

## Section 272

# The Third Battle of Ypres

## 2nd Battalion July - December 1917

*The 2nd Battalion endured the whole of the Third Battle of Ypres. They moved to Ypres to relieve the 1st Worcesters on 5th July. Continued from 262.*

### Ypres

6th to 9th July 1917

After relieving the 1st Worcesters, D Coy was detached to the 171st Tunnelling Company, Royal Engineers. Next day the three remaining companies relieved the 2nd East Lancashire in the front trenches of the right sub-section of the 8th Division's front; one company each was in front, support, and reserve till the 9th, when the battalion was rejoined by D at Dominion Camp. B and one platoon of C were left behind in line to carry out a raid planned for the 10th.

In over three months, from the 4th April to the 9th July, the casualties had been only two other ranks killed and seventeen wounded.

### Raid

10th to 11th July 1917

The Divisional Diary for the 10th noted the requirement placed on 2nd Bn:-

10-7-1917. A raid will be carried out on the enemy's trenches at Hooge, by B Company 2nd R. Berks on the night of July 10th/11th.

The Raiding Party will form up in Kingsway. The enemy's trench will be entered between I 18 b 50 35 and I 18 b 15 40. Blocks will be established and the Raiding Party will penetrate as far as the Trench I 18 b 43.51. to I 18 b 31. 74. [TX01068A]

The raid above alluded to was duly carried out, by the detachment left behind, in the night of the 10th/11th July. The strength of the party was one hundred and sixty-eight all ranks; the platoon of C had been added to B on account of the presumed strength of the enemy's position.

Zero hour was 01:00 on the 11th July. A quarter of an hour earlier the raiders were ready in Kingsway. As the barrage began punctually at zero, the company pressed rapidly forward, reaching the German front without casualties, except from the British barrage, into which some sections pushed on too rapidly.

Of the Company 50 per cent. had never been in action before and therefore lacked experience. The second

objective was reached in fourteen minutes. When the first trench was passed it was so dark that it was difficult to recognize the entrances to dugouts, and some of these were passed by unbombed. In consequence of this, some Germans lurking in one of them came out with a machine gun and brought it into action after the raid had passed. This gun and its team were knocked out by Sergeant Sturgess. The Germans put up a good fight everywhere; only one prisoner was taken, and he, thanks to the intelligent self-restraint of Private Bowden, at whom the German had fired. Bowden, realizing the importance of prisoners for identification purposes, restrained his natural inclination to bayonet the man, who held up his hands as soon as he had fired. Bowden was awarded a parchment certificate for his efforts.

In one case two Germans, pretending to surrender, threw bombs, and were of course killed. Many strongly held dugouts were bombed, and there must have been numerous casualties in them. Independently of these, it was estimated that thirty of the enemy had been killed in hand-to-hand fights.

The Berkshire casualties were: **Officers** (names not given): *Wounded* 2. *Wounded and Missing* 1. **Other Ranks:** *Killed or Died of Wounds* 3. *Wounded* 35. *Missing* 2.

The battalion report read:-

Report of the C.O. 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment on the operation carried out on the night of 10/11th July 1917.

Strength of party – 168 all ranks. The presumed strength of the enemy's position was the reason for adding No 10 Platoon of 'C' Company. This was fully justified by after events.

The Company was formed up in Kingsway on and in front of wire at Kingsway Support and all was ready at Zero minus 15 minutes. One man was killed by a stray shell, in getting to the assembly position.

At 1.00 a.m. Zero Hour, punctually, the barrage fell, and the raiding party moved forward immediately. The German front line was reached without any casualties, except from our own barrage. This was caused by some of the sections pressing on too closely. Owing to the darkness, sections were inclined to bunch at the start but got their proper intervals by the time the German front line was reached. 50% of the Company had never been in action before and, all things considered, went very well

Though there was some wavering when the enemy threw bombs which they did from dugouts and shelters.

The second objective was reached at Zero plus 14

minutes.

It was very difficult, owing to the darkness, to recognise the entrances to dugouts, the consequence being that after our line passed over, the enemy emerged and brought a machine gun into action. This and the team were knocked out by Sergeant Sturgess.

The Germans put up a good fight, in practically every instance and in consequence only one prisoner was taken. With reference to this, one German fired at Private Bawden, the bullet grazing the latter's arm. Private Bawden knowing how essential identification was, showed great self restraint in not killing the man, who immediately put his hands up after firing.

In one case the two Germans offered to surrender and then threw bombs, these were killed. Many dugouts were bombed and, as these positions were strongly held, a good many Germans must have been killed. It was estimated that 30 Germans were killed from hand to hand encounters.

Wire – There was quite a lot of wire left between the German Front and Support Line, though rolled up and broken.

Barrage – All agreed that the barrage was excellent in every way. For night work it seems that shrapnel bursting on graze gives an excellent line for troops to work by.

The O.C. Left Platoon reports 20 dead Germans opposite the Menin Road Crater and other platoons report Germans lying dead in front line trenches.

I am of the opinion that the care taken by Major Duncan R.F.A., to demonstrate the exact position of the barrage to all raiding officers, on the morning of the 10th inst was largely responsible for the excellent direction kept by troops in the raid.

There were a number of small dugouts and shelters in Hooge Crater which were bombed.

Trenches were in some places 9ft deep The Crater at I 18 b 0.9. was 40 to 50 ft deep, very soft at the eastern end, and a large pool of water in the centre and also small dugouts round the sides. The O.C. Left Platoon reports that 6 to 8 Germans were killed by his platoon.

Withdrawal;- The retirement was carried out with practically no casualties to ourselves. The Platoon 1st Line covered the retirement of the 2nd Wave. This withdrawal did not start till Zero plus 44 minutes and not Zero plus 36 minutes as planned. All Stoke mortar bombs were thrown into dugouts on signal of withdrawal being given by the bugle.

All arrangements about stores etc were completely satisfactory, owing to the courtesy of the 7th Infantry Brigade.

A Conservative estimate of total German casualties is at least 70 to 80.

Signed: Roland Haig, Lt. Col. 12-7-1917.

Casualties:-

Lt C de V Hinde – Wounded and Missing

2nd Lts. T A L Dawson and A G Rice – Wounded

O.Rs. 2 Killed, 1 wounded (since died of wounds), 35 wounded and Missing.

The undermentioned Officers and men were awarded Military Medal and Parchment Certificates for gallantry

and devotion to duty during the raid on the German trenches near Hooge, on the night of 10/11th July 1917:-

Military Medal – 19914, A/Cpl. T Wheeler, 202791, Pte RN Coleman 27442 Pte. AE Barke, 24529, Pte A Knight, 37889, Cpl. H Grice, 37435, Pte. E Adams 8990, Pte., T Ranscombe

Parchment Certificates – 2nd Lt. T A L Dawson, 19529, Pte H E Bawden and 18896 Pte T Painter. [TX01060]

### 11th to 29th July 1917

The raiding party rejoined on the 11th, and went with the battalion to Ouderdom, and afterwards to Rebecques and Tournehem for training, which lasted till the 24th. It then returned to Dominion Camp, and on the 29th to Swan Chateau.

## Getting into position

30th July 1917

On the 30th July 1917 the 2nd Battalion was at Halfway House, ready for the coming attack from Ypres towards the east and north-east. The first positions in front of the 8th Division were to be attacked by the 23rd and 24th Brigades, with the 53rd Brigade (18th Division) on their right, and the 45th Brigade (15th Division) on their left.

The 25th Brigade was not to attack till 6½ hours after zero, when it would advance with the 2nd Royal Berkshire in reserve, and the other three battalions in front line. The Berkshire Battalion was to assemble just west of Halfway House at 4 hours after zero. As the front line advanced at zero plus 6 hours 28 minutes the battalion would follow, throwing out patrols to connect with the brigades on either flank.

## On the move

31st July 1917

The 8th Division Diary set the scene:-

31-7-1917 Boundaries of 8th Division area:

South - Northern edge of Sanctuary Wood to where Jackdaw Reserve trench cuts main Menin Road, J 13 a 80.25. to Northern end of Nonne Boschen Wood.

North - Ypres/Roulen Railway

Units will leave their dugouts at Halfway House at such an hour as will allow them to form up and advance at the hour named.

R. Berks forming up areas:- South of Oxford St and West of Ritz St.

Hours of advance – Zero plus 4 hours. Route South of Etang de Balleward.

Destination – Valley about J 7 d 5. 7.

Dunbarton Lakes are reported to be dry, except for the circular lake to the South East. Two small streams running N.W. & S.E. about 100 yards east of the lake is (sic) 6 yards broad and appears to be somewhat deep. Most of the woods in the forward area have been so

thinned out as to be hardly recognisable as such. Whilst recent photographs show Polygone Wood, Noone Boschen and Glencorse Woods have been almost entirely cut down, though undergrowth of 3' to 4ft high still remains. Inverness Copse and Bodmin Copse do not appear to have been damaged. When the battalion moved punctually from west of Halfway House there was not much shelling, but it had to bear to its left as far as the Menin Road to avoid the 5.9in barrage which the Germans were putting down on their old fire trench. When the battalion, having re-formed here, moved on Chateau Wood it encountered severe shelling, and had some casualties. [TX01068B]

Being somewhat scattered, it was again formed beyond the wood. A short way beyond this it was found that the 53rd Brigade was somewhat behind, and the 2nd Royal Berkshire formed a defensive flank which commanded the ground as far as Glencorse Wood, the enemy's machine guns in which were giving much trouble and causing many casualties.

The advance was then ordered by the GOC to stop for the present, as the 15th Division was held up.

At 11:05 the battalion was ordered to reinforce the right of the 2nd Lincolnshire. Two companies and Headquarters were now in reserve, the other two divided between the defensive flank and the 2nd Lincolnshire. The 15th Division was still hung up in Glencorse Wood.

Soon after noon a counter-attack was launched against the 2nd Lincolnshire, and at 12:30 the Berkshire was ordered to withdraw as far as three hundred yards east of Ziel House and prepare to receive a counter-attack. A surprise bomb attack, at 14:00 on the left, caused some confusion and retirement, but the troops rallied and recovered the lost ground. At 15:03 Brigade orders directed the battalion to consolidate and hold on at all costs.

At this time the 2nd Lincolnshire, on the left of the 2nd Royal Berkshire, as not up to the line, and was unable to straighten the line on account of heavy machine-gun fire on its left. At 16:30 C Company in front line had to be reinforced by half of A, and at 20:00 orders from the Brigade required a company to be sent to reinforce the Rifle Brigade on the railway to the left. At 20:40 the Berkshire were informed that, though the rest of the 25th Brigade was to be relieved by the 24th, they were to remain with the 24th. The commander of the 24th Brigade sent them to occupy the position now vacated by the 2nd Lincolnshire. Here C was on the right, D on the left, and, later in the night, B returned from the Rifle Brigade which it had supported since 20:00.

The battalion report read:-

Battalion Report on Operations carried out by 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regt – 31st July to 1st August 1917

Acting on Brigade Operation Orders, the Battalion left their dugouts at Halfway House and formed up in Artillery Formation, South of Oxford St and was ready to move off at Zero + 4 hours. This order to move was given and the

Battalion moved off sharp to time. The Commanding Officer went on to meet the Brigadier, as per instructions, leaving the Adjutant to bring on the Battalion.

There was very little shelling at this time but, owing to the enemy putting a heavy 5.9 barrage on his old front line, it was necessary to swerve to the left as far as the Menin Road, where a short halt was made. The Battalion reformed and was then ordered to move on. Chateau Wood proved somewhat difficult to negotiate, owing to heavy shelling and a machine gun barrage, some casualties occurred here. The Battalion was scattered a bit and a halt was called when well clear of the Wood. Companies reformed in Artillery Formation and moved on to the Valley just West of Jabber Trench, reaching there about 9.30 a.m.

Information was received that the Division on the right had not got on and a defensive flank was formed on the South-Eastern slope of Jabber Drive. This commanded the ground up to Glencorse Wood. Enemy machine guns from this wood proved very annoying and caused casualties.

As the Commanding Officer had not returned the Adjutant reported to the G.O.C. who gave verbal instructions that no advance would be made for the present as the Right Division could not get on.

Instructions were received at 11.15 a.m. to reinforce the right of the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt. 2 Companies of the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt were on the extreme right, these two Companies were ordered forward to get in touch with their left two Companies.

The 2nd Battalion R. Berks were then in position, partly in support of the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt and with 1 Company on the right in Jabber Trench and 1 in Jabber Drive forming a defensive flank. 2 Companies and Battalion H.Q. in Reserve.

