

Section 263

Interval III

The 1st/4th Battalion - April to June 1917

The beginning of April found the 145th Brigade round Villers-Faucon in support to the other two Brigades who were fighting their way forward beyond Epehy (continued from section 243)

In support 1st to 3rd April 1917

The battalion moved off at 06:00 on the 1st from Marquais ready to support 143 and 144 Brigades in their attack on Epehy and Peizieres. As the attacks were successful their services were not required and they returned to their bivouacs. The next day they moved to billets at Hamel which was not as badly damaged as other villages as the Germans had not had time to destroy it before they retired. When they moved on to Villers Faucon on the 3rd they found this village with only one house near complete. They relieved the 4th Glosters

Three Villages 4th to 6th April 1917

On the 4th the Battalion received orders in concert with the remainder of the Brigade to take the three villages of Ronssoy, Basse Boulogne and Lempire. These three lie closely clustered together at the head of a valley with an undulating rise to the east. It was arranged to capture them by an encircling movement from the south and west. Snow fell heavily throughout the 4th, and frustrated all attempts of the Company Officers who had gone forward to see the lie of the land. A conference of commanding officers was held at Brigade HQ at 15:00 on the 4th.

The operation order read

1/4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, Operation Orders for attack on 5th April 1917

1. The Fourth Army continues its advance and a new main line of resistance will be occupied and consolidated. One Battalion and one Section M.G. of 144 Brigade will attack SLAG HEAP in F 28 c starting from Templeux Le Guerard at 4.45. a.m. tomorrow (5th April)

2. In accordance with above the Brigade will capture Ronssoy and Basse Boulogne, tomorrow, 5th April.

3. The Brigade will attack as follows:-

A) 1/4th R. Berks will attack South and South-east of

Ronssoy and Basse Boulogne moving up the valley N.E. of Templeux Le Guerard and protecting its Right by a flanking detachment.

B) 1/4th Oxfords will attack the S.W. end of Ronssoy

C) 1/5th Glosters will attack La Pauperelle and Basse Boulogne with a detachment directed on Maye Copse (F 9 c) to protect the Left flank.

D) Each of the above three battalions will keep one Company in Battalion Reserve.

E) 1/Bucks Battalion will be in Brigade Reserve at STATION in K 2.9.

4. Forming Up. The Companies will be formed up on the Road at 26c facing the Objective in the following order:- 'B', 'A', 'D'. O.C. Companies will detail one Officer per Company to reconnoiter the forming up ground before dark today.

5. Objectives:- To protect the Right Flank of the battalion all through their advance and to assist 'A' Company if necessary. O.C. 'B' Company will get in touch with the battalion of the 144 Brigade in Templeux arranging that his right and their left move together.

'A' & 'D'; Companies:- South and South-east of Ronssoy

Left of 'D' Company to link up with the Oxfords at 21 c 5. 9. both Companies pushing through the village and linking up with the Glosters along the main road in 16 c.

Objectives having been gained, posts will be pushed out to the East and South of the village, forming an outpost line.

Remainder of the Companies will be withdrawn to the valley behind Ronssoy in order to escape the enemy's shell fire.

6. Frontages

B Company:- A line drawn through 21 b 8.2. to 21 b 5.3.

A Company:- A line drawn through 21 b 5.3. to 21 c 7. 8.

D Company:- A line drawn through 21 c 7.8. to the Point of Junction with Oxfords

The left line of advance for D Company will be the road running N.E. through the first O of Bouleaux Wood to S. W. corner of Ronssoy

7. Advance. Each Company will advance in three or four waves each. Each wave of two lines - lines 25 yards distance between lines, 50 yards between waves. The main advance will be up the valley, 'D' Company will keep in touch with the Oxfords. The three Companies will move off from their Forming up ground in sufficient time to link up with the Right of the Oxfords at the Cross Roads in 20

d at zero. A quarter of an hour should be allowed to cover this distance.

8. Reserves 'C' Company will be in Reserve in Templeux Wood.

9. Lewis Guns. Lewis gunners should be on the flank of the second line

10. Tools. Shovels should be carried by the last wave of each Company.

11. S.O.S. Signals One case "S.O.S." signals will be carried by each Company.

12. Bombs Each Company will take ten carriers of N. 5 or No. 23 with rods.

13. Dressing Stations, Reserve S.A.A. and Battalion H.Q in Templeux Wood.

14. Dress All ranks will be in fighting order - haversacks carried on the back - mackintosh sheets to be carried.

15. Rations Tomorrow's rations will be carried in addition to the iron rations. Water Bottles to be filled.

16. Flares Ten flares will be carried by each Company to be lighted when contact plane calls for them, either by signals on the Klaxon Horn or by dropping a white light.

17. Wire Breakers Wire breakers will be fixed to rifles.

18. Strong Points and Wire. If a Strong Point or belt of wire is met with the leading line will establish a fire fight, while a way round is found by the following lines.

19 Intelligence Officer The Intelligence Officer today will reconnoiter Templeux Woods for the Battalion H.Q.

20. F.O.P. An F.O.P. will be established on the cross roads 20.d and the Intelligence Officer will take up his position there keeping the battalion H.Q. informed of all he can see.

21 "S.O.S" Barrage

A) R.A. Barrage will not open during attack unless called for

B) Calls will be:-

1/4th R. Berks single S.O.S. Signal

1/4th Oxforde - red Signal

1/5th Glosters - three S.O.S. Signals fired together

C) Calls may be made by each Battalion independently

D) In reply to S.O.S., R.A. will fire for five minutes on front of battalion calling for it.

E) Barrage will be on front i.e. edge of village and 100 yards in front i.e. W. of it.

F) R.A. will fire for 5 minutes each time S.O.S. is sent up and on same target.

G) A second barrage will be opened independently and without any S.O.S. at Zero plus one hour and will be directed 500 yards beyond objective villages.

