy. His loss is indeed a personal grief to me as we had served in the regiment together practically since its formation, and were the two remaining officers who came out with it. One's only comfort is that he suffered no pain and died a most gallant death. He was killed leading his company in a most brilliantly successful attack. The regiment itself captured 20 field guns and your husband was killed by one of these which was firing before our men got to close quarters. I have lost so many dear friends since coming out here that I find it difficult to write to those they loved, but please believe my sympathies are true.

The Royal Berks used concentrated rifle fire plus short rushes to take the batteries and captured all four plus two isolated guns. One battery consisted of four 4.2" Howitzers and the other three had 77mm Field guns. 40 prisoners were taken. In all 22 guns were captured, two of which they were able to bring into action and fire at the German troops on the high ground beyond the Brown line. Lt George Peter de Bono who was in temporary command of B Coy won the MC. His citation included:-

He showed great courage and ability when commanding his company. He led them against an enemy battery, captured it and many prisoners. He set a fine example throughout.

A member of the battalion wrote:-

"My battalion alone took five batteries and chased the gunners. Finally we turned one of their own field guns upon them. That was no 12 Platoon. I took two or three

prisoners myself; one of them was a youngster. He wanted me to take all his kit. Of course I couldn't carry it, and moreover did not want any of it." [TX00397B]

A sergeant from Maidenhead described the capture of a machine gun and some field guns by Sergeant B Smith.

"This machine gun" he said "had held up the advance of several British regiments and had also inflicted heavy casualties on the British. It was also holding up my regiment when it was spotted by my company. Our men were trying to think out how they could get it when a platoon of my company (no 8 platoon) which so far had done splendid work, was beginning to suffer casualties through this machine gun. A sergeant named B Smith got a few men together and started to work round the machine gun position. This was very hard work as the Germans were giving us hell with their different shells. Still they kept pegging away until they were near enough to rush the gun. Then this brave sergeant gave them the order to charge and our men flew for the gun which had caused such a lot of trouble and casualties. They succeeded in capturing the gun at the point of the bayonet and saw the dead Germans lying there in heaps. There were only a couple of Germans alive and they were quickly made prisoners. They collected a few more Germans together and they carried their own gub back to our headquarters. Having accomplished this gallant deed, the sergeant and his brave men rejoined their platoon who were still advancing. Things were going on as well as could be expected when we were held up by a field battery of German guns. This same sergeant quickly realised the danger from these guns and once more collected a few men and started to advance on these field guns which were only a hundred yards away. The Germans were still shelling our men at this range, but Sergeant Smith was determined to drive the Germans away from their guns. Our men made another splendid charge and succeeded in capturing the whole battery of guns and ammunition. In the desperate fighting the whole of the men of this German battery were killed or wounded, except two who were quickly made prisoners. Our brave Colonel (Colonel Willan) led the battalion all through the great attack and although in places it was like going through hell, he managed to come out without a scratch" [TX00379E]

The 12th Division History recalled:-

Undeterred, and if anything, enthused by the sight [of the German guns] the troops charged forward and by means of short rushes and concentrated fire, reached the batteries and 18 field guns, 4 howitzers and 40 prisoners were captured. On this occasion Lts JM Ready and GP Debeno, CSM Arthur Blake and Pte McAllister distinguished themselves by their leadership and fearless courage. So keen were the men that, with the assistance of a Royal Artillery officer, they manned the captured guns and opened fire on the retreating enemy. The attack continued towards Orange Hill, but was held up by the uncut wire, and finally the 5th Royal Berkshire took up a line on the Feuchy road in continuation of the Essex.

### **Capturing the Village**

Having disposed of the field guns the Berks were able to cross the valley and capture the village of Feuchy. Berkshire Chronicle:-

On reaching the village the fighting was severe for a while but the Berks ultimately got the upper hand and the Boches were driven out. "Our officers led us splendidly showing that dash and fearlessness which is so charac-

teristic of them and the example which they set was so well followed that it had not a little to do with the victory which fell our lot" was the verdict of another. [TX00379D]

D Coy were being bothered by snipers on their flank so Sgt E H Stevens led his Lewis gunners to deal with them and succeeded in wiping them out, for which he was awarded the MM. Two of his men also won MMs for their part in the action: LCpl T H White and acting Cpl J T Day

At 1430 they were ready for the final attack on brown line but the earlier delays now took their toll as the battalion was too late to take advantage of the British barrage. They were met with heavy rifle and MG fire and it was soon apparent that a full frontal attack was not on, particularly as the battalions on both their right and left had also failed to gain the Brown line.