At 11.15 a.m. a message was sent to Brigade stating that a gun was firing point blank range from about J 8 Central. This message was also repeated by Pigeon and stating that the Right Division was hung up before Glencorse Wood.

At 12.10 pm. A message was sent to Brigade that enemy appeared to be forming up for counter attack and Lt Ayres, R.F.A. (F.O.O.) was killed by a sniper.

12.31 pm. Message received from Brigade that 2nd Lincolnshire Regt report that they were being counter attacked.

12.31 pm. Message received to withdraw Companies from Jabber Drive to 300 yards East of Ziel House and to be ready for immediate counter attack.

1.00 pm. Message received from O.C. East Lincs that they were expecting a Counter attack

1.26 pm. 'A' & 'B' Companies in position about Ziel House with about 30 men of Battalion H.Q.

2.00 pm. Enemy made a surprise bombing attack on the left causing confusion and troops began to retire. They were rallied and recovered the lost ground. Trench Mortar got into position and used with good effect.

2.15 pm. Message sent to Brigade H.Q. that troops were partly driven below the crest by bombing attack. One platoon was sent forward to reinforce 'C' Coy

3.03 pm. Message received from Brigade to consolidate and to hold on at all cost; repeated to Companies.

Message sent to O.C. 2nd Lincolnshire Regt asking if they could push on and straighten out the line as we were in advance of them on the right. Answer received stating machine gun from the left held them up.

4.30.pm. ½ of 'A' Company was sent to reinforce 'C' Company who was urgently asking for reinforcements. Brigade informed.

8.00.pm Received instructions from Brigade to send a Company to reinforce the 2nd Rifle Brigade on the left by the Railway about J 1 central.

8.05. pm Informed Brigade we were in touch with East Lancashire Regt on the right and also the 18th Division.

8.40. pm Brigade orders received stating that 25th Brigade were being relieved but 2nd Battalion R. Berks would remain and come under the orders of the G.O.C. 24th Brigade. About 10.30.pm. Received verbal instructions from 24th Brigade to take over all ground held by the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt.

The line was taken over with 'C' Company on the right, 'A' Company in the centre and 'D' Company on the left.

11.30.pm Message sent to Brigade asking that 'B' Company be sent back to rejoin. Relief of the 2nd Lincolnshire Regt completed about 4.0.a.m.'B' Company rejoined. At this time the weather conditions were very bad, the rain making the going very heavy indeed.

About 11.45.a.m. verbal instructions were received that the Battalion would be relieved by the Loyal North Lincs, but considerable difficulty was experienced owing to the shelling.

About 12 noon the enemy commenced a heavy barrage with 5.9s and 8" shells shelling all the ground between Westhoek and Chateau Wood causing numerous casualties. This heavy shelling continued for about 6 hours.

The relief was completed about 6.0.pm.

Sections moved off immediately they were relieved and were given instructions to avoid the barrage and find their way to Pioneer Camp and ask for information as to which camp the Battalion would be accommodated in.

The going was very bad indeed and all ranks were very tired and wet through by the time they reached camp. At Pioneer Camp it was found that the Battalion would be accommodated in Winnepeg Camp. The majority of the battalion arrived that night but a few stragglers turned up during the following morning.

Although the Battalion was not seriously engaged, units carried out all instructions thoroughly and the men were kept together and well in hand.

Company Commanders: 'A' 2nd Lt WH Glenister, 'B' 2nd Lt H E Howse 'C' A/Capt HH Flint, 'D' Capt RA Curtis Adjutant Lt. H T Forster, M.C.

Casualties: - Lt Col. R Haig, D.S.O. wounded. 2nd Lt J C Lee Died of Wounds 2nd Lt WC Snelling & 2nd Lt ND Bayley wounded O.Rs Killed 15, Wounded 109, Missing 20

Signed:

Lt. HT Forster, Adjutant, 2nd R. Berks. [TX01061]

## Major Hanbury-Sparrow Returns 31st July 1917

Having recovered from his injuries sustained at Pallas Trench Major Hanbury-Sparrow is returning to his battalion. He would have preferred to stay in England but the call of duty was too strong:-

IT was the 31st of July, 1917. The steamer was puffing slowly up the river Seine towards the port of Rouen, and the grey sky was heavy with the thunderous rumble of Passchendaele. Three years ago almost to a week you had made the same passage. You had not been this way since then. Three years! Could it really be three years? It seemed only yesterday that you had floated through this golden gateway to the war. You had only to shut your eyes to see again the lovely mist-swathed woods and hills, the blue-cloaked gendarmes, and the white-trousered postmen out on their early round. Still the cheering and the proud hoots of the syren sounded. Still the morning sun sparkled on the clear water and still the ghosts of Roland and Du Guesclin arid of thousands of mail-clad figures waved their brave lances through the mist, cheering on the descendants of their ancient enemies.

But now, as you le ant over the ship's rails in eager anticipation of a repetition of the scene, you began to feel uneasily that something was wrong. Where was this country you remembered? This couldn't be it, for what you were seeing now was quite uninteresting. Perhaps it was round the next bend? No! The next? No! What had happened? Was your memory utterly at fault? But there it was. The scenery had become ordinary, just as the war had become ordinary; just as our presence in France had become ordinary. You had told others on the boat they would see up the Seine the fairest scenery in the world. Well, it wasn't-you had to admit. it. And they-they'd think you were telling lies just to show off or maybe keep up their courage. You'd made a mistake and were being found out. Had you also made a mistake in coming out again?

But what else could you have done? That delightful month in the convalescent home in Northamptonshire had got you reasonably fit. You couldn't conscientiously stay there any longer. Then what was the choice? On the one hand to be an unimportant nonentity doing light duty at home, surrounded by fellows who'd go out if they were sent, but not otherwise. On the other the relative freedom and importance, and above all the stout hearts and good companionship of the trenches. "The best of England," you were fond of declaring, "is either in London or within ten miles of the frontline." Besides, had not your hostess once remarked "a man cannot live on a deed." True she made it apropos of a tramp, but you recognised the cap fitted. As long as a man had blood in his veins, there could be no question whilst the war was on, of having done his bit. Anyhow you were a Regular. Arms were your profession. It was, when all was said and done, what you were paid for. Feeling as you did, there was really no choice for you in the matter. By dint of firmness with the Medical Boards you had escaped with only ten days of the third (reserve) battalion, and had embarked without undue agitation. But now seeing how dreary the countryside appeared} and how the leaden skies were charged with rain, you began to wonder if you'd been right. Were you really strong enough to take up afresh the challenge of fear? How would this new wound affect

you? Could you do it when the time came?

Uneasily came back the grim warning of an Australian convalescing in the Northamptonshire home. "The pitcher that goes too often to the well-" he had said, and left it at that.

The cannonade thudded and rumbled. You hoped the attack would succeed. What really remained to any of us on this boat save hope? We were cannon fodder, destined to "fatten up" units for the slaughter. All that was left to us was hope-hope that this prodigious attack with its monstrous cannonade and fleets of tanks, would scarily the Boche defences and lead to victory. Listening to the gunfire it seemed impossible that the assault could fail. But just then, as if to show how impotent when up against the will of the gods must be the greatest efforts of humanity, a drop of rain hit you on the nose, the forerunner of four days' continuous downpour. In your trench coat you remained on the deck watching the leaden clouds piling up from the south-west. Do what you would to retain it, you could feel hope slowly ~scaping from your heart. Finally, with a shrug of the shoulders, you sought the cabin. The Australian had been right. The pitcher that goes too often to the well. [TX00793A]

### 1st August 1917

The 2nd Lincolnshire was not completely relieved by the Royal Berkshire till 04:00 on the 1st August, as the weather was very bad and the going very heavy. At 11:45 on the 1st the battalion was informed that it would be relieved by the Loyal North Lancashire, but, owing to the heavy going and the German shelling with heavy stuff for six hours after noon, it was not till 18:00 that the relief was complete.

The sections moved off they were relieved, and were directed to Pioneer Camp, whence they were sent on to Winnipeg Camp. Most of the battalion arrived there that night, but some stragglers only reported there the next morning. The Battalion diary says it was "not seriously engaged," but the tale of casualties was hardly light. The casualties included Lt Col Roland Haig.

*Officers. Died of Wounds:* 2nd-Lieut. J. C. Lee. *Wounded:* Lieut.-Colonel R. Haig, D.S.O. 2nd-Lieuts. W. C. Snelling, N. D. Bayley. *Other Ranks: Killed or Died of Wounds* 26. *Wounded* 107. *Missing* 15.

## Hazebrooke

### 2nd to 4th August 1917

Major Hanbury-Sparrow rejoined on the 3rd August to find the battalion bereft of leadership. He found himself promoted to Lt Col the next day and given command of the Battalion.

## Steenvoorde

### 5th to 14th August 1917

The Battalion moved from Winnipeg Camp in Hazebrooke by march and bus to the training ground at Steenvoorde. A and C Companies went to the Espla-

nade, Ypres, B and D to Bellewarde Ridge, and on the 15th the whole battalion moved to Westhoek Ridge to assembly positions for the attack on the next day.

The journey through Ypres brought back memories to Lt Col Sparrow:-

Three days after your arrival the brigade moved through Ypres. Such was the dread the very name aroused in you that you passed through it, so to speak, on tip-toe, fearful lest you should wake the Boche guns. The place stank of mustard gas. For the next two days the battalion was constantly exposed to its unpleasantness. But the transport officer, an ex-sergeant-major, defied it with an onion, whilst the rest of us sat before our interrupted meal goggling at him enviously through our gas masks. Here, before Ypres, could be seen tanks sinking into mud, shattered batteries, air fights, debris, and the crumping of Hell-fire Corner. [TX00793F]

Around the 6th the Divisional Commander, Major General ?, came to visit. No doubt he briefed Sparrow on the forthcoming attack.

Lt Col Sparrow:-

The divisional commander came round two or three days after your taking over. Having criticised the transport for not being up to standard (a French officer saw the divisional horse show about this time. "I see you've got new waggons," said he, pointing to some vehicles that had been out since 1914), he then asked if you were absolutely satisfied with all the officers. If not, let him know and he or they'd be removed. "The Doctor," you said, after some hesitation. "Make a note of it," said the General to his A.D.C. [TX00793C]

The doctor, a rough Australian, had not fitted well into the mess and was not regarded highly by the men:-

This doctor was an extraordinary creature. An Australian from Sydney, squat, round-headed, and excruciatingly common, he had been sent to every battalion in turn, to be rejected by each because of his impossibility as a messmate. Finally he found a somewhat precarious home in ours, for we treated him as a sort of pet. His uncouthness fascinated us; he was the only man, for instance, whom any of us had met who invariably helped himself to salt and mustard long before the beef arrived; "Aw, saw as to be ready," whilst his habit of blowing on his tea had earned him the name of "rude Boreas." [TX00793D]

One reason why we kept him was that we all dreaded meeting him farther back where we might be under his care for some time. As long as his duties were confined to the first dressings and trivial complaints of a battalion he was passable as an M.O., but we'd no confidence in his skill beyond that. He was all right only as long as we knew we should be out of his hands if we were bad. By the men he was loathed and mistrusted. This was another of his advantages, for his presence undoubtedly had the effect of keeping the sick rate down. There was one final advantage, that periodically he'd do something quite brave. Half clown and half criminal, wholly common, and wholly unique, good natured and merciless, immoral but trustworthy, stupid yet shrewd, he was a problem. Nevertheless he was the only man that might possibly be difficult and therefore you told the divisional commander what you did. [TX00793E]

That evening Sparrow was busy writing up the orders for the battalion:-

A week later you were writing out orders for an assault. You were now acting lieutenant-colonel, and at the age of twenty-five about to lead the second battalion into the furnace of the third battle of Ypres. The division had fought on the 31st. It was now under orders to resume its advance from Westhoek the moment the ground dried. You had the power to mar a victory. Perhaps also to make one. Yet though you paid lip service to the great responsibility, actually this side of the matter didn't worry you. For the noble art of war had degenerated by this time into little more than a technical science. The battalion's duties were so precisely defined, that the task of writing full orders required no more than a comprehensive knowledge of the stage to which tactics had developed. This you possessed, so as you wrote page after page of orders covering every conceivable detail, you were doing little more than assembling and winding up a clock. When you had completed the eight pages, you went with some pride to show the masterpiece to the Brigadier. "I don't want to see it," he said, "you're responsible for commanding your battalion, not I. I shall only judge on results." The Brigadier was one of the most lovable and stout-hearted men you had ever met. You had always liked him and for this you liked him more than ever. He knew that battles were won and lost by the valiance of troops, by the men. And their leaders, and that these orders were only so much eyewash. If things went wrong he wasn't going to let you escape responsibility by pleading he had passed your orders. He took the responsibility of accepting you as commander of a battalion, you were responsible for its leadership. [TX00793B]

The Adjutant, whom Sparrow refers to as Poster was a former Sergeant Major pointed out the flaw in the plan:-

Yes, the orders were eyewash. Technically they were as good as they could be, but, and this was the point, they would have done almost equally well for an attack on any other part of the front. All that would have been needed would have been an alteration of a few names and map references. Tactics, in fact, had become so rigid that you saw no object in risking your life by going up for a prior reconnaissance. A visit would reveal nothing that you couldn't get from maps and air-photos. The spirit of eyewash told you to go up; reason and experience informed you that it would be not only an unnecessary risk, but an utter waste of time, when time was rather precious. But eyewash, masquerading as conscientiousness, would probably have got you up had it not been that the very mention of the Salient sent a grim chill through your heart. You had not been there since 1914, but the tales you had always heard of its sordid mud and shell-fire had filled you with a grey apprehension and dread. Therefore because of this, you did not go up. Within their narrow framework the orders, you knew, were technically perfect. You had no need to worry on that score.