H) Battalions will make special arrangements to avoid running into a barrage called for by another Battalion.

22). Zero Zero will be at 4.45.a.m.

23). Machine Guns - Half a section of M.G. Company will be attached to the Battalion. They will report at B.H.Q., where special orders will be given them.

24). Communication - Two Signallers will report to each Company and be under orders of the Company Commanders. They will be equipped with flags, shutters etc. The Battalion Signalling N.C.O. will be at advanced B.H.Q. in Templeux Wood and will make arrangements with Brigade for a line to be laid there and will lay another line forward to the F.O.P. as soon as possible.

25) Details Officers and Other Ranks left behind will be as ordered.

Issued - 4-4-1917 (4.0.p.m. & 11.0 p.m.)

(Sgd) S C Lam. Lieut & ADJ, 1/4th R. Berks

All these orders were carefully gone through point by point by the Commanding Officer with the Company Commanders during the day, and he also went up to the forming up place to see if all was clear before the advance began [TX01263]

A cold, dense mist wrapped everything in still greater obscurity when the Battalion moved off from Villers-Faucon at 02:00 on the 5th. The narrow sunken lanes, with numerous steep little hills, were clogged with snow. In spite of this the battalion neither lost direction nor time, but reached the rendezvous at Templeux Wood by 04:00. Touch was obtained with the 8th Warwickshire in Templeux village, who were prolonging the attack on the right, and with the 4th Oxforde on the left. The Companies were silently deployed a few hundred yards east of the wood. As the fighting was open and no elaborate defences were expected, each Company had a frontage of 200 yards, and was drawn up in depth with six waves each of two lines, the distance between the former being 50 yards and between the latter 25 yards. The village of Ronsoy was 1,600 yards away; between it and the attackers was a girdle of little woods, still untouched of green, and a number of small intersecting lanes and ditches. The enemy's outposts, as far as was known, were about 1,000 yards away, running north-west and south-east to cover the village. The morning was ideal for surprise, provided that mistakes were not made in the mist; for that reason no barrage would be provided unless called for by signal rockets.

B Company

We must now follow the fortunes of the three Companies, who began their advance at 04.30. B Company, on the right, had only gone 200 yards before enfilade fire was directed at them through the darkness from the slag-heaps on the right. A platoon was detached to deal with it, and its garrison, fearing encirclement, gave themselves up to the 8th Worcesters, who were coming up on the other side. Another 800 yards advance disclosed a further obstacle: the wire of the German outposts with well-manned trenches just behind. A Lewis gun was brought into action, gaps were cut, a barrage called for, which descended on the enemy at 5.45 and shortly afterwards the position was gained without any hand-to-hand fighting. The Company now turned to its fourth task of protecting the flank of the Battalion, and dug themselves in on a line just east of the captured slag-heap.

A Company

A Company under Captain Challoner, in the centre, also ran into the wire of the same position rather further north, but were able to break through without much difficulty. Then, led by Captain Challoner with great dash and determination, they pushed on rapidly through the eastern outskirts of the village, seized the cemetery, and there divided. One platoon joined hands with the 7th Gloucesters, whose successful attack from the west had put them in possession of the joint hamlets of Lempire and Basse Boulogne. The remainder, moving to the right, occupied a bank 800 yards south-east of the village, which had been designated beforehand as the left of the new outpost position. This long advance of 1½ miles over unknown country with the successful division of forces just after the assault, when disorganisation is most wont to occur, reflects the highest credit on all concerned. Captain Challoner, who kept the firmest grasp throughout, and both inspired and controlled his men, well deserved the Military Cross which was awarded a few days later. A fine example of initiative was shown by Sergt. Millican, whose Platoon Commander was killed as the village was entered; taking charge instantly he led his men with distinction throughout the rest of the fight.

D Company

To D Company on the left fell the lion's share of the fighting and of the booty. Approaching unobserved almost to the south entrance to the village, they overwhelmed two hostile posts in the first light of dawn, killing every man among them and taking two machine guns. Though their flank was for the moment open, as the Oxforde were held up on the edge of Ronssoy Wood, they burst into the village. Here was the wildest confusion. No attack had been expected in the wild weather, and the enemy were in their cellars and dugouts just sitting down to breakfast. Figures could be seen running about outlined in the snow; at a corner of the street a sergeant-major was shouting and beckoning to his men to fall in round him. D Company, wild with excitement, hunted them through the cellars and lanes and made a great slaughter. The dead lay all about

the streets and in the bombed dugouts. Lieut. Rogers, O.C. No. 16 Platoon, was reputed to have killed eight himself. Those Huns who escaped ran pell mell singly or in groups up the hill and along the Hargicourt road, flinging away their packs, with which the slope was littered. Captain James, who had led the Company so gallantly and successfully, got them together and wheeled round to the east of the village in the chance of exploiting still further the result achieved. Through the clearing mist a battery could be dimly seen on the ridge 1000 yards away limbering up and then disappearing over the crest, and it seemed possible to advance there, and thus command a view into Hargicourt. Unfortunately at this moment our barrage, by some unexplained mistake, fell upon the eastern exit of the village, causing several casualties. Part of the Company, therefore, made its way to its allotted position in the outpost line. The remainder cleared up Ronssoy, and found all kinds of booty. Soup, coffee, bread and sausages were all ready in the dug-outs and were consumed by the victors. A mail had just come in, and the letters lay about unopened. The equipment and packs were examined with keen interest. Everything was new and of the best material, for the Huns had just come from Russia, and had been hastily fitted out for the Western Front. In every pack, in addition to the usual articles, were a change of underclothing and three pairs of socks. One fortunate sergeant found a bottle of whisky in a dugout, which was quickly shared; it was not till afterwards that he discovered that it was not legitimate loot, but the property of the Brigade M.G. officer, who had appropriated the dugout and most incautiously left unguarded his treasure, which he had brought up with him in the attack. At the other end of the village a lively dispute was going on with the Oxforde, who were found carrying off the two machine guns captured when the outposts were rushed. The men were wonderfully excited and delighted at their achievement, and have always declared since that it was the best fight they have ever had in France.

