

Section 262

Interlude III

2nd Battalion April 6th to July 6th 1917

*While the battle of Arras was raging the 2nd Battalion moved to Brigade reserve.
Continued from section 242*

In Reserve 6th - 17th April 1917

When the battalion was relieved, on the night of the 5th/6th April by the 12th Suffolks, it went back to Fins, and next day to Gouzeaucourt.

On April 7th Lt Howse wrote home:

April 7th :- Things are still booming out, here, and the Bosche has still got his face towards Berlin..

On the 11th they moved back to Nurlu, relieving the 2nd Middlesex in support. Everyone was put to work on the roads.

Like most of the front line battalions they still had not grasped the point of the German strategic withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line and believed that now the Germans were really on the run and it was only a matter of time before they were pushed back into Germany. Howse wrote home on April 14th:-

April 14th :- " You have been having exciting and good news in the papers lately, and you will have wondered what; part I have played in these latter days. Suffice it to say that I have seen something, a good deal, of the good things you have been reading about, and have come through very well so far, thank God, ... The last month has been exciting - and more big things seem to turn up every day." [TX01085J]

The next day, the 15th, the battalion went to Brigade reserve at Heudicourt, relieving the 1st Worcesters and next day took over from the 2nd Devons and the 1st Irish Rifles the outpost line from Gauche Wood to the road to Gonnellieu. Two companies were in front, one in support and one in reserve.

Villers-Guislane 18th April 1917

On the 18th the battalion co-operated with the 23rd Brigade in an attack on Villers-Guislains. The scheme of the attack was for the 23rd Brigade to attack the village, the final capture of which was expected to be completed about an hour after zero. The 25th, on the left of the 23rd, was to co-operate during that hour by firing heavily on all machine-gun positions likely to interfere with the attack, which was from south to north.

The function of the 2nd Royal Berkshire was to send out strong patrols to dig in at fixed points, to bomb down a trench leading from Quentin Mill to Villers-Guislains, and to block it if there was strong opposition; also to supply "mopping up" parties to deal with occupied dugouts, and to keep up a heavy rifle and Lewis-gun fire. All this was done; the details need not be gone into, as they are only to be understood with a complete trench map.

The battalion had no serious fighting, and its casualties for the day were only three men wounded. It was relieved by the 2nd Lincolnshire at 22:15.

Lt Howse:-

"We then went in again and took part in the attack on the village of Villers-Guislain. Again it snowed during the attack, about April 19th.

"We could now see the famous Hindenburg line in the distance, and after some more turns, fairly quiet, in the line, I went on a course of instruction. [TX01085C]

Heudicourt 19th to 21st April 1917

After the capture of Villers-Guislains the battalion was relieved by the 2nd Lincolns and moved to billets at Heudicourt.

Howse wrote home on the 20th:-

April 20th:- "As I write, this is an old Bosche hut, the sun is shining fitfully through the clouds. I hope we have now reached the end, absolute and final, of the winter. We made our third snowstorm attack this winter the other day. That sort of thing may be all very well for Eskimos or Icelanders, but not for a Sunny South African. All our little visits to the Bosche have resulted in jolly fine advances, so we have not much to grumble at. But given finer weather we would be prepared to drive the Hun anywhere!" [TX01085K]

Gonnellieu 21st April 1917

On the 21st, it supplied two companies to support the attack of the 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment on Gonnellieu. That village was taken with little opposition, and the supporting companies of the 2nd Royal Berkshire had no casualties.

Capt Allaway issued the orders:-

Battalion Operation Orders, by Captain H P Allaway M.C.,

Commanding 2nd R. Berks, for the attack on Gonnellieu, 21st April 1917

The 2nd Bn Lincolnshire Regt under cover of an artillery barrage will attack Gonnellieu on the 21st April 1917 at an hour to be notified later.

'B' & 'C' Companies, 2nd R. Berks will be in Support to the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt and will take over present Support and Reserve Line tonight. They will be in position at Zero - 3 hours. 'B' Company will take over Support Company 2nd Lincolnshire Regt, 'C' Company will relieve the Reserve Company 2nd Lincolnshire Regt.