What, however, did worry you, was the part the Brigade and indeed the whole division had to play. It was Poster, ranker, sniper, and now, adjutant, who first put you up to it. "Polygon wood," he said, "dominates our right. It ought to be taken first, for unless it is captured, Jerry will not only enfilade us as we advance, but we shall never be able to hold our objectives even if we get them. He'll

shoot us down from there like as he did on the 31st. Then," he went on, "the division got the first two objectives, and captured Westhoek, but couldn't get the third, because the troops on the right had failed. It'll be the same this time, mark my words." [TX00793L]

Sparrow was impressed with Poster's analysis and put it to the General at a staff conference two days later:-

You were impressed with his arguments, so much so that meeting the G.O.C. and his G.S.O.i., you informed them of what Poster had said. Two days later the divisional commander, conferring with his C.O.s, whose age probably averaged under thirty, informed them that he had urged on the higher authorities the desirability of launching the attack on the high ground at least an hour before that of the Division; that his views had been overruled, and that therefore the attack must take place as directed, i.e. with zero at the same moment as that of the troops on the right. It was highly probable that the divisional commander's appreciation of the situation had been reached quite independently of anything Poster had said. Nevertheless you were extremely glad to be able to tell the latter that his point had been considered by the General. For you had great faith in Poster as a tactician. If his advice had been taken at Ovillers the left Brigade would never have incurred such appalling losses, and now if we were to be scuppered, it was at least something to know that the fault did not lie within the division. Yet what a tragedy it would be if this unit were to be cut to pieces through a mistake of the staff. Surely of all the fine units in France at this time, none surpassed that the command of which you had just taken over. In it your predecessor had left a weapon that was all even your exacting soul could desire. Its turn-out was faultless, its drill and training excellent, whilst the tone and morale of the men were more than good. Although it had lost on July 31st some two hundred casualties, including the C.O., yet these losses had done nothing to shake its confidence. Above all, there were the officers. Every one of the seniors had acquired through his valour and endurance the right to belong to the core of the battalion. Trench life had united all in very deep friendship with yourself. But chief amongst them was Archie. [Capt J A Cahill] His was a noble spirit and he was as fine a gentleman as could be met in all England. He was fast taking the place in your heart that old Reginald had once held.

Yet as tragedy would have it, almost the first thing you heard on rejoining was that Archie's nerves were at breaking point, and almost the next was Archie himself applying in the orderly room for his company to have the honour of leading the assault. You knew and he knew you knew, so therefore you answered, "Yes, thank you very much." When he had gone, Poster looked glum. "The late C.O. wasn't going to let him go over the top again," he said. You made no answer. How could you make it plain to such a man as Poster that for Archie's very soul's sake you had to let him go? This time. But never again, never again. But somehow you knew you would never get another opportunity. [TX00793M]

While at Steenevoorde the battalion were busily training for the forthcoming attack. 19 other ranks joined them on the 6th.

They were waiting for the ground to dry but it was a harrowing wait:-

By day we rested, whilst all night working parties were

out, and strings of pack animals passed up the corduroyed and constantly shelled road carrying ammunition to the guns. And all the while an incessant stream of casualties came back not only from the front line, but also, almost for the first time in the war, from the batteries. Smoke and explosion by day, flash and bang by night, the noise never stopped. Slowly the water seeped from the shell holes. The country dried up. The moment had come. [TX00793P]

## **Moving into Position**

### **15th August 1917**

At last on the evening of the 15th it was time to move into position:-

On the night of the 15th we moved up to the assembly positions for the attack.

That journey was a nightmare. It was so extraordinarily dark that, despite duckboard tracks and white tapes, the guides soon began peering about in agonising uncertainty. The battalion was moving in single file, and the leading company commander, keeping his head, took charge. You in the meanwhile were repenting bitterly your failure to undertake an earlier reconnaissance. Now, because of your ignorance of the ground, you must remain impotent whilst events were taking charge. Fortunately, most of the officers knew the ground fairly well. But worse was to follow. Stepping off the track you watched the battalion go past. The leading company plodded by, the men like links of a chain that, emerging out of the cavernous dark, clanked past once more into darkness. So the first company passed; so passed the first forty men of the second-and then, with a sickening horror, you realised the chain was snapped.

When eventually you found the rest of the battalion it was heading in the wrong direction. Its leader and broken link was Private Ailey. This Ailey had been the curse of the battalion for the past year and more. Feeble in body, he was still feebler in mind. Time and again the battalion had attempted to get him invalidated out, but the Medical Board firmly repulsed each attempt. Private Ailey, they declared, was fit, and now in consequence of Private Ailey's "fitness" the attack not merely of the battalion, but of the division and even of the army, was in jeopardy. For in so far as such a man can be held responsible for his actions the fault was wholly his. Too sub-normal to be able to keep up with the man in front, he had quietly lost touch, and such was the blackness of the night that not even his section commander, let alone the rear companies, realised what had happened.

You had discovered the break, but here your usefulness ended, for ignorance of the ground reduced you to impotency. Fortunately, the two rear company commanders - for the guides were almost as useless as yourself remembered the ground from the attack on the 31st, but the darkness, the shelling, and this interruption had so delayed the march that these companies only got into position with uncomfortably little to spare in the way of time. [TX00793G]

## **The Battle of Langemark**

### **16th August 1917**

The first objective was the road leading south-east from Zonnebeke along Glasgow spur, the second parallel to it

just east of the village, and the final objective was as far beyond the second as the second was beyond the first.

The Berkshire Battalion was to lead on a front of three companies (A, B, C), each in two waves of half-companies, with D mopping up, as far as Zonnebeke Redoubt, after which it would become the reserve company. When the first wave had taken the Iron Cross Redoubt, the second would pass through.

The siting of Battalion HQ had to be changed at the last minute.

Sparrow:-

Battalion headquarters had barely installed themselves in a line of deep shell holes when an officer of the battalion holding the position informed us we were on the line of the German barrage. He added that his battalion -which was to be our support had been reduced by four days in the line to under two hundred strong. Pausing no longer than the barest civility permitted to hear the tale of his casualties - though it boded ill for our attack - we hastened forward to seek a more salubrious spot. By your side moved a gunner subaltern, a boy in probably his first show, who had reported as liaison officer. He was brave enough, but in a state of nervous tension which he tried to disguise with jocular inquisitiveness. Knowing the brave show he was putting up against fear, you refrained from biting his head off, which was what you wanted to do. He followed into the better 'ole that you selected and continued his trying chatter, whilst the darkness grew less intense. Suddenly he discovered you were the C.O., and he was in the middle of some abject apologies when the barrage fell and his words were lost in tumult. [TX00793H]

It was 04:00 on the 16th when the battalion was formed up on tapes. At 04:45 the advance commenced, and little difficulty was experienced in getting forward beyond the marshy bed of the Hannebeke where the battalion was re-formed. About fifty prisoners had been taken so far. It now appeared that the troops on the right had not advanced as fast, and C Company on the right was deputed to guard this flank as A and B went forward.

The CO was now powerless to control events - it was all in the hands of his company commanders:

Sparrow:-

From that instant you lost all effective control of the battalion. Everything now depended on the company commanders and the men themselves. You had done all you could beforehand in the way of orders and training. Now you were in the position of a parliamentary candidate on election day, watching the voters going to the poll. Your work was before and after the assault. For the moment there was nothing to be done except wait.

For ten minutes or a quarter of an hour you lay in the shell hole amidst this cataract of steel. The Niagara of Vulcan! Drum fire! Field guns clattering like a racketsy Xylophone! Treble of Vickers! Bass of heavies. All merged into this roaring deluge in which the acrid air throbbled, pulsed, and vibrated, and in which men shook and shuddered. Flashes lost in the greying dawn! Black smoke, red smoke, grey smoke, white smoke, mustard gas and tear shell! Cascades of leaping earth, clods and

shards. A tension of nerves strained taut to ecstasy. Prisoners running, hands up, through the crashing shells, bleeding, as wounded Germans did, like stuck pigs, a bayonet man as escort.

Look to your watch! By the hour and these prisoners they've got the first objective. Advance Headquarters! Pick your way from shell hole to shell hole. Watch where the German shells are falling and pick the gaps in their wall of fire. Past an overturned pill box. Past stakes from which hang dismal jags of wire.

First halt, a concrete dug-out or pill box with three Bavarians, wounded, watching you curiously as you sample their brown sticky war bread. First reports from our wounded. Going all right. More running prisoners.

Advance again. Tumult's growing less. Down towards the Hanebeek brook. Four concrete shelters, shaped rather like small engine sheds, against a bank. Open ends towards the enemy and only protected by sandbags. More wounded Boches, stretcher cases, who put up their hands nervously as you enter. Not too good a place, but best we can find. Establish Headquarters here.

It's quite light. The devastated slope of Polygon Wood, some bare six hundred yards distant, dominates our right. It's clear the division on our right have completely failed to take it.

The barrage is over. Sailors talk of a lull in the centre of a tornado. Such was the feeling now. Stillness, eerie and ominous. Nothing much beyond counter battery work and musketry in front. A 4.5 howitzer starts sniping and lands one on the roof.

You have two liaison officers with Headquarters. One an infantryman of the next division; the other this gunner child. What a kid it is! It's a damned shame sending an inexperienced fellow like that for this job. How will you make him understand the situation, whatever it is? You're going up: the only thing to do is to take him with you, so that he can see for himself.

He, yourself, and an orderly set forth. Now the barrage has stopped, there's a lot of rifle and machine-gun sniping starting from the fastness of Polygon Wood. There are more than a few living stragglers from the next Division skulking in shell holes, not only right behind your battalion, where they've no business to be, but right behind even the first objective. Sure signs, you say to yourself, of bad discipline. You perceive that the battalion to which they belong hasn't "gone," and in consequence your right is jeopardised worse than ever. Facing the front of this next battalion is a line of pill boxes flying the white flag, some of which are hauled in as you are walking along. [TX00793J]

After this the battalion was under a heavy machine-gun enfilading fire from Nonne Boschen and Polygon Woods on its right flank. The greater part of Iron Cross Redoubt and the defences north of it were captured, with another fifty prisoners. The right had suffered severely and was now held up, and the Irish Rifles on the left were not up with the left company which, under Captain Cahill, had got in places on to the green line, still far behind the first objective. A line of small posts was now formed, but, owing to casualties and heavy fire from the right flank, and even the right rear, the line was now very weak. This line was on the crest north of Polygon Wood.

The problem of Polygon Wood was becoming apparent: Sparrow-

The sniping is getting worse. Bullets are flying very close to your own small party. The boy by your side is becoming maddeningly jocular as he hurries along at your right hand till you could almost murder him. Crack! a bullet's straight past your head. Ough! The boy spins like a top and falls holding his side. You can see at once that he's a goner; there's nothing to be done except leave him. But he's still alive and his eyes turn their ghastly reproach upon you. "Why," they seem to ask, "did you take me forward? I'm only the artillery liaison officer?" When you see eyes like that you doubt there being a Resurrection. Surely he must know who has such a short time to live? "It's not my fault," you want to cry, "I'm only trying to do my duty," but aloud you call up a skulking straggler whose head you perceive peeping out of a shell hole and bid him stay with the dying boy. Then you and your orderly hurry over the Hanebeke.