C Company

The enemy's artillery had been active throughout the attack, but ineffective, as it was without direction. It had shelled Brigade Headquarters and the ground in front of Templeux Wood, but had never overtaken the attack. Throughout the day 5.9-inch shells were poured into Ronssoy, but did no damage whatever, as the men were either in the unlocated outpost line, or withdrawn well west of the village. A patrol of C Company managed during the day to get up to the ridge and look into Hargicourt, in front of which the enemy were visible, digging actively. Once or twice small patrols of Uhlans rode along the skyline, the first enemy cavalry that had yet been seen. No counter-attack of any description was attempted, and it was clear that the enemy rearguards, who were not in great strength, had been seriously inconvenienced by this surprise capture of their positions. General Fanshawe, who, as usual, was not far behind, soon came up, and after going over the village said he had not seen a better day's work since he had been in France.

An unnamed NCO wrote home and his letter was published in the Berkshire Mercury of 24/4/17:-

A graphic account of a successful attack made by a Battalion of the Royal Berks Regiment on the German lines is contained in a communication which has just been received from an NCO by a friend at Reading. He states:-

"As I previously told you we made an assault on the German's position, I will now give you details of what happened. It was between 4.30 and 4.35 when we attacked and our objective was to take three villages and a ridge. Three companies A, B and D being deputed to perform the task. These villages I might say practically join one another and the ridge is but a little way beyond the last. We soon accounted for the German patrol who showed a little fight and going on reached the third village in no time, so to speak. A and B Companies were the first, D Company being hung up in the wire. What do you think we found? We discovered that the Huns were cooking and having their breakfast and when we finally drove them beyond the ridge we sat down ourselves and had a really good feed. I might say that we had to negotiate a wood. Here the Huns had placed their machine guns and were pretty heavy with them, but all the same they did not do a great deal of damage. It was at the last village and the fight for the ridge that we lost most of our men. Here the enemy fought desperately. He put up a stubborn resistance and I can tell you we had to fight tremendously hard to dislodge him. As you will have already gathered we were successful in achieving our object. We soon got into close quarters with the Huns and it was pretty well all bayonet work. Our men used the bayonet splendidly and you could see the German dead lying about by the dozen. I heard afterwards that their losses were nearly 300. I expect you have heard that Company-Sergeant Major Rider was wounded. He was hit soon after we made this advance whilst leading his company. He was wounded just above the heart so you can guess what a narrow escape he had. Billy Wilson, the Reading footballer did well with the bayonet. He got well in with it and accounted for a few of them. We took quite a number of prisoners and our bag included four guns. There was the question of a fifth but the ---- claimed it as theirs and we gave it up to them. Yes we fairly caught the Huns on the hop; they never expected us but at the same time we had a warm time of it, so stubbornly did old Fritz resist. The way we stormed the German lines called forth praise from Sir Douglas Haig who sent congratulations saying that he was very proud of those who took part. I hear that seven have been recommended for honours in respect to which we are top of our division on the Somme. We are now back for a rest and you will agree with me that we deserve it. [TX01099]

The battalion report read:-

Battalion Report of the attack made on the villages of Ronssoy, Basse Boulogne and Lempire on the morning of the 5th April 1917 - Maps 17 C, 17 d & 17 E

The Battalion left Villers Faucon by platoons at 2.20 a.m. moving via Pleasnat House-Templeux Woods-The last Company, 'D' Company, being formed up and ready to move off at 4.15 a.m

O.C. 'B' Company had got in touch with the 8th Worcesters on the right in Templeux and returned to his

Company by 4.0 a.m.

The weather conditions were bad, the roads being very heavy after the previous days snow, and landmarks were very difficult or impossible to pick up, one could not see 100 yards owing to the mist. The country was quite unknown to all ranks, only the officers sent on the afternoon before knew the forming up positions and nothing beyond, as the falling snow prevented any observation then.

Each line of the Companies was on a frontage of about 200 yards, five to ten paces extension between men. The Companies were in six waves, each wave of two lines.

The forming up ground was 1000 yards from the west end of the village of Ronssoy, the second objective being another 1100 yards on to the Basse - Boulogne Road. The country was most difficult to advance over, with steep banks and roads and with the mist prevailing, it must have been far from easy to keep the direction. But in spite of these difficulties the Companies advanced in excellent order, ably directed by their Officers. The advance began at 4.30 a.m. and the lines had not proceeded 200 yards before machine gun fire was opened from the Slag heap: this fire continued until the O.C. 'B' Company later sent a platoon to outflank the position. As soon as this party had turned the enemy's flank the garrison surrendered to the Worcesters.

Right Company - 'B' Company

This Company was held up by wire running from 21 c 2.6. to 27 Central. The rifle fire from the trenches just east of the wire and the machine gun fire from the slag heap was very heavy. Wire cutters were sent forward to cut gaps in the wire, and a Lewis Gun was pushed out to cover the Right Flank, and another to keep down the fire from the trenches. Our own barrage commenced at 5.45 a.m. And also kept the Company from moving on. At 6.5 a.m. the barrage lifted and the Company were then able to advance. They got in touch with 'D' Company on the left and then turned right to take up positions to cover the right flank of the Battalion in F 27 d 5. 4. to F 28 c 2. 9. linking up with 'D' Company on the left, where they dug in with supports at F 27 d 1.8.