At 1930 information was received that 15th Division to the left had reached brown line and a tank was seen advancing from the north. A further attack in conjunction with this tank was considered but rejected. Around this time three companies of the 11th Middlesex and 7th Sussex arrived to reinforce the 5th Royal Berks.

### **A night in the open**

At 2030 they were ordered to make fast for the night and to be prepared to move (with their reinforcing companies) through the brown line at the point captured by 15th Division, to descend from the north on Orange Hill. At the same time the 7th Suffolk, also with extra companies attached would attack brown line south of the Cambrai road. A snow storm concluded the day's activities.

*Berkshire Chronicle 22/2/1918*

The battalion were not relieved as they expected and they had to face the prospect of being out all night with practically no shelter. There was only a rough trench which the Berkshires had dug themselves. Worst of all it was bitterly cold and the position of the wounded lying on the field of battle, exposed to the elements, was a trying one and a number of them succumbed. [TX00379E]

*Cpl Histed*

We took part in one of the most successful offensives undertaken on Easter Monday and the following day, and it was a glorious day for the Division and for the Regiment. We advanced over more ground that day, accompanied by two other Divisions, than had ever been done in the war before, but the weather broke into snowstorms and sleet which hampered both transport and troops, and that, I think, is why we settled down again and were not able to advance so successfully in the latter stages of the offensive. One thing that is noticeable and that is that the troops out here still retain their spirits and there is no fear our chaps following the Russians to disaster.

### **April 10th**

At 1200 on the 10th the British barrage lifted off the Brown line and troops from both the 5th Royal Berks and 36th Brigade, under the command of Lt Col Willan, used a gap in the defences to work along the rear of the

German line.

By 1245 the line had been taken along the whole of 12th Division's front, with the Royal Berks having outposts on the farther slope of Orange Hill. The 36th Brigade contingent included three companies of the 7th Royal Sussex and three from the 11th Middlesex.

*Berkshire Chronicle 22/2/1918*

On the Tuesday the Berkshires resumed the attack and drove the enemy back another 1000 yards. The next two days were spent in support, where the battalion was continually being shelled. The snowstorm raged for two days, so that they were delighted when another Brigade relieved them in order to take up the advance. [TX00379F]

*12th Division History:-*

At daybreak the artillery fire opened on the Wancourt-Feuchy Trench and Lt Col Willan's force, crossing the trench in the 15th Division sector, passed along the slopes of Orange Hill and caused the Germans who were still holding out in Church Work and its neighbourhood to evacuate their positions without fighting. By 12 noon the 35th Brigade had occupied the position and the final objective of the 12th Division was captured. Patrols were rushed forward to Chapel and Orange Hills and consolidation carried on.

The Divisional Commander, Major-General A B Scott stated in his report dated 20th April 1917:

At 12 noon the 35th Brigade assaulted and captured the position [the Brown line] the deciding factor being the outflanking of the German right by the 5th Royal Berks together with six companies of the 36th Infantry Brigade which had been placed at the disposal of 35th Brigade.

He also recognised the difficulties the men had faced with the British artillery failing to cut the German wire.

I saw the wire on my bit of the Brown Line the day after and it was deep and untouched.

At 1300 the 37th Division passed through the 12th to attack Monchy le Preux. The 5th Bn then withdrew from their outposts and reformed in Chapel Wood.

### April 11th

The next day (April 11th) the 35th Brigade was ordered back to dugouts in the rear but these orders were almost immediately countermanded as the 12th Division was to be sent forward to relieve the 37th. There was great danger in occupying former German dugouts because the enemy left many booby traps. One of six explosions killed several signallers of the 11th Middlesex before a warning order was sent out forbidding the use of former German trenches. German reserves were by now arriving in increasing numbers and the village of Monchy-le-Preux, one of the final objectives, had still not been taken. Its capture was effected by the combined efforts of two fresh infantry divisions, some cavalry units and a small number of tanks. As a result 35th Brigade was placed in Divisional reserve around Chapel Wood and the 5th were sent to re-occupy the strong points on Orange Hill.

### Aftermath

On April 12th the 12th Division were in their turn relieved and retired back to Arras. A member of the 5th Berks wrote:-

Last night we came in for a rest and I can assure you I needed it. You should have seen us - simply plastered with mud from tip to heel.

This had been one of the most successful operations of the war so far on the Western front and the 5th had played a noteworthy part. Their Brigade Commander, Brig Gen Berkeley Vincent reported on their high morale:

In spite of hardships my men are very fit and cheerful. They have seen the Germans run and are immensely pleased with themselves.