A thought struck you. You pulled out your map. Yes, you must have come over these very fields when you attacked with the first battalion in 1914. Absit omen. [TX00793K]

The next few hours are crucial. Hanbury-Sparrow tries to assess the situation but he is under constant fire and wishes that Posters advice had been heeded and that Polygon Wood had been captured before the main assault started. Sparrow:-

A MACHINE-GUN hidden amongst the craters of Polygon Wood is sniping at all who, like yourself and the orderly, are on the move. Even in falling into a shell hole to dodge its attention you perceive four successive bullets strike the ground, flick o' dust - flick o' dust - flick o' dust, the fourth on the edge of the shell hole, the fifth cracking over the spine'. Let its firer think he's got you, as in truth he nearly did. By the time you stop playing "possum" his attention has been diverted elsewhere and you push on up the rise unshot at.

Aeroplanes are droning in the hazy sky, shooting and swooping with a watery roar; the heavies cough and thunder, whilst the musketry ahead is stinging the tension that lies taut over the battlefield. The tension can be felt in the atmosphere, tight stretched like a toy balloon. We breathe in air; without it we die. We breathe it out and with it the waste carbon of the blood-stream. But do we not also breathe out something of our emotions, of our hates and loves, and -on the battlefield- of our inner conflicts? Why not, when oxygen is taken up by the blood-stream and discharged again as carbon dioxide? Thoughts affect the blood-stream-who would blush save for a thought, and must a man not perceive or at least imagine before he loves? But go one stage farther. If the air we breathe out may contain our emotions, may we not breathe in the emotions of other people? Is this the cause of crowd psychology, of panics, straining tensions, of grand fears? What is of the blood is below our highest soul. Therefore the thoughts we breathe out are below our highest self, for they have been through the blood. Therefore mobs are cruel and savage, far below the individual, and only to be controlled by law and discipline. That's the difference between a good and a bad battalion, this mastery of the blood. Ahead, your own men, properly disciplined; behind, on the right, victims of the blood.

Suddenly voices cry out from shell holes, "Look out, Sir!" "Keep your head down, Sir!" "They're just the other side,

Sir!" You're amongst your own men. "Where's an officer?" you shout. There's no answer. At last you find one, a subaltern, the commander of a company. Squatting together in a shell hole he tells you what he knows. On the left Archie's been killed, storming the redoubt. We've got all our objectives there, thanks to him and his men. But on the right the line has had to curve back almost to the starting point, for the Londoners, save for their left company that rushed forward diagonally behind us, never left their trenches. The subaltern is very bitter, for, according to him, the Germans opposite them were not attempting to resist, the pill boxes were actually flying the white flag as you had seen. Immediately on crossing the Hanebeke the company commanders had met and arranged to form a defensive flank, and had used up one of the support companies for that purpose. But, because the battalion had had to take on this extra five hundred yards of defensive flank, the line was very thin, casualties were growing rapidly for the enemy dominated the position from Polygon Wood - there was hardly an officer left) and ammunition was being used up very fast.

Immediately on receipt of this information you hurried back. It was absolutely essential to get up supports quickly if the position was to be held, for the situation was obviously very bad. Actually it was worse than you thought, for much the same sort of thing had happened on the divisional left. The division, in fact, was like a wedge driven deep into the enemy territory with its foremost troops at least a thousand yards ahead of the brigades on either flank.

On the way back you pass the gunner boy. He's dead and the straggler has disappeared. Pausing only to remove his wrist watch and pocket book as a memento for his parents, you hurry back to Headquarters. Ring up Brigade, "Owing to the failure of the attack on the right." "What?" "Owing to the failure, etc." You're first with the news.

The single 4.5 howitzer lands another shell just outside.

You explain the situation to the infantry liaison officer - a subaltern perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three years old. A shell hits the roof. "I want you," you say, "to find your C.O. and tell him what's happened." Then you turn to give some directions to Poster. On looking round again you are surprised to find the liaison officer still in the shelter. Again a shell pitches just outside. "In a minute, Sir," he says. You start eating some food. A shell - they are falling every two or three minutes - pitches just beyond the sandbags that protect the entrance. Anxiously we wait for the next. We talk with strained ears, breaking off in the middle of a word to listen for the direction of each "whoolorig" shell; and then the rest of the sentence, dammed for the moment by the tension, breaks through in a hurry so that the last word finishes on time. Seconds grow to minutes and still no shell from our particular enemy. The liaison officer has taken the glass out of his wrist watch and is cleaning it. Really this is too much. "You've got to go, you know," you command. It's necessary, absolutely necessary. There might be two opinions about the gunner, in fact, you're beginning to think you were wrong to take him up. But this fellow-well it's what he's here for. "Go," you order. There's been no shell for five minutes and more.

He goes. The same instant a four-five bursts on the sandbags. As Poster, dazed by the explosion, falls into your arms, you catch sight of the liaison officer bent double, running - or falling. When, relieved to find your adjutant is unwounded, you look out, the liaison officer is

two yards the other side of the breast-work-dead. His hesitation was almost certainly due to presentiment.

The same shell bolted a group of signallers from the next compartment. Their defection did you good service, for the observer of the howitzer, evidently thinking he had cleared out the place, ceased firing. Of course it was all wrong these men going, but on the other hand you were not at all sure that you yourself were right in staying. Not sure enough, anyhow, to possess the moral force to compel them to return. You had been directly responsible for the deaths of two liaison officers, and realisation of this had momentarily shaken a will already numbed by the terror of this sniping howitzer. Your mood approached that of oriental fatalism. With your now much depleted headquarters-for some of its details had never received the original order to change position and so had been caught in the barrage-you awaited what might befall.

You were impotent. Unless reinforcements arrived you could do nothing. Marlborough "Inspired repulsed battalions to engage and taught the doubtful battle where to rage," - but then he did it from the only place where such deeds can be done-in front. Forward though your headquarters were, it was idle to pretend you were taking charge. You were simply a passenger waiting on events. All four companies had by brigade orders been thrown into the attack. Consequently you had no reserves. But even if you had, what could you do with them? One had only to listen to the rapidly rising musketry to realise that the enemy were fast gaining superiority of fire. Troops reinforcing the front line would lose half their strength getting there. We were pinned to the ground. Where you were you were practically useless. On the other hand it was not your job as C.O. to be up with the assault companies.. Here was a microcosm of the problem of command. It was the problem that assailed every formation from battalion to far-back G.H.Q. It was a problem that was never solved. [TX00794A]

By 08:00 the losses were telling. Hanbury-Sparrow was keenly aware that unless reinforcements came he would have difficulty in holding their position against a counter-attack. He felt he should be right up front to stiffen morale:-

Nevertheless you'd have given something to have some men under you. It was obvious that a crisis was blowing up. From behind Westhoek ridge our machine-guns were going hard, from which you deduced a strong counter-attack was taking place somewhere round the corner. Away on your right, on the Polygon Wood ridge that should have been stormed by the Londoners, large numbers of Germans were collecting. Get the gunners on to them we could not. The telephone line was cut, the liaison officer dead, and runner after runner failed to get results. At this time (8 a.m.), though you didn't realise it, your battalion was being attacked not only on the front, but on both flanks. Yet the attacks were not heavy. As the survivors said afterwards, they could have held them if there'd been any officers. But there weren't. Only one was left and he was wounded. Where you should have been was in front. You were useless where you were. Up in front you might have done something to hold the morale that, like the gas from the ill-starred R 101, was leaking away under the fret-fret-fretting of these incessant attacks. [TX00794B]

At 09:30 the tempo of the battle increased. By now the Brigadier had joined Sparrow

The first plunge -to continue the metaphor- came at 9.30. There came a sudden increase in the tempo of the fighting, the rattle of machine-guns and the scream of shells. Next moment khaki followed by grey was scurrying down the slope towards the Hanebeek, shells bursting among them. One pitched along two men; one fell, the other bent over him for a moment, and then ran on. Death! How incredible it is!

The Brigadier was up in your headquarters when it happened, discussing the future employment of two companies of the support battalion. Together they were only twenty strong, small help, but better than nothing. Hearing the confusion we both leaped to our feet. "Shoot at the Germans!" cried the Brigadier, himself picking up a Boche automatic rifle with a belt of cartridges deliberately twisted to jam it. Then, apologising for the need for haste, and followed by his staff officer, he stumps off to stop the rout on the right.

The structure of the battlefield swoops, plunges, all but crashes. Breathless moments, frantic exertions in a typhoon of confusion. With a straining shudder it rights itself on to an even keel. It's been a near go.

When at last you can look about) the situation is this: Poster, yourself, and about sixty men of the four units of the brigade are holding an aged breast-work some fifty yards behind your just evacuated headquarters. The parapet, a relic probably of 1914, is so weather-worn as to be barely bullet-proof. It has no parados or back. You're facing south-east. On the left the line bends round to the east) but who's there or in what strength you cannot tell, for the lie of the ground blinkers the view. On the right the position is echeloned back to face east. Some sixty men of your battalion under the wounded officer are there in the low ground behind another old breast-work. Beyond them the remains of the next Brigade are facing south-east and looking towards the high ground of Nonne Boschen Wood and Inverness Copse.

Behind the breast-work lie four dead men, all hit in the head. A machine-gun had raked the parapet. Once again you could see the physical impossibility of holding a trench against good rifle fire. To save casualties and ammunition you give the order that none except marksmen are to fire.

A curious lull falls over the field. The enemy are reorganising. There is scarcely a shot being fired. So quiet is it that you are able to return to your late headquarters and rescue a despatch book that has been left behind in the rush. The wounded Boches hurriedly put up their hands on seeing you again. On the way back you are able to collect the ammunition off a couple of dead men, for there are only sixty rounds a man left - none too much judging by the rate we got through it just now. On one point you're firmly decided. If anything goes short it shall be the Lewis gun. You always considered them useless ammunition eaters. After what you've just seen you're sure of it.

You have lost all sense of time. Each shell that falls is one nearer the end of the war and improves by some infinitely small amount the odds on your coming through. They form the only clock that matters.

That howitzer that plagued us before is worrying us now, searching for the range. Otherwise the German artillery is suspiciously quiet. If it were not for the utter improbability of it, one would say that it had been crushed by our counter-battery work. To ease your nerves and give

confidence to the men, you pull out of your haversack a set of pocket chessmen and with Poster for an opponent, sit down at the back of the trench and play.

Poster knows little more than the moves, but even if he'd been better, it would not have been much of a game. Both of you are racked with anxiety. The moment that howitzer gets on us we're done, for the breast-work is practically useless, lacking as it does any kind of parados. The Boche has only to pitch a dozen shells just over it to get us all in the back. But hold it we must, for morale is too precarious to risk a rearward movement to a safer position. Such an adjustment might well set the whole line in retreat. We're doomed men and we know it. We haven't a hope in hell of coming out alive.

Who's behind us? "I take your Bishop." Is anybody? "You can't move into check." Now you come to think of it there's nobody except this shattered division between Westhoek and Ypres. If we go -"stupid of me, I didn't see that move by your knight"-the Boche will be able to capture the whole of our artillery. He's in a position to achieve -bang! from the howitzer - a really decisive victory. Bang! "Thank you, I take your castle." What an anti-climax! Serve Gough right; he's lost the whole of my battalion for me. Oh these cavalry generals! [TX00794C]

At 10:30 a strong counter-attack was launched by the Germans from the E.S.E. and against the front. Exactly what happened in this is unknown, but the result was that the line was driven back to the west of the Hannebeke, where the battalion had assembled in the early morning. The German attack stopped at the Iron Cross Redoubt, but the losses of the Royal Berkshire had been so heavy that Lieut.-Colonel Hanbury-Sparrow's report says that there were only left four officers (one wounded) and about one hundred men. The units were much mixed up, and this figure probably presents the number available for formation.

Sparrow:-

"Another attack starting," shouts one of the men. You look up. Long lines of widely extended troops are moving down from Polygon Wood about nine hundred yards away. Their main strength seems to be directly opposite your front. The adjacent Brigade are making a fearful noise with rifles and Lewis guns. Reflecting that they'll soon have no ammunition left if they go on like that, and so put you in the cart worse than ever, you tell your snipers to slow down the advance and return to your chess. For you have previously decided at what point you will try to crush the attack by fire, and if that fails where you will charge. There is nothing therefore to be done till matters develop further. Behind, our machineguns are firing thousands of rounds, at first you suppose at this attack, but after a while you realise it can't be. There's evidently another attack on the left which you are unable to see.