Centre Company - 'A' Company

After going about 300 yards, fire was opened on them from the front as well as the enfilade fire from the right. On reaching the wire they were held up for a short time until gaps were found or cut. The Company then advanced reaching their first objective Lt Pring, with his platoon pushed on to the Cemetery and then turned right and took up his position in bank in F 22 c. The O.C. Company with another platoon pushed on and joined up with the Glosters at the second objective at 5.45 a.m. at point F 15 c 7.8. More of the Company followed Lt. Pring and dug a position in F 22 c 6.5.

Left Company - 'D' Company

At 5.45 a.m. the first line attacked and overwhelmed a Post at

F 21 c 1.5. Heavy machine gun fire came from a strong point F 21 c 1.7. and this was at once attacked. It was

strongly held and three following lines closed up and joined in the attack. The Point was captured, two machine guns taken and all the teams killed. About twenty of the enemy were killed at this spot. The Company then advanced to the village, linking up with the Oxfords about 5.0.a.m.

The enemy were retiring in large numbers by the road F 21 d and across the open towards Hargicourt. Lewis Gun fire was opened on them but our advance was held up by our own barrage. As soon as the barrage stopped, the Company followed the enemy and dug in on road 28. A. 22 and Reneyeux Copse. At least 50 of the enemy was killed by this Company

(In one cellar a party of this Company broke into, hot tea was found on the table but the occupants had not stopped to finish their breakfast.)

The whole operation was carried out excellently. The advance across open country, the street fighting, the capture of the strong points, the immediate following up of the retreating enemy, the linking up with the other Battalions, the digging in of the various platoons - always under heavy shell fire, and the able handling and leading of the Company and platoon Commanders, reflect the greatest credit on all who took part in the attack. The position, when seen from the enemy's side was very strong.

We took up the Outpost Line at night - 'A' & 'C' Companies in front; 'D' Company in support; 'B' Company in Reserve, all very tired.

The kit of the enemy was very good; their clothing new; the packs contained change of underclothing, three pairs of socks etc. The roads leading from the village to Hargicourt was full of packs thrown away by them as they retreated.

The enemy's barrage came down as soon as he realized he was attacked, but it was behind the attackers, chiefly on forming up road and by Battalion H.Q. - very heavy mostly 5.9.s The villages were very heavily shelled all the day 4.2.s, 5.9s. And 8 inch, but orders had been issued to keep out of the village and there were no casualties there.

Our casualties were as follows:-

| | Officers | | | Other Ranks | | |
|----|----------|---------|-------------|-------------|---------|----|
| | Killed | Wounded | D.of wounds | Killed | Wounded | D. |
| A. | 1 | | | 2 | | 7 |
| B | | | 2 | 3 | | 8 |
| D | 1 | 2 | | 2 | | 24 |

Missing believed killed - 2 O.Rs 'D' Company

The Officers were all hit as they gallantly led their Commands

I wish to specially mention the behaviour of the following Officers and O.Rs, and the example they set to all their commands

The recommendations for Immediate Awards will be sent

in tomorrow

Captain O.B. Challenor

Captain O M James

2nd Lt. E L Bostock (Died of Wounds)

2nd Lt T Rogers

200426 Sergt Millican H 200620 Sergt Martin S

200674 Sergt Seeley C.L. 203875 L/Sgt. Baylis L.G.

200847 L/Cpl. DeGruchy H 200661 L/Cpl, Slatter S.G.

201804 Pte., Breadmore F (wd) 200633 Pte. Lamden R.E.

Medical Arrangements

The medical arrangements worked well. Stretcher Bearers brought the cases back to H.Q. and Bearers came from the Advanced Dressing Station to Villers and took the cases.

8-4-1917 (Sgd) R J Clarke, Lt. Col. Commanding 1/4th R. Berks

The Commanding Officer received the following:-

"Following from 11 Corps aaa Wire from Fourth Army begins aaa

CHIEF wire begins aaa "Please convey my further congratulations to the 48th Division on its recent successes aaa Ends aaa

In forwarding the Commander-in-Chiefs message I desire to congratulate the 48th Division most heartily on the brilliant successes they have achieved since the advance began aaa I offer all ranks my warmest thanks aaa. [TX01264]

Casualties

The casualties in officers were heavy, which is explained by their conspicuous gallantry in leading and directing their commands over the unfamiliar country. Four were killed or died of wounds: 2nd Lieuts. T O Garside, H D Heppell, N G Hunt and E L Bostock; while Captain James and 2nd Lieut. Rogers were wounded. Other ranks escaped very lightly with 9 killed and 39 wounded.

Hand Over

Positions were handed over 56th Division once the attack had been completed. The sun came out at last and melted the snow but this made the going even more difficult. In any case they were too exposed to move during daylight hours.

At 01:30 on the 7th they were ordered to support 59th Division in their attack on a sunken road but the Lincolns informed them that only an officers' patrol was scheduled and the Brigade attack had been aborted. As a result they moved to billets at Hamel by 01:25 on the 8th.

Hamel

8th to 13th April 1917

When they arrived at Hamel they were delighted to find hot food awaiting them and ample supplies of hot water and dry clothes.

April pursued its bitter way with snow and sleet. The first and triumphant stage of the Battle of Arras was fought on the 9th, when the enemy was thrust back 5 miles with the heaviest losses in prisoners and guns which he had yet suffered at the hands of the British. The repercussion of this violent fighting was felt all along the British line, and particularly to the southward, where the positions were still semi-fluid. The enemy's object was to delay as long as possible in his outposts before the Hindenburg Line, while the British endeavoured to push him rapidly upon his main positions, which would then be open to regular attack. Accordingly, small actions to seize local tactical features were epidemic throughout the 4th Army during this month.

The Battalion at first rested from its labours in the village of Hamel, but only on Sunday 8th were they excused work. On other days they supplied working parties for local work and the remainder were detailed to clear up the village and their billets.