Guides from the 2nd Lincolns will be at their Battle H.Q. (W 6 d 6.2) at 11.0.p.m. tonight at which hour 'B' & 'C' Companies 2nd R. Berks will arrange to be there

The final objective of the attacking troops will be a general line R 34 Central - R 28 c 0.0. - R 27 d 3.7. When this line is captured 'B' & 'C' Companies will move forward into the present Outpost Line. 'B' Company on the left and 'C' Company on the right. Both Companies will keep in communication with O.C. 2nd Lincolns and will come under his orders.

White Very Lights will be fired when the village is captured

Dress - Marching Order, Water Bottles will be filled and rations for tomorrow will be carried.

Issued at 7.20.p.m. H Y Forster, Lt & Adjutant, 2nd R. Berks

Lt Howse had been sent on a course. He wrote:-

The battalion came out of the line for a good rest. We had had a fairly strenuous time during the retreat - the weather was very bad, and we never had any billets - and conditions were much more uncomfortable in many ways than in the old trench fighting. But it was far more interesting, and more exciting." [TX01085D]

The Outpost Line

22nd April to 14th May 1917

From the 22nd April till the 14th May the battalion took its turn alternately in the outpost and support lines, and then returned on relief to billets at Sorel-le-Grand.

They remained in the outpost line after the attack until relieved by the 2nd Lincolns on the 24th. They swapped back on the 27th and on the 1st May went to billets at Heudicourt being relieved by the 2nd Devons.

Howse was revelling in the spring weather and being away from the front line on a course. He wrote on the 1st May recalling the last month:-

May 1st :- "I am out behind the lines again - for a month this time, on a course of instruction. So May Day of this year finds me once, more amid peaceful surroundings, in a French village some miles behind the destruction we have just left. The trim garden of some peasants of Picardy separates our Cottage from the village church, the bells of which have just been ringing for vespers. An evening mist is bringing to a close one of the most perfect spring days anyone could possibly imagine. Everywhere are buds and birds, and near by the river rustles between tall trees.

What a contrast! A few days ago I scooped out a hole for myself in a bank alongside a shell-torn road, with a dead shattered village on my right, and another even more so on my left; Behind were our guns, and in front the Bosche with his. And the whole earth was absolutely desolate. The two spots are a little further apart than P .E. [Port Elizabeth] and Uitenhage, Such is the difference between the countryside as God made it, and the countryside as man has made it in the exercise of Kulture and civilisation.

"In the past month I have seen a good deal of fighting. A short time ago I went into a real attack for the first time. Many a time before I had been under shell fire, and rifle and machine-gun fire, but I had not till then gone out in an attack to drive out the Hun. It was a new experience. Before starting I felt the same sort of nervousness that one used to feel before a footer match. Lining up waiting for the order to advance, and waiting for our guns to open on the enemy position was rather tense. But when the fun began, and our guns made the earth shake with the roar of the barrage, and one gave the order 'Fix bayonets! Advance!', and the men moved steadily forward, all nervousness' vanished, though the danger had in fact increased, and the rest of the show was only like playing a new sort of game. Of course it was a desperate sort of game, and there were those who went into that attack and did not come out of it, but we drove the Hun out of his position and sent him running for some thousands of yards and gained all our objectives. He hadn't even time to pack up, and in his dug-outs his officers left their afternoon tea, standing in the cups, with egg's boiled but not eaten, and slices of bread cut. We made a good meal off these things. There was also a case of Munich beer, which - well, we were very thirsty And all this in a snowstorm. Some game!" [TX01085L]

"This is an exceedingly pretty village, with a river and canal running through it, and innumerable trees. the river is one which, nearer its source, ran with blood during the heavy fighting of last year, But here at least there ,is no sign of war. One could almost imagine it all over, and Peace again on the earth.

"In reality of course it is far otherwise. Such fighting is now going on as was never seen in the fiercest moments of Loos and the Somme. We are up against that last German hope, the Hindenburg line. It is a critical time, We should see the result very soon now. God grant that this may be the end of the struggle. Should it still continue we have the spirit and the material, and will fight until the end; but ,surely mankind has suffered enough.