But the Germans on your front are very sticky. The attack has been on now for half an hour and they have advanced barely three hundred yards. But they're in large numbers. The shell holes on the bank must be full of them. What are they waiting for? Obviously, their guns. The moment this howitzer gets the range, Lord knows what won't open. Certainly all their machine-guns and rifles. That'll be the signal for them to push the attack and then-moriturus salutant. Think what a single traverse with a machine-gun did just now.

With a crash a shell fell straight into the trench, knocking out several men. Without a word to Poster you snapped up the chess board and both went towards the breast-work.

It had come. You were for it. The end couldn't be far away now. Well, you had had a long run for your money. Resigned to death? Yes, but not so much as to prevent you loathing the thought.

Between the time your foot rose and fell, it came, the sudden, overwhelming knowledge that whatever happened in the trench you were not going to be killed. A load fell from your mind. The absolute certainty completely transformed your mood. This was no wave of optimism: this was knowledge. Buoyantly you went to the breast-work, and seizing a rifle shot down two or the enemy at six hundred yards and made a third skip for his life. You didn't care what happened to the rest of the Army. You were going to come through. Nothing else mattered.

Peculiar and unaccountable as was the cause of this sudden transition of mood, yet you would probably have attempted to attribute to it some rational explanation but for the course the battle proceeded to take. For just when it had us absolutely taped that howitzer stopped firing. That single shell that fell in the trench was the last it fired in our direction. But even that you would have been inclined to credit to pure coincidence if the general progress of the counter-attack had allowed such a supposition. Yet here again something was holding it back for no apparent reason-on your front; on your front alone as far as you could judge. For from the back of the Westhoek ridge the divisional machine-gun companies were keeping up a continual fire which-later on you discovered - barely sufficed to stop a heavy attack. At the moment, however, the ground prevented you seeing what was going on on that flank. But the right you could see, and whatever was happening on the left, there was no doubt about a counter-attack on the right. If noise could have held it off the troops there would have stopped it, for every rifle and Lewis gun was firing its hardest, though the enemy were still a considerable distance away. But on your front the counter-stroke, slipping forward from shell hole to shell hole, was being braked by the slow fire of your marksmen. We had used up our last S.O.S. signals in vain efforts to get the gunners on to this attack. It was, incidentally, as well we did fail, for the artillery, under the impression we were right back on our starting point, had got their barrage line over the very trench we were in and we'd have been exterminated if they had fired. Except for the unobserved fire of a few heavies the enemy had nothing against them except the fire of your snipers. Whatever the musketry experts at Hythe might teach, the experience of this day convinced you that at ranges of over six hundred yards the only effective shooting was that of individuals. The collective fire on the right was useless. Side by side the two methods, Hythe and anti-Hythe, were being demonstrated under your eyes, and anti-Hythe had it every time, if it were only bullets that were holding back the Bache.

The German skirmishers, darting diagonally from shell hole to shell hole, were now reaching the bottom of the slope. One got behind an old beet tump. His head peeped two or three times round the side. Your eye was on him; you meant to get him. Suddenly he made a dash. You fired and missed. Putting the rifle to one side, you pulled a book out of your haversack and sat down at the

back of the trench to read.

Several reasons prompted you to this course. In the first place the crisis could not now be long deferred, and to meet it you would have to be fighting as an officer and not as a private. In the second, it must be admitted that you were still so sceptical of the validity of your "certainty," that you were not going to risk that machine gun. It had been strangely silent ever since it had swept the parapet and killed those four men. The moment the Boches had worked sufficiently close it was certain to re-open, and so you decided to remove your head out of its line of fire whilst you could do so with dignity. Therefore you opened this book of Francis Bacon's Essays. So imperative did you feel the need to solve life's problems that you had put it in your haversack in preference to Handley Cross or the Pickwick Papers, the two volumes you usually carried. But the essays were poor fare for such an occasion, and you heartily wished you could immerse yourself in the great run on the "Cut and Custard Pot" day.

In the trench there lay a young sergeant of another unit, hit in the rump. Though he never complained, it was easy to see that he was becoming very nervous of being abandoned as a prisoner. He made one effort to crawl away, but his wound, foul with dirt, prevented him. Seeing his plight, Poster, who was looking through his glasses towards the right with obviously increasing anxiety, sent a runner for stretcher-bearers. They came, and with them, trotting behind, the doctor. "Well done, Doctor, you've saved your bacon. For this you can stop with the battalion as long as you like," and you made a mental note to tell the divisional commander so, if, which seemed most doubtful, you got out of this alive. For you were still disinclined to credit the validity of your psychic experience. Scepticism fought against the facts.

The sergeant removed, you struggled along with Bacon. In grim resolution you set yourself to study the first of moderns, regardless of the black storm-clouds piling up on either flank. The bitter wind was whistling through the forest and the trees were dragging their roots in the blood-soaked earth. Yet you were certain there'd be some warning before the real crisis was reached. [TX00794D]

The correspondent of the Morning Post wrote:-

Again, as on the first day of the battle the men exercised their initiative in emergencies and did not rely blindly on others for help. Again there were instances of privates commanding companies when all the officers and non-commissioned officers had been killed or wounded. A wounded officer whom I saw last evening at a dressing station told me that as he advanced with his men to attack a fortified farm, a private - he thought he was one of the Berkshires - came up to him, saluted and said "I have some men with me sir, all my officers are out of action; can we join you" "I'm afraid I can't look after you" replied the officer "you had better carry on" "very good sir" replied the private and he disappeared in the smoke with his handful of men.

At 15:00 another German attack developed from the south-east and from Nonne Boschen Wood and Zonnebeke Redoubt. The attack progressed slowly in face of the British heavy artillery now firing, but by 17:30. it was within six hundred yards of the brigade front. Owing to shortage of ammunition, firing by the British had to be much limited.

At this juncture the division on the right retired in some disorder, exposing the right of the 8th, whilst the left had already been left in the air, owing to the retirement of troops on that side. There were now only sixty Berkshire and twenty Lincolnshire men available to form a defensive flank, on the right facing west, to cover the retirement which had to be made.

You were wrong. The crash when it came was catastrophically sudden. The troops on the right, collecting their last rounds for one final drum of the Lewis gun, fired it and bolted. Almost every division had its "off" day. This was theirs. There was a cry, "They're away," and before you could collect your wits or take charge, Poster had shouted, "Get back," and half the men were off. You'd been caught napping badly. With the suddenness of a felled chimney stack the front collapsed into dusty ruin. Startled and dismayed, you watched the men swarming up the bank to Westhoek. A threat against the flanks rouses all the primitive instincts of fear. Men who will stand face to face with any odds are shattered by the most trivial threats to their communications. Such was now the case. Yet, said experience, coming to your rescue, having to run uphill, their panic, such as it was, could only be short lived, and anyhow, if Poster hadn't given the order, you'd have had to have given it. Once out of breath you'd easily get them again under control.

Insolently contemptuous, you deliberately let them get ahead and followed at your leisure. Not a shot came near you.

Breathless troops behind the outer defences of Westhoek, huddled, panting. Something that isn't you sorting them out, swift, pitying; something that is you, self satisfied, self-confident, swaggering, contemptuous, mind ice-cold, body streaming with sweat, filthy. German aeroplanes swooping triumphant, low, masters of the air; ours twirling like falling sycamore leaves, smash, crash, and flame. Bullets cracking, shells screaming, banging, clanging; splinters whirring and whistling; dynamic intensity, drawing men out of the earth element; terror and ecstasy alternating in broken rhythm; puzzled death leaping into men's eyes. Brigade headquarters - a ruined cottage concreted within, close behind. Run there to report. "Where's the Brigadier?" "The Brigadier," replies the young signal officer, "is in the front line - and that's where you'd better be-Oh! I'm sorry, Sir," suddenly recognising you through your dirt.

Yes, the Brigadier's out on the right with the personnel of his headquarters, holding the line, rallying the troops there, winning the V.C. On that flank the situation is beyond measure critical. Swooping and plunging, pitching and diving, whirling and swaying like a kite in a whirlwind, morale all but crashes. But the Brigadier is there, fearlessly stumping through the storm of steel, reanimating with his own invincible spirit the hearts of the collapsed troops, strengthening them with his last reinforcements. Through him the ridge is saved. Through him the red flags of courage once more flaunt the gale.

So much for the right. But what of us? Can we hold Westhoek? How long will it be before a fresh division can arrive? "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon." Oh, Mockery! Mockery! Set, set quickly, oh, sun, that's what we want, so that we can be relieved. For we're done, drained of all our moral forces. Try as we will to resist, our exhausted wills are giving in way to the ceaseless pull of fear.

Suspense! Two more counter-strokes on the left wiped out by guns and machine-guns. None come your way. Then just before dusk our guns let fall the most terrific barrage. Where's the enemy? You haven't an idea, nor has your companion, the C.O. of the reserve Battalion. All you can do is to grin unhappily and uneasily at each other through the tumult, whilst the enemy, massing for their decisive stroke, are annihilated.

Then comes the night, smelly with mustard gas. That morning we attacked upwards of four hundred strong. That night eighty of us file out into support, and we have left behind scarce one unwounded prisoner. Eighty of us! But that's better than the battalion that attacked alongside our left. - Their strength is sixty.

But what would ours have been if you yourself hadn't been so wonderfully protected? That's what you kept thinking. How did you know you were not going to be killed? Why did the howitzer stop firing? What held back the Germans? [TX00794E]

No other German attacks took place and the battalion, on being relieved by the 2nd Northamptonshire, went into reserve on Bellewaarde Ridge. was reorganized as soon as possible in four platoons, the strongest of which was about thirty men. The fighting strength of the battalion was now only three officers and one hundred and fifteen other ranks. It had behaved very well, but had lost terribly. In the first retirement a considerable number of wounded, including at least one officer, had to be left behind fall into the enemy's hands. The battalion claims to have brought down least one German aeroplane by rifle fire.

The following appeared in the Berkshire Chronicle of 24/5/1918:-

CAVERSHAM MAN HONOURED - Sergt Neale Royal Berks, who is wounded, received his Military Medal at Knutsford from General Sir William Pitcairn Campbell at a sale of work consisting of articles made by wounded soldiers. The General read the following record :- "Sergt (then Lance Corporal) Neale, during the attack launched against the enemy on Passchendaele Ridge on August 16th, showed great courage and disregard for the enemy in leading his men through a heavy barrage of shell and machine gun fire, and when the objective was reached, although detached from his battalion, with two men consolidated an isolated position under troublesome rifle fire kept up by the enemy and having captured a machine gun in the post, used it with great coolness and deliberation to frustrate the enemy's endeavours to regain the captured position. Although his two comrades were wounded and he was slightly wounded himself in the forearm he carried on for two hours the defence of his isolated post. Three attempts were made by the enemy to regain the lost position and each one failed with losses and after reinforcements arrived he carefully bandaged his two wounded comrades and brought them back to a position of safety where they received medical aid. He was given the two stripes on coming in." [TX00574]

The Colonel was happy with the performance of his men if not with the outcome. Sparrow:-

I received one or two letters from wounded officers after this show. They were all to say the same thing, the men had gone magnificently. [TX00793R]

The casualties on this day were:

**Officers. Killed (2):** Capts. J. A. Cahill, M.C., H. E. Howse. **Wounded (7):** Capts. J. B. M. Young, E. G. Hales. 2nd-Lieuts. W. A. Grove, E. W. H. Cabespine, M.W. West, W. J. Phillips, H. A. V. Wait. **Missiug (5):** 2nd-Lieuts. S. M. Loundan, A. E. Mills, E.L. Thompson, A. E. Berry, G. R. Threlfall. (The last three were afterwards reported as prisoners-of-war and 2nd-Lieut. Mills as killed.) **Other Ranks: Killed or Died of Wounds 24. Wounded 223. Missing 120. total: Officers 14; Other Ranks 367.**

The battalion report read:-

On the night of the 15/16th August 1917 the Battalion moved up into the line, proceeding in single file. Owing to the darkness of the night and the difficult nature of the ground considerable difficulty was experienced in keeping touch and finding direction.

The Battalion was not formed up on tapes until 4.0.a.m. Up to this period the Battalion suffered very light casualties in spite of considerable hostile shelling.

The assault on the Green Line commenced at 4.45. and the ground east of the Hannebeke fell into our hands without great difficulty. About 50 prisoners being captured.

The Hannebeke was crossed and the Battalion was reformed. It was realised by the Officers on the spot that the attack on the Right had made little, if any progress, and the Right Company ('C') took over the defence of the Right flank whilst the other two assaulting Companies continued the attack.