On the 13th they relieved 144 Brigade and returned to Villers Faucon

Villers Faucon

13th to 17th April 1917

At Villers-Faucon they took over from the Oxfords on the Brigade right with A and B in the front line, C in support and D in reserve.. The line had by now been consolidated some 2,000 yards east of Ronsoy on the slopes of the hill, the crest of which was occupied by the German outposts, the key to whose position was the fortified farm of Guillemont.

The Battalion was ordered to attack this point next evening in conjunction with a combined night movement by the whole Division. The weather was again vile, and wet snow fell incessantly. The night was pitch dark, and without firing lights it was impossible to see 5 yards. The attack was due to start at 23.30 on the 16th. It was carried out by two Companies, C and D. The password was 'Wilson,' which called to mind the entry of the United States into the war a few days previously. The Companies arrived punctually after a march of 2 miles from support, and began to form up for the assault. While they were doing so, covering parties ahead reported that the enemy were advancing on the right flank. This was probably a patrol, but Captain James wisely pushed forward a platoon of D Company to secure his Company's advance. The enemy disappeared into the darkness, and immediately telephoned to their artillery, which promptly put a heavy and accurate barrage on our men who were formed up on open

ground with no kind of cover. This caused 30 casualties, and as the men were so cold that they could hardly hold, much less fire, their rifles, it was decided not to proceed with the attack, and they were withdrawn to the trenches.

A second attack, which was proposed for 01.30 on the 17th, was vetoed by the Brigade. General Fanshawe, when addressing the Battalion on the 22nd April, said that he was fully satisfied with the effort put forward, and that if it had been possible to reach the objective the Battalion would have done so. Guillemont Farm was taken by the 144th Brigade on 24th April.

The Battalion report read:-

Battalion Report on Operations April 16th & 17, 1917

The two attacking Companies 'C' and 'D' moved off from their shelters in the Slag Heap F 27 c. and the banks F 27 a to the place of deployment in F 17 b. and d. There was no shelter of any description nearer and this meant a march of over two miles for each Company. The Right of 'D' Company was F 17 d 9.4. and 'C' Company's left F 17 b 6.3. The weather conditions were about as bad as they could possibly be - a storm of rain or snow had been raging continuously all day and night: the ground was sodden and the night was so dark it was impossible to see 5 yards unless the very Lights were up.

The attack was due to commence at Zero, 11.30.p.m. The attacking Companies were forming up when the enemy were reported advancing on the Right Flank. Captain James, O.C. 'D' Company promptly ordered out a platoon to protect the flank. As soon as they moved off the enemy must have seen them advancing by the aid of the Very Lights, as they retired over the ridge before the platoon could get in touch with them. The attackers did not move forward until their Right Flank was secure and at 11.35.p.m. - 5 minutes after Zero - they were evidently seen by the enemy for a very heavy barrage of 77's and 5.9's, came down on them causing heavy casualties. All the men were wet through and so chilled and numbed with the cold that many of them could not fire their rifles. Under the circumstances therefore further advance was impossible and the Companies returned to the trenches just behind the point of deployment: the retirement was carried out in good order. The enemy's barrage was still continuing and the weather, if anything grew worse.

At 1.30.a.m. orders were received from the Brigade not to attempt another attack. The two Companies were ordered to return to their shelters.

No blame is attached to the Officers or men of the two attacking Companies for their not succeeding. The messages received from the Corps and Army Commanders show what the higher authorities thought of the attempt. Their efforts to advance, after the march and the heavy shell fire at the point of deployment, were worthy of all praise, and even though they did not succeed the Companies retained the reputation they had previously gained.

Many acts of gallantry were performed by Officers and Non Commissioned Officers and a list for immediate

awards has been forwarded

Casualties

| | Officers | Other Ranks |
|---------|----------|-------------|
| Killed | - | 9 |
| Wounded | 2 | 20 |

23-4-1917

Sgd - J N Aldworth Major for Lt. Col, Commanding ¼
Royal Berkshire Regiment [TX01265]

Ste Emile

17th to 19th April 1917

After the attack was aborted they moved to a new camp in a cutting near Ste Emile. Twice B Coy went up to support the Oxfords on both the 18th and the 19th.but the weather caused both attacks to be postponed and as 144 Brigade were relieving 145 Brigade the battalion returned to Hamel.

Hamel

19th to 24th April 1917

Although Hamel was still standing many delayed action mines kept exploding in cellars in the villages around so to be on the safe side battalion HQ was moved to a shelter in the open.

The 20th was spent in cleaning up and resting. On the 21st the Corps Commander came to present Military Medals to eight men who had won them for their actions on April 5th. The next day, Sunday three MCs were announced and the Divisional Commander turned up for an inspection and pep talk.

The ranges were made available to the battalion on the 23rd and they were able to use the baths at Tincourt.

They were on standby on the 24th to assist 144 Bde in their attacks and A and B Coys were eventually sent up under the command of Major Aldworth at 18:30. HQ with the other two companies moved up to Slag Heap moved later arriving at 02:30 on the 25th.

The battalion report read:-

Battalion Report on the attack on Quennemont Spur on April 24th 1917

1. On the 24 April we were in billets at Hamel

2. At 3.30.p.m. verbal orders were given me to find two Companies under my Second in Command to co-operate with the 144 Brigade in their attack on Gillemont Farm and The Knoll, to form the protective Right Flank.

3. Major Aldworth rode up to the Headquarters 144 Brigade and details of the attack were verbally given him.

4. I detailed 'A' & 'B' Companies to carry out the work and on Major Aldworth's return about 5.30.p.m. the situation was explained to the Company Commanders and orders were then issued verbally ,and in writing at 6.15.p.m. special instructions being given to keep in touch with the Battalions on Right and Left. Major Aldworth received his orders, in writing from the 144 Brigade at 7.15.p.m.