Major General A B Scott, commanding 12th Division was more effusive when he wrote on April 16th:

To the Officers, Warrant Officers NCOs and men of the 12th Division - I desire to express my warm appreciation of the excellent work you have done, and at times under very trying circumstances in the preparations and training for the attack on April 9th 1917.

I also congratulate you on the brilliant and gallant manner in which you carried out the attack through to such a successful conclusion. You have not only worthily upheld the reputation gained by the Division in its previous fighting, but added greatly thereto. The mutual confidence which exists between the different arms has formed a powerful combination which I feel sure will lead to further successes when occasions arise and I thank you one and all. The march of the troops from the battlefield where the conditions had been very severe was worthy of the best traditions of the Army. The Division captured about 20 officers, 1200 other ranks prisoners, 41 Field guns and howitzers, 28 machine guns and two aerial torpedo throwers.

### Reading Mercury Accounts

The Reading Mercury in its edition of 12th May 1917 published a detailed account of the attack on 9th April.

The story of a brilliant attack on the German lines on Easter Monday by a battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment is told to our representative by those who took part. A village had to be captured. The taking of this place was considered to be of great importance and its capture meant the taking of seven lines of German trenches. The task was successfully accomplished with comparatively light losses to us as compared with those of the enemy, who suffered heavily.

A great deal of the success of the performance is due to the manner in which the attack was engineered by the commanding officer, who has now been over the top on eleven occasions. In this instance he stood, with shells bursting all around him, on top of the parapet, directing operations. The coolness which he displayed was remarkable and there is no doubt, said one of our informants, that in this he set all those under him an excellent example and imbued in them that confidence which has stood the Berkshire boys in such good stead.

The success of the attack and the manner in which it was executed won the encomium of the General commanding the Division, who complimented the battalion very highly

on their achievement. The Germans not only suffered losses in killed and prisoners, but also a number of batteries were captured and, in one instance, just before reaching the village, we turned one of their own field guns on the Huns.

The attack was made at 10.30 on the morning of the 9th April. It was so arranged that the enemy were completely taken by surprise. The whole of the companies were engaged in the attack. Over the top the Berks men went with a determination that suffered no resistance and were on the enemy before they could hardly realise what was happening. *The Huns were so overwhelmed by the brilliance of our dash that in a sense they fell easy prey* said one of our informants.

The Reading Mercury of 25/8/17 carried the following account:-

#### GERMAN'S PLETHORA OF MACHINE GUNS

Further details of severe fighting in which a battalion of the Royal Berks Regiment were engaged on the Arras front a short time ago are to hand.

The positions were carried, but a snowstorm delayed operations for a couple of days as a result of which the Germans were able to bring strong forces of reserves which naturally made the task all the more difficult to accomplish. The Berks suffered somewhat heavy casualties owing to the intensity of the enemy's fire; but the German losses were very heavy. In addition hundreds surrendered and many guns were captured. Hardly any opposition was encountered in the first two lines and the third line was carried after some short but sharp fighting. Here the Berks were hung up for a while by the enemy's machine guns. A number of the guns were very carefully concealed and difficulty was experienced in locating them. When ultimately they were discovered, C Company charged their position where they captured the guns at the point of the bayonet and by bombing. The enemy however did not allow them to be seized until after a great deal of resistance and when within about fifty yards the Berks were subjected to a severe fire from various quarters.

"After that it was rough and tumble all the way to ----" said an NCO who told our representative this interesting narrative. "Plenty of bombing was indulged in and in the dugouts we found a number of unopened parcels and there was evidence that we had taken the enemy by surprise.

Our next big move was to take ---- [Monchy] but unfortunately snow commenced to fall heavily and we were delayed for a couple of days. In the meanwhile the Germans rushed up large forces of reserves and during that time the enemy kept up an incessant fire which put some of us out. When ultimately we advanced the intensity of the fire became even worse and it was in our final effort that we lost most of our men. However we were successful in achieving our object and we consolidated the position and held it under heavy fire until we were relieved.

Several machine guns were taken. Two of these had been put out of action. The Germans had heaps of machine guns, in fact it looked as though every man in the line had a machine gun to himself. The ground was terribly difficult to get over and Capt Wykes was wounded just before we captured the guns and Lt Barrett was wounded in our final journey. We were afterwards congratulated on our performances by the Brigadier General.

### Casualties and Decorations

In the operations from 9th to 13th the Royal Berks casualties were:

*Officers Killed* - 2Lt KCB Storey, 2Lt L P Bartlett  
*Wounded* - Capt H C Horsford\*, Capt H Wykes, 2Lt A H Hamel-Smith, 2Lt L G Howard \*Later died of Wounds

*Other ranks* - killed 5 wounded 92.