From this time onwards there was heavy enfiladed fire, M.G., from Nonne Bosschen and Polygon Wood.

When the barrage advance, the attack was continued and the greater part of Iron Cross Redoubt and the defences to the North of it fell into our hands, a further 50 prisoners being captured.

Our Right, after suffering heavy casualties, was held up by a Strong Point (Unlocated, possibly the Eastern Edge of Iron Cross Redoubt)

The Left Company, under Captain J A Cahill M.C. with a party of Londons captured Anzac which was strongly held and the Green Line was reached in certain places.

The Royal Irish Rifles was not quite up with our left. A line was formed of small posts running approximately J 3 d 3.9. through the N.W. corner of the Iron Cross Redoubt and down to J 2 c 6.1.

Touch was gained with troops on our right and left. There were a certain number of men on the forward edge of crest.

Owing to casualties this line was very weak and heavy sniping and machine gun fire made it impossible to re-organise, some fire coming even from our Right rear.

A weak Company of the Lincolns came up in Support. Battalion H.Q. was established in concrete dugouts at J 2 c 8.6.

About 9.30.am. Germans were noticed forming up on the high ground in Polygon and at 10.30.a.m. a strong counter attack commenced, the enemy advancing on our front and from E.S.E. It is extremely hard to make out

what happened on our front as no really reliable witnesses survive.

Our casualties on the crest of the Ridge had been very heavy and the Germans attacked in great force. According to the accounts of two men they appeared to come from a tunnel behind Anzac.

The enemy suffered considerable casualties but our front was driven in and the Division on our right appeared to have given way.

The troops were rallied by Brigadier General C Coffin DSO. West of Hannebeke posts were established in an old trench at J 2 d 8.5. and also at J 2 d 8.2.. A Post of the 1st Londons was in echelon on our right and touch was gained with troops on our left. Units were completely mixed up.

The Battalion strength was 4 officers (one wounded) and 100 men.

The German attack stopped on gaining the Iron Cross Redoubt Line.

At 3.00.pm. Germans were noticed on the high ground in Polygon Wood and a pigeon message was dispatched asking for Artillery support.

At 3.30. the German advance commenced, there being apparently a Battalion coming down from this high ground in a North Westerly direction. Another attack started from Nonne Boschen Wood and from Zonnerbeke Redoubt.

The attack on our front made very slow progress.

At 4.30. a.m. heavy artillery commenced shelling the ridge causing considerable casualties.

About the same time the Brigade on our left were seen retiring.

At 5.30. the advanced troops of the attack on our front were within 600 yards where sniping was becoming very effective. Owing to shortage of ammunition no fir except sniping and occasional Lewis Gun Fire was allowed. This attack, in the opinion of those present, would have been comfortably repulsed but at this time the Division on our right was seen retiring in disorder, exposing our right Post to enfilade fire and ultimate destruction.

The left flank was already in the air and retirement became necessary. This was effected with very few casualties in spite of heavy M.G. fire.

A Line was organised along Concrete Dugouts from J 8 a 9.8. to J 8 a 4.6.

As the Division on our Right has last been seen retiring on Westhoek it was anticipated that the right would be held by them, this however was shortly found not to be the case.

All the Royal Berkshires immediately available (60) and about 20 Lincolns moved to the right and formed a defensive flank facing west.

Touch was reported with the Londons, this information proved to be inaccurate and there was a considerable gap in the line which was ultimately filled in by two Companies of the 2nd Northamptons.

No further German attack took place and the Battalion was relieved by the Northamptons and went into Reserve on the Bellewaarde Ridge. As soon as possible the Battalion was reorganised into 4 platoons and Headquarters, the strongest platoon being approximately 30.

The fighting strength of the Battalion was 3 Officers and 115 men.

The conduct of the Battalion was very good

When the first retirement took place a considerable number of wounded, including at least one Officer, had to be abandoned and fell into the hands of the German.

In addition at least one German Aeroplane was brought down by our Rifle Fire.

20-8-1917 A A Hanbury-Sparrow, Lt. Col. Commanding  
2nd R.Berks. [TX001062]

## Westhoek Ridge

17th August 1917

The next day the Battalion was holding Westhoek Ridge but there were not enough men to offer a proper defence. Hanbury Sparrow tried to get the padre to command one half of the battalion. Eventually he agreed but refused to carry any weapons:-

Sparrow:-

THE aftermath of this battle witnessed an episode that occupied a good deal of your time and thought both then and later. This was an argument with the padre, as to whether or not he should command part of the battalion. What was left of your command the following day was in support on the Belleward ridge, a bare half-mile behind Westhoek. It was organised in four weak platoons, and you wanted the padre to take command of two of them. For the men were in that exhausted state in which they just might follow an officer where they wouldn't follow an N .C.O. The chaplain, good fellow that he was, had come up with the rations, and what was more, had elected to stay. He was a tall Australian who breathed through his nose with a curious whistling sound. Your own strained self had only to listen to the catch in its sibilance when shells were flying about to comprehend his nerves were in no better state than your own. But this wasn't the reason that made him refuse your request. It was because he thought it wrong for a parson to fight.

Now this was what you couldn't see. With your passionate longing for a philosophy that should cover all life's manifestations, there was something illogical and inconsistent in a uniformed and commissioned clergyman boggling over the actual fighting. If the war was right, fighting was right. That was your point. The situation didn't permit of half-shades. The war was either right or wrong. It was either a man's duty to fight for his country or it wasn't. What moral right had a parson to get out of it, when such a noble soul as Archie was lying dead in the German lines?

Stubbornly the padre held his ground, mercilessly you went for him. He had no arguments to answer yours) but yet you never doubted it was a matter of conscience and not fear that was holding him back. There was some reason, therefore, that he couldn't express in words. For the life of you you couldn't see his point. Strained almost to madness by the racketing of the previous day, you tore his defences down and drove your clumsy probes into him, savage to get at what was holding him back. Brutal obstinacy alone made you keep it up, for quite early on you had realised your original scheme wouldn't do. It wasn't fair on the men to officer them with a militarily untrained chaplain, nor perhaps, on the troops you might

have to reinforce. Besides which, you might get into a row for doing it. Nevertheless, in nervous exasperation you continued arguing with him hour after hour in the candle-lit pill box that was your headquarters. Once a shell struck it so that it rocked; often they would burst close by, putting out the candles; occasionally whiffs of mustard gas would ooze in, and the argument would be interrupted whilst we watched each other through the glass eyepieces of our masks. Finally, at the close of one of these compulsory meditations the padre gave way. He would lead the men, he offered, if he didn't have to carry weapons; with which Pyrrhic victory you were glad to be content.

For, in truth, you had sufficient honesty to realise you hadn't come particularly well out of the discussion. Whilst he had seen your point, you had not only completely failed to see his, but had used the coarse self-evidence of your own to bully him. And as if to emphasise the utter futility of your behaviour a message came through that the battalion had been allotted twenty-one leave vacancies, who were to depart that evening. Owing to the casualties we had just experienced the padre was at the top of the officer-roster, so he and twenty men were detailed. Yet before the party left one of the twenty had been killed. The survivors, when the hour came for them to depart, left at a great pace, and indeed who'd blame them, for the Boche could not only observe our movements, but having built the pill box and dug the trench, knew to an inch our location. For their sakes you were glad to see the party go; for your own you were sorry. Indeed the line was being held so thinly and the supports were so meagre that you were surprised these men had been allowed to depart. Yet as you watched them disappearing into the setting sun you envied them from the bottom of your soul. For the full reaction of yesterday was upon you. Then you were taut like parchment; today you were limp as wet paper, shaken, not daring to move in the trench for fear of drawing these terrible shells. Whenever you lay down visions and scenes of the battle danced before your eyes. In the jargon of the time you "had the wind up proper." What saved you that night was the discovery in the pill box of John Buchan's Thirty-nine Steps. Some predecessor had left it there. Did its owner foresee the kindly deed he was doing? That night it was worth all the learned lucubrations of Francis Bacon. You devoured it from cover to cover, and when sleep came you forgot the bursting shells in dreams of brave men. [TX00792A]

That evening they were relieved by the Northants Regiment and moved back to Belleward Ridge.

## Halifax Camp

18th August 1917

The next day they were relieved by the 2nd Londons and proceeded to Halifax Camp.

## Caestre

19th to 26th August 1917

From Halifax Camp, on the 19th August, the battalion proceeded by bus to Caestre for training, where it remained till the 26th.

On the 21st they were inspected by the Commander in Chief, Field Marshall Douglas Haig. Hanbury-Sparrow was furious:-

Yet when two days later the Division paraded its shattered ranks before Sir Douglas Haig, there was a dull fury in your heart against Gough and the gilded staff of the Fifth Army; there was bitter contempt for the lordly A.D.C.s and rich red-tabbed commoners lurking in their safe billets; and there was a dark suspicion that in this testing time the upper class had failed. It had done nothing to justify its position. It was just a lot of snobbish public school boys, and Gough -you said to yourself between clenched teeth - was quite at home amongst them. Between the lot of them the British Army had just escaped the most humiliating and catastrophic defeat of its history. But what of the Field-Marshal who was inspecting the ranks with his air of grave serenity? What of him? All to whom he was introduced he looked straight in the face. Always it appeared as if he were about to speak) but all he did was to regard the person with his clear eyes as if he sought to imprint his face for ever on his memory, and then, shaking hands, would pass on; in silence, with his inscrutable gravity. Surely this man must see Gough as you saw him, outclassed by his task and heartily school-boyish? Yet such was the power of Sir Douglas) s demeanour that as your eyes followed him round the three-sided square of the division you began to have doubts of the rightness of your judgment about his general. But when you looked at the depleted battalions and thought how all these lives had been fruitlessly lost, your mood changed again. You didn't know what to think. You wobbled) mistrustful of Gough and mistrustful of your own judgment.

However, it was no good brooding about the Fifth Army staff, more especially when we were leaving their area to go to a quiet part of the line. Our own divisional staff was surely as efficient a body as any in France. Certainly the division was marvellously happy. How could it be otherwise when it was charged with the creative force of steel-hearted discipline? We were properly proud of our losses) jealous that no other division) not even the Guards or Australians, should stand up to greater. And truly we had the right to be proud) for it is no mean achievement to have crystallised into durable will the leaping, flickering flames of the human spirit, that of its own nature burn now wildly, now in sulky smoke. And we? Well, we had made a standard now below which we knew we should never fall, but above which we might rise to what heights? The fiery fierceness of the Australians? The indomitable resolution of the Canadians? The never-failing courage of the New Zealanders and the Guards? Nothing seemed too presumptuous to aim at. It was our ambition to be pulled out of the line as a storm division like the Highland Territorials, the 51st. Discipline had given us this life, this power, this hope, and that discipline was due to the iron resolution and-shall we say?-ambition of one man, the divisional commander. [TX00792B]

Also on the 21st 26 new men joined the battalion. Hanbury Sparrow reflected on how the army moulded men:-

Sometimes it frightened you, this terrific power that discipline held over modern man. We'd get our drafts of reluctant but sensible conscripts, and of returned wounded undergoing God alone knew what agonies of fear, and in a few weeks we'd turn them into troops as brave, if not as skilful, as any the battalion had ever had.

Once an officer knew the trick of it, it was all so terribly easy. Crime, which is a certain sign of discontent) was virtually non-existent. Perhaps a couple of cases a week would come up at C.O.'s orders) perhaps less, never more than a negligible number. Light-hearted as swollen Jordan tumbling to the Dead Sea we sang and joked and jested. The battalion even ran its own theatre, the Ephemeral, which the divisional commander attended. As long as we were not being acutely frightened we were happy. For death wasn't the enemy, any more than the Germans were the enemy. The real enemy was Terror; and all this heel-clicking, saluting, bright brass, and polish were our charms and incantations for keeping him at bay. And very effective they were. [TX00792C]

## **Canteen Corner**

**27th August to 10th September 1917**

On the 27th it moved to the II Anzac Corps area, where it was in camp in Divisional reserve at Canteen Corner till the 10th September.

During this period a trickle of men joined the battalion but more were sent off to hospital.

## **In the Line**

**11th to 19th September 1917**

On the 11th, when it again moved into front-line trenches it was still woefully weak so it was reorganized on the basis of two companies- A-B commanded by Captain J. A. Lowe, and C-D under Captain H. H. Flint, M.C. They relieved the 2nd Northhamptons. taking over the line from Halt Point to Yank Point.

They were so weak that they had to alternate the two merged companies with one in the front line and one in support.