5. The Companies arrived at the SLAG Heap at 9.0.p.m. 'A' Company and one platoon of 'B' Company moved up, three platoons of 'A' Company to the forming up position in front of our wire about 29 b 8.9. to 23 d 8.9. and the other two platoons to hold the line.The three remaining platoons of 'B' Company took up their position in the Sunken Road.

6. The attacking Company moved off and appears to have been swung to the right. This movement is accounted for by the right of the Company keeping in close touch with the Battalion on the right at Cross Roads, 29 b 8.9. and the rest of the Company conforming too closely to them. They appear to have finally taken up a position along a bank that runs from 29 b 8.9. to 24 d 95. 40. There were three machine guns firing on them about 30 b 5.5., 19 b 5.5. and S.W. corner of Copse.

7. O.C. 'A' Company had lost all touch with the battalion on his left and he sent out a patrol to get in touch with them; the patrol returned being unable to find them. Another patrol was sent out and gained touch, finding them in the original front line.

8. The C.O. of the left Battalion sent a message at 2.0.a.m. to say there were none of his Battalion to the south of the road from the old front line to Gillemont Farm, as shells fell amongst his right attacking Company in the initial stage and causing many casualties, disorganized this attack.

9. About 3.0.a.m O.C. 'A' Company having received the message from the C.O. Left Battalion and his second patrol having returned to report the Left Battalion were in their old front line on his left and under the impression that he should keep in touch, and conform to the movements of the Battalion on his Left, withdrew his Company to the original front line.

10. The Company was, naturally, tired, as, in addition to the march up (7.5.miles), they had had a very short night previously, and had been standing to all day, ready to move at very short notice. But this did not influence the way they formed up, and moved off to the attack.

11. I had moved up with headquarters and the remaining two Companies to the SLAG Heap having received orders to be there by 3.0.a.m. I arrived at 2.45.a.m. and at 3.15.a.m. received orders from the 144 Brigade H.Q. to move up to the Sunken Road to make a further attack or wait to repel a counter attack. On my arrival at the

Sunken Road, after finding out the position, as far as it was known to the C.O. left Battalion and Major Aldworth I 'phoned the Brigade that I considered that by the time another Company could be in position it would be too light to make another attack. The 144 Brigade agreed, and no further attack was made.

20-4-1917 Lt. Col Commanding 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regt [TX01266]

Slag Heap

25th to 29th April 1917

The attack, on the night of the 24th-25th resolved itself, as far as the Battalion went, into a demonstration. Apparently owing to the darkness of the night and the width of frontage allotted to the attacking Companies, touch was lost with the right Battalion of the 144th Brigade which was enveloping Guillemont Farm from the south.. As its role was to protect the right flank. and as the attack on the left was disorganised by shell-fire, the operations came to a standstill.

Dawn arrived before it was possible to sort out the attackers and to get a fresh Company into position. The two Companies engaged, A and B, lost only 1 killed and 9 wounded from machine gun fire. The net result of the attack was that Guillemont Farm was taken, but the Quenemont Spur to the south remained in the enemy's hand.

The Battalion next day took over the whole of the front concerned from Companies of each of the four Battalions of the 144th Brigade. (8th Worcesters, 7th Worcesters, 5th Glosters and 6th Glosters). B Coy were on the right, A Coy in the centre with D Coy supported by one platoon of C Coy at Gillemont Farm. The remainder of C were in support.

The relief was long and laborious, as all the Companies were mixed together and their exact limits uncertain.. The enemy, expecting a renewal of the attack, showed great nervousness, and put down a counter-preparation three times during the night, but without doing much harm. This state of anxious expectancy continued during the remainder of the tour making life that more unpleasant, as the trenches were as yet improvised, and supplies had to be brought up over the open.

Much patrolling was done to discover the exact position of the enemy's forward posts, while the snipers of D Company from their commanding position in Guillemont Farm claimed several victims. Three patrols went out on the 25th, to the wood which was found to be held in strength by the Germans, towards Rifle Pits which were also found to be held in strength and to a strong point which gave them a good view down the valley.

On the 27th the 4th Oxforde took over from the Berkshires and they moved to bivouacs in support.

2/Lt C D Hampshire returned from hospital on the 28th.

He had been knocked out by a shell earlier as described in the Reading Mercury of 12/5/17

Second Lieutenant C D Hampshire of Russel Street Reading was formerly with the 3rd/4th Royal Berks being with them whilst the battalion was stationed at Reading. He is now reported not wounded; he was knocked over by a shell which killed and wounded some of his men and has been suffering from shell shock.[TX00862]

At sunset on the 29th the 7th Worcesters relieved them, and they went back into billets at Villers-Faucon.

Villers Faucon

29th April to 2nd May 1917

Their brief stay at Villers Faucon was taken up with sorting themselves out and inspections. The ration strength as of the 26th was reported as 631, well below establishment.

On the 1st May they left Villers Faucon moving to a camp at Buire, exchanging places with the 6th Lancashire Fusiliers. Here they received a message of appreciation from the commander of Fourth Army:-

My congratulations on our further captures. The skill and success with which the advance of the Fourth Army has been conducted are admirable and most creditable to all concerned. In passing this on the Army Commander desires to express his warm thanks to Corps and Divisional Commanders for the excellent work they have done during the advance.

There was work to do mending roads on the 2nd but at 17:30 they moved off to Doingt.

Doingt

2nd to 12th May 1917

The long winter had ended, and spring arrived with a burst of sun and warmth. A fortnight's well-earned rest was now to follow, in which time could be given to refit and to assimilate the new drafts, which, however, were only sufficient to bring the total strength, from 600 to 700 men. It was remarked that although the general quality was good, out of the first contingent of 35 who arrived on the 2nd, five wore trusses and three others possessed flat feet, varicose veins or hammer toes.

When they got to Doingt after a hard days work at Buire they found no arrangements had been made so they had to borrow 30 tents from the Ordnance Corps for C & D Coys with A and B having to make do with bivouacs in the village ruins.