Military Crosses were awarded to Lts G P Debono and J M Ready and Military Medals to CSM Arthur Edwin Blake [10325], Sgt Frank G Burton [10580], Sgt S E Stevens, LSgt H Jones, Cpl Joseph T Day [7678], LCpl W Hannon, LCpl T White [9750], Pte David J Gearing [33749] and Pte Ronald McAllister [12003].

### Bayonet Trench 14/4/17 to 2/5/17 25th April 1917

The 5th Battalion spent several days in and around Arras until the 25th April when they were marched by the railway to a point near Feuchy where at 0830 they relieved part of the 17th Division in the line. Their task was to hold a line east and north of Monchy le Preux against counter-attacks, carry out raids on the enemy trenches and consolidate their own positions. Their front had the Scarpe on the left and 7th Norfolks on their right who covered up to the sunken road running east from Monchy le Preux.

#### 26/27th April 1917

They had to endure heavy shelling on the 26th and 27th but few casualties were sustained.

*Berkshire Chronicle 8/3/1918*

The Berkshires after their welcome rest were back in the line on April 25th. After spending a day in Support, they advanced under shell fire to the front line arriving there about 10.0.p.m. The trenches consisted only of shell holes in some places so that the men had to dig themselves in. The occupation of those trenches was an unenviable experience: for two days the Berkshires were shelled by the enemy, day and night, without intermission. They were told that they were going to make an attack on the German Lines at dawn the next morning, April 28th, and the news acted quite like a tonic to the men who had had quite enough of the enemy's shelling. [TX00392A]

*Berkshire Chronicle 22-3-1918*

On returning to the line, the 5th Berks occupied the trenches near Monchy... The enemy were sending over heavy stuff without intermission and as the Berkshire trenches were open to fire from two sides the men occupying the trenches were in highly unpleasant surroundings. Added to this was the discomfort of the continuous wet weather: after their return the battalion held the line for seventeen days, and rain fell on every day but one. It is noteworthy that the enemy never once raided the Berkshires while they were at Monchy, though once they caught the Huns as they were, apparently, preparing to come over and great execution was caused in the enemy ranks. The Germans however possessed some very keen snipers. Only 15 yards divided the lines at one point so that the greatest watchfulness was essential.

Raids by the British Forces were numerous and were generally successful. Work of a dangerous character was performed by the wiring parties.

A Corporal recorded his narrow escape in the Berkshire Chronicle of 8/3/18:-

Before going over on Saturday I had some narrow escapes. The Company detailed me as a guide for a ration party and that meant leaving the front line in daylight and dashing 200 yards or so just over the top to a ridge and working along behind the ridge under a very [heavy] shellfire to the safety of a deep valley. Well I had the job two nights in succession and the second night Fritz was waiting for us - gave us 'Hell on earth' with machine guns and pipsqueak shells. I nearly trod on one pipsqueak as it exploded; how I missed being hit was the marvel of the sergeant and three other men who were following my lead. [TX00392E]

On the 27th April Brigade orders were received for the capture of Bayonet Trench and the part of Rifle Trench which the enemy still occupied. Then they had to push outposts towards the German lines. After the first objectives were taken the 7th Suffolks would pass through to the second objectives with the Essex in reserve. The action became known as the Battle of Arleux

#### 28th April 1918

The advance started at 0425 on the 28th on a three company front. C on the right, D in the centre, A on the left with B in reserve. The action began with a two minute intense artillery bombardment to which the Germans made a furious response at 04:28. Nevertheless the British troops moved forward and the 5th Battalion came up close behind the barrage and captured their objectives in Bayonet and Rifle Trenches without difficulty and began consolidation. The 7th Norfolks were less successful and the 7th Suffolk found themselves unable to proceed against heavy machine gun fire when they attempted to pass through the Berks lines at 0505.

At this point the Berks held Bayonet Trench and 150 yards of Rifle trench but the Germans still held Rifle Trench as far as Harness Lane. The 7th Norfolks and the 7th Suffolks were still in their original positions. One company of the Essex was sent to help the Berks hold on to their gains. Attempts to capture the rest of Rifle trench with bombing from both flanks failed. During this operation Cpl J Hedgeman [11111] noticed an enemy's machine gun, about 150 yards away from the bank of the Scarpe which was holding up the attack. He thereupon collected a small party of men and outmanoeuvring the enemy, attacked their rear, capturing the gun, one officer and 21 men. From the officer he secured a map giving information about the disposition of the German machine gun positions.