Eventually they were relieved on the 19th by the 2nd Rifle Brigade and moved to Romarin Camp in Brigade Reserve.

## **Romarin Camp**

**19th to 27th September 1917**

Nothing notable occurred till the 27th September, when the 24th Brigade relieved the 25th, and the battalion went into Divisional reserve at Menegate Camp.

## **Lt Morris Joins the Battalion**

Lt Charles Edwin Morris who was formerly with the Indian Army joined the 2nd Royal Berks at Menegate Camp 3rd October 1917. He kept a diary of his short time with the battalion and the first part recalls him leaving England and travelling to join his new regiment: It covers the period from 23rd September.

*24th Sept*

Had last leave on 17<sup>th</sup> Sept to 23<sup>rd</sup> Sept 1917 and returned to Victoria Barracks late on Sunday night the 23<sup>rd</sup>. My servant Hillier was quite surprised to see me next

morning, Monday the 24<sup>th</sup>. I left Victoria Barracks at about 10 mins to 2 midday and caught the 2.25 from Portsmouth Town Station. At Fareham I met Robertson and we proceeded to Southampton and we arrived there about 4 o'clock and we reported to the R.T.O. about 4.30 at Southampton docks. Then we got leave out to the town and had some lunch. Saw many U.S.A. embark and disembark. We returned to our ship S.S. Londonderry at 6.45 but did not sail till 7.45. So I left England on the 24<sup>th</sup> Sept 1917 a Monday at 7.45 having only been with the Royal Berkshire Regt a fortnight – one week with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battn at Victoria Barracks at Portsmouth and the other week at Fort Gomer which is about 2 ½ miles west of Gosport, where I attended the Browndown Brigade revolver school under 2/Lt Cooper our instructor. We had an exceedingly smooth crossing. I slept sitting up on a seat in the saloon next to Robertson. It was absolutely packed fellows all about the floor. There were about 100 officers aboard and about 150 U.S.A. also a good number of British tommies.

25<sup>th</sup> Sept.

Arrived at Havre at 3.30 in the morning stayed on board till 7 o'clock, came off and went to the Officers club at 17 Rue Jules Ancel (put our watches on 1 hour as French time had not been changed yet) got to British Officers clup at 8.50 (new time) had breakfast, went for walk to railway station came back and wrote letter home and had lunch. Got back to railway station at 12.30 and entrained for Rouen. Left at 12.50 and arrived at Rouen at about 4.30 and arrived at the I.B.D. about 5. Saw Burne who left for the front at 9.10 went to bed early.

26/9/17

Got up at 7 had breakfast at 7.40 and was inoculated at 10.20. Slept most of the day.

27/9/17

Another slack day. Saw Robertson in evening. Slept most of the day.

28 Sept.

Parade at 8. Went to the Bull Ring about ½ mile south of the camp, did gas the whole day, went through the gas chamber. Saw Indian Cavalry camp. French Artillery manoeuvring about the Bull Ring in the afternoon. Went to cinema in Indian Cavalry camp in evening.

29<sup>th</sup> Sept Saturday.

Went to Bull Ring, did bayonet fighting all the morning and in the afternoon, musketry. In the evening I went to Ordnance and got some boots and then I had a good dinner at the Officers Club: When I got back to our camp I was up in orders for the front on Sunday tomorrow. French trams are very different from English ones in that you are allowed to crowd round the driver and conductors platforms and even allowed to stand on the buffers or any projecting part at the back of the tram. Saw quite a number of Cavalry Officers both English and Indian army.

30<sup>th</sup> Sept.

Did nothing in the morning. Fell in with my draft who came from the 6<sup>th</sup> I.B.D. (they were all in the 6<sup>th</sup> Somerset Light Infantry 98 in all. Half of them were untrained only having one day in the Infantry, they came from the Expeditionary Force canteen) on the parade ground. We marched to the Rive Gauche Gare in Rouen and the train left at 5 o'clock. I had a fine 1<sup>st</sup> class carriage. French 1<sup>st</sup>

class are just as good as English 1<sup>st</sup> class carriages. There were only three in our carriage – a fellow in the Duke of Cornwall's and the other in the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry. The train is going very slow and continuously stopping and then we all get out and wait until it starts again. It is not dangerous as the train only goes about 4 miles an hour. It is getting dark now so I will turn [sic].

8.15 I have had a good meal that my man Eaves of the 46<sup>th</sup> I.B.D. got for me, chocolate and french biscuits. I did not wake up again until 6.30 next morning.

1<sup>st</sup> October.

Woke at 6.30 in a little station called Savy Berlette. I think I was told that we had been near Albert and also Arras and St Pol. Heard the guns during the night. The country is very pretty although it is now getting very flat. The French kids stand along the line and when we pass they call out "bis-quee" (biscuits) and "Bully Bef" (bully beef) in a curious English accent. We are at present doing about 4 miles an hour (I am taking this draft to the 8<sup>th</sup> Corps). Got to Hazebrock [sic] at 12 o'clock midday but did not leave there till 10 mins past 2. In this time had a shave and wash. I also wrote five letters during the time I been in the train. We eventually left Hazebrock and arrived at Baileul [sic] at about 4.30 this is where we got out. I got my men out 118 in all 4 where [sic] missing and got my rations out. I found a guide and marched the men to their camp (14<sup>th</sup> Division) about 25 fell out and it was only 4 kilometres I reported at the camp at 6. Got back to Baileul in an ASC lorry. The Officers Club was full, went to town Major, got a chit for Hotel de la Gare and had a good night.

2<sup>nd</sup> Oct.

Got up at about 8 and had breakfast, had a fine omelette. Left there about 9 o'clock. Left Baileul station about 9.30 got to Steenwerck at 9.40, walked to 8<sup>th</sup> Division reinforcement camp and from there went to the Berkshire camp about 3 miles walk. Arrived about 11.10. Did not do anything today. Had fine semicircular hut very warm and comfortable. Nice comfortable bed made of wood and canvas. Good mess. Colonel a fine chap. Col A A H Sparrow DSO MC bar to the DSO. Capt Ayres my Coy Capt. Very fine chap. A Coy is my coy and No 4 Platoon is my platoon.

Subsequent quotes from his diary will illustrate his time with the battalion.

## Menegate Camp

27th September to 12th October 1917

25th Brigade had been relieved by 24th Brigade on the 27th September, the 2nd Royal Berks being relieved by ther 2nd Northampton. They went into 8th Division reserves at Menegate Camp.

Over the next two or three weeks a steady stream of reinforcements arrived, the largest party was 77 strong arriving 29th September. Most of the other parties were less than 10.

Lt Morris:-

Oct 3<sup>rd</sup> 1917

Parade at 9 o'clock till 12 and again from 2 to 3. The

Divisional General Heniker came to dinner. Maj Gen. Boxing and concert.

*Oct 4<sup>th</sup>.*

No parade today. General Coffin VC came to tea. Went to Lewis Gun lecture. Gen Coffin is our Brigadier, he has got the VC.

*5<sup>th</sup> Oct.*

Ordinary parades today. Did a little revolver firing today. Watched boxing. Bosche aeroplane came over the camp but did not drop anything.

*6<sup>th</sup> Oct.*

Ordinary parade in the morning. Went up the line tonight. Left camp at 6.15 by motor lorries and went to Nieppe, Point de Nieppe and Le Bizet (very ruined, and fine ruined church) to motor car corner. Then R.E. guide took us for a 3 ½ hour walk to no mans land and we widened a drain running in the river Lys from one of the strong posts. The ruins of Le Basse ville were just on our left about 300 yards away. Mr Hope Lumley was in charge and we got back to motor car corner at 2.30 there were no lorries and we had to walk all the way back to camp the men were quite done some of them and I carried one of their rifles. Lt. Lumley gave away all his cigarettes. We eventually arrived back at 5.10 in the morning. I had a good cold supper and went to bed at 6.40 and got up at 12. We covered about 8 miles.

*Oct 7<sup>th</sup>. Sunday.*

I got up at 12. We were warned for working party again, exactly the same thing as the night before only Lieut Hope Lumley did not come with me. Some whiz bangs came within 100 or 200 yards of me. They were also shelling Ploegsteert Wood and Hyde Park Corner tonight. We got lorries tonight and got back at 1.30, had hot dinner and got in bed by 2.30.

*Oct 8<sup>th</sup>.*

Ordinary parades. Went to Divisional cinema tent and saw a fairly good concert troupe. I went with Durnford.

*Oct 9<sup>th</sup>.*

Today I was transferred to "C" Coy, Capt Flint MC in command. No ordinary parades today but we had a special Battn Parade and General Henniker gave away many medals.

*10<sup>th</sup> Oct.*

No parade for me as "C" Coy was on working party. Colonel gave us a lecture preliminary to going into the trenches on Saturday. Great aerial activity in the evening many Bosche and English planes up over camp, good deal of firing but nothing happened. I put in for a regular commission.

*11<sup>th</sup> Oct.*

First day I paraded with "C" Coy we went on the range in the morning – in the afternoon I gave my platoon gas drill and P.T. Glenister of "A" Coy went on leave, the 6<sup>th</sup> he has had. Came out with the expeditionary force and has never been wounded and has been in nearly all the big battles – Mons, Marne, Aisne, I, II and 1917 battles of Ypres, Neuve Chappelle and Somme 1916, Delville Wood. Lieut R. Hope Lumley, 2/Lt Yeats and 2/Lt Durnford went on working party to Hyde Park Corner and Prowse Point. In the evening I went to the Divisional Cinema, all comic pictures including Charlie Chaplin. Colonel was at

Winchester School and at Sandhurst in 1910.

*Oct 12*

I awakened at 1.40 in the morning by Yeats and he told me that Lt. R. Hope Lumley had been killed and 4 men wounded and 1 missing of A Coy working party. He was hit in the head by a piece of shell which took off [sic] the back of his head so he died instantly. He was found just by the side of a shell hole. Everybody is very upset about as he was such a nice fellow – a real gentleman in every way. He was buried this afternoon at a British Cemetery near Steenwerck – I watched his body carried out of the camp on a stretcher. As I write this on my bed I can see all his belongings and equipment on his bed ready to be packed up – it's very sad indeed, and everybodys awfully sorry. He lived at Pangbourne on the Thames in his own cottage and I believe his wife and child live at St John's wood at present. I liked him immensely from the very moment I met him.

## In the Line

13th to 21st October 1917

25th Brigade were sent back into the line on the 13th October. The Royal Berks relieved the 2nd East Lancs on the left with the 2nd Lincs on the right. The Companies were arranged with B on the right, C on the left, D in support and A in reserve.. B and D swapped positions on the 14th. and A and C swapped on the 17th.

There was a steady trickle of casualties with some fatalities.

Lt Morris:-

*13<sup>th</sup> Oct Saturday.*

Left camp at about 2.30 and marched to Hyde Park Corner through Ploegsteert Wood to the trenches in front of Warneton. Got in the trenches about 10 o'clock. No shelling. We took over from the East Lancs Regt, I was in charge of HAY POST with 17 men, and we had a standing patrol of 7 out at night.

The night was intensely cold. There was a German pill box in front about 100 x away, also at night we put out a standing patrol about 40 x away of 6 men and a NCO. We had 8 men in the Hay Post also.

*14<sup>th</sup> October Sunday.*

On duty for 3 hours and off for 6. At about 5 in the afternoon the Bosh [sic] started a bombardment which lasted 14 hours, he knocked a lot of the trench in but strange to say there were no casualties. I did not mind the bombardment a bit in fact I was very interested in it. Nothing special happened today except Mr House of No. 10 Ptn took out a raiding patrol and had a look at Hock's wire and threw a few bombs into a German sap head. They all got back safely.

*15<sup>th</sup> Oct (Monday)*

Still have very cold nights – very white frost. However, I managed to keep fairly warm in my little splinter proof shelter which was 5 feet high 6' long and about 3' wide.

These are sketches (very difficult to understand, but I can make them out) to remind me what my first shelter was like in the trenches in France. There was a mackintosh sheet over the door and I always had two candles burning.

*16<sup>th</sup> Oct Tuesday.*

Our Regimental Sergeant Major was killed at Prowse Point today. He was a very nice fellow. Huns bombarded us tonight and killed two sergeants in B Coy and 5 men in D Coy. German aeroplane came over very low and fired all down our front line though we gave him a good reception but nothing happened. His aeroplanes are always over our lines but they don't usually stop long.