The days that followed were taken up with work parties with the occasional lecture and training. On the 5th all blankets were sent to Peronne to be treated by the thresh machine which seemed to be a form of cleaning and disinfecting device – the next day the whole battalion marched to Peronne when all their clothing was treated. They were given use of the ranges on the 7th (C Coy), 9th (B Coy) and 10th (D Coy). There were inspections of the

transport on the 5th by the Brigadier and of Lewis guns and rifles on the 8th by the Armourers.

A Challenge Cup, presented by the C.O., was competed for in inter-Platoon Football Matches.

On the 11th they received their orders to return to the trenches but as the GOC Division was on leave, the brigadier moved up to Division and the colonel to Brigade as a temporary measure. Major Aldworth became temporary CO. The battalion left Doingt at 06:30 on the 12th to make a very long and tiring march to Combles via Clery and Maurepas. The countryside through which they passed had been devastated and the smells awful which made everyone feel depressed with many men falling by the wayside. At one of the halts the Corps Commander passed by and stopped for a chat with the CO who was acting Brigadier, he asked that his appreciation of the conduct and behaviour of the men be passed on as they were now leaving his Corps and moving to XV Corps.

THE RENEWAL OF TRENCH WARFARE

The great attempts to break through in April had definitely failed from a variety of causes. The Russian Revolution had rendered impossible the blow in the East, for which British munitions had for the first time adequately armed the Russian Armies. The German retreat had partially disorganised the combined British and French plan. The failure of Nivelle's great blow at the Chemin des Dames on the 16th April with enormous losses, made the French Armies incapable of any offensive operation on a large scale for several months. Hence the Battle of Arras, which had begun so happily, had degenerated towards the end of April into a series of furious struggles, each of which showed less promise of decisive importance than the last. The centre of gravity shifted to the north, where preparations on a vast scale were pushed forward for the main attack in Flanders, which opened on 31st July.

The march resumed next day, the 13th. Far away, on the eastern horizon, a green strip appeared, showing the limits of the devastation of the old Somme battlefields. The march was continued through the centre of the waste past Le Transloy to a capacious camp at Beulencourt on the Peronne road, 2 miles south of Bapaume.

Next day the Battalion re-entered the line in front of Hermies, relieving the 9th Sherwoods, whose C.O., Colonel Thornton, came from the 1st Royal Berks. Until the end of June their lot was cast in this neighbourhood with normal periods of trench duty and relief. The line held by the Brigade stretched south from the great Bapaume-Cambrai road. It was from these trenches that the northern part of the surprise attack against Cambrai would be launched on 20th November. The enemy was ensconced in his Hindenburg Line, which took advantage of every undulation in the bare table-land. The villages in British occupation, Hermies, Doignies and Beaumetz, had all shared in the systematic devastation of the spring. The foremost British line was still a matter of partially connected outposts, each Platoon forming as a rule a self -

contained strong point, while inter-communication with other posts was always difficult and sometimes impossible by day. The Battalion frontage was strung out to a width of about 2,300 yards, and on their arrival was protected only by discontinuous belts of wire, but before the first tour had been completed they had all been linked together. No Man's Land was wide and ill-defined, amounting sometimes to 1,000 yards, with such debateable features as ruined farms or clumps of trees situated in the midst, which required constant patrolling, but were found regularly unoccupied. The aspect of the country with its tangled growth of grass and weeds revived memories of Hebuterne two summers ago.

Hermies Sector

14th to 28th May 1917

The next two weeks were spent in comparative stagnation in trenches in the Hermies sector.. 145 Brigade relieved 33 Brigade on the 14th with the Berks in right front, the Bucks in left front and the Oxford and Glosters in support. 3 platoons of each of B, C and D Coys were in the Berks front line with their remaining platoon in support. A Coy were in reserve. The companies spent most of the time in improving the trenches and watching the aeroplanes overhead. The gunners kept up their activities but the enemy's artillery were almost silent for days on end, though now and again violent bursts of 5.9-inch would be directed at the Support Companies.

The weather was very variable, sultry with thunder on the 14th, sultry on the 15th, wet on the 16th very hot on the 17th and 18th. Nights were dark and misty and it was very difficult to find ones way around in the unfamiliar territory. However wire guides were installed on the 17th leading from post to post which proved very valuable.

On the 18th they were relieved by the Oxfords and moved into support. The CO inspected the transport on the 20th but otherwise time was spent on working parties with an opportunity to bath at Velu on the 21st. There were bivouacs and shelters for all. A Coy were by the cemetery, C NW of Hermies and B and D I the valley by the slag heap.

It was back to the front line on the 22nd when they relieved the Glosters. Capt Downs died of his wounds on the 22nd. The Germans had a good oversight of the British trenches and their shelling and sniping ensured everyone kept their heads down and movement was strictly limited. A patrol was sent out on the 25th to reconnoitre the pits and branches around the farm which were found to be unoccupied. A second patrol went out on the 26th with similar results.

Their time at Hermies came to an end on the 28th when they were relieved by the 1st/4th Oxfords and moved to nearby Beaumetz which was to be their base for the month of June.

The Battalion report read:-

Battalion Report on enemy's attempted raid on the night of the 20/21st June 1917.

At 11.55.p.m. 20-6-1917 a barrage of 4.2.s and 77.s estimated at four Batteries was opened on Posts R. 10., 11. and 12 (Posts R. 10 and 11. not occupied).

A raiding party of one Officer and 70 Other Ranks 9 (from information gained from prisoner) started up the valley to E 8 c 2.1. and, from tracks in the grass afterwards, found by our patrols, they apparently crawled from that Point to K. 14 a 1.8. about 100 yards south of our Listening Post. At this Point they cut the lower strands of our wire and crawled under the first row then passed through the second row in the same way, but proceeded no further. At 11.57.p.m. a rocket was sent up by the enemy, bursting into 5 Red Stars and their barrage lifted.