Berkshire Chronicle 8/3/1918

The Berkshires left their trenches and took up their position in front of them and eagerly awaited the order to advance. After about an hour our artillery commenced to strafe the German lines with thousands of shells which could be seen doing deadly work on the enemy. The

artillery preparation over, the Berkshires received the order to advance. The objective was a little trench system, north of Monchy, known as Rifle trench, which had already an evil reputation for the strength and pertinacity of the enemy's artillery. There had been three previous attempts to take the position, Success however crowned the efforts of the Berkshires. Creeping up behind their own barrage, they broke into a sprint, as they approached the objective and found comparatively few of the Huns there. [TX00392B]

The 7th Suffolk passed through the Berkshires but were unable to capture their objective because of machine gun fire from Roeux.

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The most severe trial for the 5th Berks came in holding the captured trench. Counter attacks were attempted, but with the splendid aid of the artillery the Berkshires stood firm and consolidated the captured ground. The German artillery fire was very heavy but the worst trials came owing to the failure of other units to take other portions of the trench on their right. The consequence was that in their captured position the Berkshires had to face a particularly concentrated aggregation of enemy fire. It was three days before the Berkshires were relieved and in that period they sustained about 200 casualties.[TX00392C]

A Corporal wrote home -

Saturday morning my battalion had another smack at Fritz. It was worse than any fight I have yet been in. We simply knocked his lines off the earth and when the barrage lifted of his trench into it we jumped. he put up a show after, in counter attacks, but he can not do much against our gunfire, its too awful. I had a most wonderful escape; part of my Company were in a very narrow piece of the captured trench and we were just waiting for a counter attack when something happened and I was thrown forward on my face.. The man next to me on one side was dying and on the other side my sergeant was dead. Beyond him the junior sergeant was lying badly wounded and I set to work to give him a dressing and then bound up my wound. The shell had apparently burst directly over or behind me and only caused slight damage to me. My rifle was blown to atoms. After about an hour I got back to the dressing station, but we had to run for it as Fritz sniped and then opened machine gun fire on us. [TX00392D]

A Sergeant from Maidenhead wrote;

As we had lost all our officers in my company except one I was detailed with my platoon to take up bombs, ammunition, rifle grenades etc to another company of ours (C Company) Having collected all my men together and issued to them these different stores we left our trench at about 3 am under very heavy shell fire. I had been given orders by my company officer to get there at all costs as they had run short of nearly everything. I succeeded in reaching them after a very hard struggle as the Boche were giving us hell with his shells and machine guns. C Company were greatly relieved when they heard that I had arrived with a fresh supply of trench stores, which were quickly issued out. I discovered on my way that there were a lot of bombs, shovels and picks lying spare in a trench that I passed. I succeeded in collecting them and was waiting to get through again to C Company when the Germans succeeded in blowing part of the trench in, cutting us off from C Company. We had to remain in this trench, where I had got my men, when the

Germans started to shell us unmercifully, and continued at it all day long without a break, causing a good many casualties. I told my men to stick it and that as soon as it became dark we would chance it and make another attempt to reach C Company. I had succeeded in dodging these shells all day and was just on the point of starting to C Company when a big shell burst about six yards in front of me, which wounded me and also buried me. [TX00392F]

Sgt Minchin's citation for the DCM which he won in this engagement read:-

"For conspicuous gallantry on April 28th during the attack on Rifle trench north east of Monchy. When his company got into Rifle Trench he found that the right was not in touch with the next battalion. He promptly organised a bombing squad and drove the enemy back 150 yards along the trench. Although he had several casualties in his squad and ran out of bombs, he then established a bombing stop and kept the enemy at bay with rifle fire until reinforcements and more bombs arrived. He showed great gallantry throughout the day" [TX00639C]

### **29/30th April 1917**

The positions were held during the 29th and 30th despite heavy German shelling and the Germans in Scabbard Trench made it impossible for the Berks bombers to clear the rest of Rifle Trench. The 9th Essex did have a go on the 1st May but couldn't make it.

### **1st May 1917**

On the night of the 1st the Brigade were relieved and retired to the railway triangle between Arras and Feuchy. Their casualties had been:-

Officers - killed : 2Lt J C Orr, wounded Maj D H Avory, 2Lt A J Jones, 2Lt E A Sutton, 2Lt E Beale

OR - killed 31, wounded 143, missing 22.

### **Sources**

History of the Royal Berks (Petre pp 221-225)

History of 12th Division

Official War History

From Arras to Cambrai

Reading Mercury 12/5/17, 25/8/17

Berkshire Chronicle 8/3/18

Family correspondence (Cunvin)

Extract from unknown Finchley newspaper.

*Continued in section 265*