"What an enemy we are fighting! It. is sometimes difficult to believe that the Hun is on the same level as ordinary mortals. His honour must be about the same quality as that of the star-fish or thereabouts. The territory 'voluntarily evacuated' by him has the mark of the beast all over it. There is no springtime there. The dead fruit trees are making pathetic efforts to shoot. There is not a sound building from Arras to Peronne. 'The mark of the Beast.' It is everywhere. Offal and dung lie in the shattered dwellings, and the ponds are all foul. Of the same kidney are the Hun soldier and sailor. From a torpedoed hospital ship we saved lately Some 152 wounded Germans. This is a measure, let us hope, of the difference between the two peoples." [TX01085M]

"That briefly, very briefly, is a record of my experiences during my stay in France. Throughout it all there has been one feature which has, I think, been predominant. If I forget everything else I have seen in France I shall

never forget the wonderful spirit of the men. I have been out there as an officer, and I have been as comfortable as possible under the almost impossible circumstances; But through all that terrible winter, through all the discomfort of an advance through a devastated country, the men have not had any similitude of real comfort: and they have been like gods more than men. We have done our best for them, and they have gone beyond us and laughed, not only in the face of Death, but in the, face of almost unthinkable privations. It has been the highest honour I shall know, to be in command of them. They have fought with a smile, and sometimes died with a laugh at their lips. No heroics, no boasting, but simply a cheerful endurance of Hell for the sake of all England means to them. It has truly been an experience of surpassing wonder. If I told them that, they would wonder what I was talking about. It is the English Tommy's way." [TX01085N]

The battalion returned to support on the 9th May relieving the 2nd Northhamptons and on the 12th moved up to the front relieving the 2nd Lincolns. They kept only two companies in the outpost line retaining two in support.

Seeing France **15th May to 5th July 1917**

Relief came on the 15th May when the 2nd Middlesex took over the outpost line and the Royal Berkshires were able to move back to Sorel le Grand for a period of training

On the 15th a reinforcement of 51 men arrived from Base.

Howse wrote home on the 15th. He is beginning to realise that their early hopes of a quick drive back to Germany was not going to be so easy.

"About January there was an extraordinary wave of optimism over everything, and rumours, well founded so it seemed, of enemy weakness. I think this was all due to the fact that in spite of the winter we were continuing to harass the enemy continually, and to gain ground at various points. To a certain extent that optimism was justified. The Bosch had enough, so instead of giving battle on the old ground he cleared out of it. That retreat undoubtedly prolonged the struggle. Just now one cannot say when the end will come. The fighting is at its bitterest, but the Hindenburg attempt to regain the initiative has utterly failed.

"As to the retreat, we had generally a pretty stiff time, owing chiefly to the severity of the weather. All our attacks were made in snowstorms, and as the enemy had destroyed every building in the villages, we were often without proper shelter. We harassed him considerably, however, and I am sure that his retreat on our sector at least was a lot more hurried than he bargained for.

"Now, before the end comes there must be terrific and desperate struggles; but the end will come, and the force that has devastated France will fear for its own harvest fields." [TX01085P]

Another 15 men joined on the 15th and on the 29th their training came to an end and they began the move

to a new area.

Howse was still very conscious of security:-

May 27th:- "I am really sorry I cannot tell you more. Latterly the censorship regulations have been made even stiffer. You have no idea how cunning the Bosche has been in the matter of obtaining information from: the correspondence of our fellows. As we are still in the vicinity of the ground over which we advanced I cannot give details. One strikes many things out of men's letters when censoring them, and it would not do to put the same things in one's own." [TX01085Q]

The Berkshires had a day at Ville Wood on the 30th and then marched to camp 17 on the 31st.

On to Saille le Sec on the 1st June where they entrained at Heilly station on the night of the 2nd.

They detrained at Castle station on the 3rd, going into billets at Rouge Croix. Another batch of 86 reinforcements joined on the 10th and they all moved on to Hazebrouck on the 11th.

After billets at Castre they moved to Scottish Camp on the 14th, in the forward area of Ypres.

Between the 19th and 29th they were in training at Steeneworde and on the 30th they moved to Winnipeg camp with A and C Companies sent to Pioneer Camp as working parties.

Finally on the 5th July they relieved the 1st Worcesters around Lille Gate in Ypres. They were about to join in the horrors of Passchendaele

During this period Howse had had ten days leave in England. It was to be his last. He found himself on the same boat as his friend Attwell and reminisced about student days. He visited relatives at Tunbridge Wells and Devizes and visited his friends in Berkshire after a short spell of theatre and dining in London. He returned to the Battalion on June 19th.

Sources

Petre pp 89-90

Reading Mercury 28/7/17

A South African Soldier and Student

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