The garrison of the Post R 12 who, whilst the barrage was on, had been compelled to keep their heads down, immediately manned the fire steps and opened rapid rifle and Lewis Gun Fire. The platoon Officer on the post sent a message, by runner, to inform his Company Commander that the Post was being barraged and the Company Commander immediately sent out a strong party to, if necessary, counter attack, but this party. On arrival at the Post found that the enemy had not succeeded in reaching same, so that the officer pushed on with the object of trying to overtake and scupper the raiding party, but owing to the darkness the enemy completely disappeared, with the exception of one man, who was taken prisoner at Post 12. From information gained from this prisoner later, it appears that the enemy meant to raid Post 12 but were turned by the steady fire from the Post and owing to the darkness could not recover their direction.

On receiving the Company Commander's message, by wire at Battalion H.Q. I decided that it would not be advisable to ask for artillery assistance as I had ordered two patrols to leave between 11.30.p.m. and 12 midnight to go out on the two roads in front of this post and they might have been on the S.O.S. lines. I therefore waited till I knew if they had left, but by that time the enemy barrage had ceased.

I specially wish to draw attention to the cool behaviour of the garrison of No. 12 post and particularly to Sgt Garnett, the senior N.C.O. there.

The Brigadier and the Divisional Commander both sent their congratulations on the success of the defensive arrangements.

Our casualties were nil.

23rd June 1917 (Sgd) R.J. Clarke, Lt. Col. Commanding 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment. [TX01267]

Beaumetz and Velu Camp

28th May to 3rd July 1917

For their first spell of support there were daily inspections and the occasional work party. Nominally D Coy was in

the right support position with B on the left and C relieving D on the 31st. They found time to send 10 NCOs and men to the seaside rest camp on the 28th.

They returned to the front line on the 3rd June in the left subsector of 145 Brigade's line. A were on the right, D on the left with C in support and B in reserve. It was still virtually impossible to move around in the daylight and nighttime was taken up with strengthening the wire. It was C Coy in support which bore the brunt of German shellfire with over 200 rounds exploding in their area on the 4th. The CO rejoined from leave on the 5th. On the 9th they moved back to Velu camp when they were relieved by the Oxfords.

Private John Percy Norman (200454) of Caversham was a member of C Coy. He was cleaning his rifle when a shell burst at 17:30 on the 4th. The report in the Reading Mercury of 16/6/17 read:-

Private John Percy Norman, Royal Berks, 132 London Street, Reading, was killed in France by a shell on June 4th aged 22. Private Norman who was employed at Moseors Queens Road joined up August 15th 1914 and was sent to France February 15th 1915. An officer writes:- I am very much grieved at the task of communicating to you the sad news of your son's death. While he was cleaning his rifle last evening (June 4th) at about 5.30 a shell pitched in the road nearby killing Norman and another and wounding two more. Your son's death was instantaneous. We buried him beside Captain Down at night. We have lost one of the most popular members of No 9 Platoon in your boy. He was a great favourite with his comrades and we shall all miss him very keenly. May I, on behalf of the platoon and myself, offer you our deep sympathy and regard in your bereavement.

The chaplain wrote:- Your son was killed instantly by a shell during a heavy bombardment. [TX00860]

Velu Camp was in a good position and although the weather was very hot and thundery they were able to get in some training and progress the inter-platoon football competition which was eventually won by 6 platoon who beat 16 platoon by 1-0 on the 14th. On the 12th they had the use of the baths at Velu. The next day the Brigadier turned up to test the officers in rapid wiring. The CO presented the cup and medals to the football teams at a concert on the 14th.

On the 16th they took over again from the Oxfords with B Coy on the right, C Coy on the left, D Coy in support and A Coy in reserve. This time the main shelling was on B Coy's positions. The Germans attempted a raid on no12 post on the 20th but were beaten off by Lewis gun and rifle fire. In this Sergeant Garrett of Wokingham distinguished himself and was awarded the Military Medal. The Berks-shires suffered no losses but took one prisoner who got himself tangled in the wire and was left behind when the attackers retreated.

They were relieved by the Oxfords on the 21st and returned to Support at Beaumetz. D and A Coys were in the forward positions and spent their time strengthening their posts. They swapped positions with B and C on the 24th. B and C were able to get a bath at Velu on the 24th. Major

General Fanshawe presented a cup for the Division to compete for at football but the Berks were beaten 1-0 in the first round by the Bucks on the 26th. D and A Coys were put on standby to assist the Glosters on the 26th but their services were not required.

The Divisional veterinary officer turned up unexpectedly on the 27th to inspect 145 Brigade's transport. His report read:-

I inspected the Transport Lines and animals of the 145th Infantry Brigade yesterday without any previous warnings and found the Standings clean and tidy. The horses and mules were in very good condition, well groomed and cared for. This shows good stable management and reflects great credit on the Brigade Transport Officer, Transport Officers and other ranks under them. I shall be glad if you will inform them of this." The GOC congratulated all concerned on a very favourable report.

They returned to the front line for the last time at 01:00 on the 28th again relieving the Oxfords. One of C Coy's patrols were attacked later on on the 28th and three men were reported missing. A second patrol went out later and recovered one body and one wounded man. A third patrol found the final body next day. A Commanding officers' conference was held at Brigade HQ in the afternoon of the 28th, no doubt to brief them on their impending transfer northwards. They were relieved by the Oxfords on the 30th and retired to Velu Camp to clean up and prepare for the move. Ration strength on the 30th was reported at 700.

Officers from the 12th West Yorks arrived on July 1st to make arrangements for the handover which took place on July 3rd.

Sources

Cruttwell pp 107-117

War Diary

Reading Mercury

Berkshire Chronicle

Continued in section 273