*17<sup>th</sup> October (Wednesday)*

When the Colonel came round this morning he told me to go and raid the pill box in front tonight. We were all very pleased at least I was. The Huns blew in our communications trench this afternoon but my little shelter missed it all right. Tonight our Coy is to be relieved and go into battalion support about a mile behind the line, but my platoon remain behind a few extra hours to do the raid. The relief was completed about 9.20 at night and we left at 9.50. Eleven men and myself. I had overalls on and a revolver and 30 rounds of ammunition, 1 mills bomb and my stiletto. The men had 3 bombs each and a rifle and bayonet and ammunition. We went out to the standing patrol and then continued on past them until we got to our wire. After a time we found a gap and got through, we did this three times until we eventually came to the Bosch wire which was about 10 x in front of the pill box. We could not find a way through the wire so we observed the pill box for a time and were satisfied it was not occupied. We then worked round their wire for a bit and eventually got back to Hay post at 11.35. We then went straight back to our right place in the reserve line which was just to the right of Messines on Messines Ridge. Our Coy Hd Qrs were in an old German pill box 4 feet of concrete, rather poky but very comfortable and warm. I got into bed at 2 o'clock feeling very tired.

*18<sup>th</sup> Oct Thursday.*

Got up at 5.30 for stand to. Had an excellent breakfast (Franks is our Coy cook and is frightfully good at his job). I then went for a stroll on the battlefield. We were about 1760 x behind the line to the right of Messines ridge about 1 mile away. It is now Oct and the Huns were driven from here 4 months ago. There were several pill boxes and dugouts of German make, a large German bomb dump in excellent order, German uniform and ammunition, old rifles, unexploded shells, trench mortars and many other things. In the afternoon I wrote letters and after stand to in the evening we had an excellent dinner from Franks (sweet omelette) again. I went to bed about 9 o'clock.

*19<sup>th</sup> Oct Friday.*

Stand to at 5 o'clock. General Heniker came round today with Col Beddington. He was very nice indeed. Today I got a note from Battrn Hd Qrs stating that I was to return to A Coy in the line. They had only 2 officers, Yates and Durnford. I left the reserve line with Carter my servant at 5.50 for the front line and got there by about 6.50 or 7 o'clock. A Coy occupied the same part of the line as C Coy did, When going out to the standing patrol a G.G. opened up fire at us. We got down quickly and missed it.

On the 20th October one platoon of D Company raided the enemy's trenches. A patrol sent out at 19:00 found a gap of six yards width in the German wire, and heard a working party about one hundred yards to the north.

The strength of the raiders, sent out at 03:55, was one officer and thirty-five other ranks and they were divided

into three parties- A, B, and C. The objectives were the infliction of loss and capture of prisoners. On entering the German trench A was to move northwards along it, C southwards, and D eastwards along a communication trench.

Starting with the barrage, the party reached the German wire, and found a line of shell holes connected up by covered passages. These were in front of thick wire, but no enemy was found in them. The party then passed through the six-yard gap, and entered into the German front-line trench, which they found empty. After a ten minutes' search, which discovered nothing of any use for identification, the party returned without any casualties.

They had not been fired on, though the Germans in the support trenches sent up flares. The front trench had been very badly damaged by the British artillery.

Lt Morris:-

*20<sup>th</sup> Oct Saturday.*

Stand to at 5 o'clock. Very cold and wet. Got several letters today quite bucked. Went back into support trench while our artillery cut the German wire, saw Burne there and stayed there all day. In the evening the raid took place. Lt Cooper of B Coy took the raid with about 30 men. Zero hour was at 3.55 in the morning. The Boshe got a hell of a straff from our artillery for about 1 hour then the barrage lifted and B Coy raided the trench. No one there, so the raid was really a failure although nobody was lost so as far as that it was alright.

## **Red Lodge**

**21st to 28th October**

On the 21st October they were relieved by the 1st Royal Irish Rifles and moved to Red Lodge in support.

100 ORs joined on the 23rd

Lt Morris was sent on a Lewis Gun course:-

*21<sup>st</sup> Oct Sunday.*

Today we are to be relieved from the trenches. I wrote several letters during the day. It was very quiet today and the bosch very inactive although we expected something after last night's raid. At about 1 o'clock I got a chit from the adjutant saying that I was for a Lewis Gun course at Le Touquet near Dieppe I think. So I left the line at 2 o'clock without going through a tedious relief. Got to and reported at Btn Hd Qrs at 3 o'clock, left there immediately for Red Lodge and there I saw the Quartermaster Capt Quick and I got on a G.S. limber and went on it to Le Romarin about 6 kilom away to our transport lines camp opposite Brigade Hd Qrs. I had tea at the officers mess there and then a message came through that the course was cancelled so I stopped and had dinner and then returned to Red Lodge and went to bed about 12 in my Coy dug out. I had to walk back from Romarin.

*22 Oct Monday.*

Got up at 8 went to Baths at Romarin got back at 1.30 had lovely warm bath and a lift on lorry each way. Wrote letters in afternoon, went to bed early.

*Tuesday 23 Oct.*

I was orderly officer today. The Colonel went on leave. No special work today.

*24 Wednesday Oct.*

Had another slack day. All I had to do was rifle and food inspection of my platoon and then issue rum. I was warned for a working party tomorrow. I wrote several letters.

*25 Oct Thursday*

Had foot inspection and nothing else except the working party at 4 o'clock. I had 20 men from my own platoon and 20 from D Coy. Reported to the Trench Mortar Officer at Hyde Park Corner and then we went to the T.M. ammunition dump at Prowse Point and each man carried 4 shells each. We then went to Prowse Point, so far it was perfectly quiet but when we got on the skating rink they were shelling the valley. We had to stop a bit for this in an old German trench. When we got in the support trench the Irish were in the middle of a relief and a shell had knocked out eight of them (Royal Irish Rifles). One man was still in the trench with a shrapnel wound in his back 2" left of spine just above his kidneys. [transcriber's note: The manuscript has a circle about 1 cm in diameter and a note saying "actual size"]

He was very sick and I got two of the Royal Irish to move him down to a splinter proof. There was also another man suffering from shell shock quite like a child. He could not speak or hear and was quite harmless. They brought another man along on a stretcher, he was hit in the chest and was shouting out in a broad Irish accent "Sure I'll never live. Sure I'll never live". We then went on a little way and dumped our shells, we then came back but we were chased by shells all the way and we just got into an old Bosh [sic] trench and a shell burst in the path we had just come along 30 yards away. No one was hit. We got back at 8 and I went to bed early.

*26 Oct Friday.*

Got up very late, did nothing all the morning except foot inspection. Had whale oil rubbing in the afternoon at 3.45. Working party at 5 again. We all paraded at 5 but just as we were moving off an order came round and it was cancelled, much to the pleasure of everyone. I think the two happiest moments of everyone in France are 1 when you get a letter 2 when a working party is cancelled. I went to bed at 8.30 tonight – exceptionally early.

*27 Oct Saturday.*

Had a nice soft day again. I was orderly officer today again. Discovered Red Lodge was a shooting box of the King of the Belgians.

*28<sup>th</sup> Sunday.*

Got up at 4.30 in the morning, paraded at 5.30 and marched to Hyde Park Corner and reported to an officer of the D.L.I. We had a carrying job carrying duck boards along the Douvre valley from the Messines road to a trench called Useful Lane. Got back at 8.30, had another breakfast then had a foot inspection. Heard today that we are going to Ypres Salient to work on a railway line for 16 days now that our 8 days in Brigade reserve at Red Lodge is up.

## With the Canadians

**29th to 31st October**

The battalion moved to Ypres on the 29th to work with Canadian Railway troops

*29<sup>th</sup> Oct Monday.*

Got up early and cleaned up camp. The Northamptons came and took over from us as 11 o'clock. At 11.30 we marched to Connaught Road at Romarin about 2 miles there we got on busses after a lot of waiting and going through Neuve Eglise, Kemmil we got to Ypres about 3.30 in the afternoon had a nice slack time. We were about 800 yds to the west of Ypres. I slept in a tent with House and had a good bed and fine grub. The Boche aeroplanes came over tonight and dropped bombs and shelled us, great sport.

*30<sup>th</sup> Oct Tuesday.*

Got up rather late but had nothing to do today except rifle and feet inspection. A & B Companies went and did work from 11 till 5 but it rained so we did nothing. I wrote a long letter home. Heard tonight we were going away again probably back to Menegate Camp where we were before near Steenwerck.

*31<sup>st</sup>*

Got up very late again. Lunch at 11.30. We embus at 3 o'clock in the afternoon so I went for a walk with Capt Lowe, Giddings and Upton to the city of Ypres. We had a good look at the cathedral but we were turfed out by the A.P.M. so did not see the famous cloth hall. Got back and started back got back to Menegate camp near Steenwerck at 6 o'clock, went to bed early.

## Menegate Camp

**31st October to 11th November 1917**

On the 31st the battalion returned to Divisional reserve at Menegate, where it remained till the 11th November.

A party of 50 ORs joined on the 3rd.

Lt Morris

*1<sup>st</sup> Thursday.*

No special parades today except the C.O.'s inspection at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Did not do anything special. At night wrote a letter and went to bed early.

*2<sup>nd</sup>*

Parades in full swing today. Had a lot of trouble with Beckley. I took the company drill parade in the afternoon went to the divisional cinema in the evening, very good show indeed. Major Allaway MC was there also. Went to bed early. Band played at dinner tonight.

*3 Nov Saturday.*

Got up fairly late as our Coy was going to the divisional baths. We left at 9.30 and got there at 10.30 and left the baths at 11.30. Met General Heniker and Gen Coffin coming back. He spoke to me and then went on. Stayed in this evening and went to bed early.

*4<sup>th</sup> Nov Sunday.*

Church parade in morning. Wrote letters rest of the day.

*5<sup>th</sup> Nov Monday.*

Ordinary parades today. Walked into Balleul this afternoon with Knowles, and went to Officers Club and ordnance store.

*6<sup>th</sup> Nov Tuesday.*

Ordinary parades we were on the range today. Went to Steenwerck to concert in evening, met Cabias Spine there, our Trench Mortar Officer.

*7<sup>th</sup> Nov Wed.*

Colonel Sparrow came back today. Ordinary parades. Went to divisional cinema in the evening.

*8<sup>th</sup> Nov Thurs.*

C.O. inspections in the afternoon. Was Orderly Officer today.

*9<sup>th</sup> Nov Friday.*

Ordinary parades today. Went to divisional cinema in the evening.

Lt Morris's diary finishes here except for a few odd pages of later date.

## La Motte

12th to 16th November 1917

On the 12th the 25th Brigade was relieved by the 39th Australian Battalion of 18th Australian Brigade, and the battalion went into the La Motte area for training.

On the 15th November Col Hanbury-Sparrow had to go up to visit the Canadian Battalion they were to relieve next day:-

You walked along mile after mile of duckboard track, on your way to visit the headquarters of a Canadian Infantry unit, from whom the battalion were to take over the next day. For some reason you had sent your orderly back and were pursuing alone this dreary and dangerous road to Passchendaele. The narrow two-foot-wide wooden track was the only way up to the ridge. To move off it was to perish miserably by drowning in the swamp of stinking shell holes. To remain on it was to incur at every yard the risk of a direct hit, for each bend and twist of the track was known to the enemy, and sup dry gaps made since last night were there to prove the accuracy of his shooting. Between the low grey sky and the grey-black earth various stinks were blown along by the sulky south-west breeze, stale mustard gas, corpses in various stages of putrescence, T.N.T., and what not. Surely the dreary grey Hades of the Greeks must have been some such land as this?

It was nerve-racking too. Your ears were turned to catch the first whisper of the approaching shells, and ever and anon you'd pause to make sure which way the obus was going, or fling yourself down to let its flying shards buzz wasp-like past. For you were taking no risks. If anyone had seen you now, they'd have realised how spurious was your reputation for recklessness.

A shell burst near; you floundered, ducked, and dodged. Palpitating antics! Waves of gasping fear! Excuses interpenetrating. Suddenly a ringing voice, "Now then! None of that! Get up! Get up!" A voice that tore like a gale the mist of flimsy excuses, and left you naked in your shame. A Canadian private had spoken.

He who had just emerged from nowhere was a

darkhaired, clean-shaven, strong-featured man of about your own age. He was wearing the woollen cap-comforter on his head, and on his chest the inevitable gas mask. Otherwise he was unarmed. He stood perhaps three yards away, a solitary figure against the background of the rising slope of Passchendaele with its brown waste of shell holes and occasional grey pill box. He stood there strongly, as you were straightening your back. It was as if he were saying, "Sorry, I didn't see you were an Imperial officer.",

For a moment you two regarded each other squarely between the eyes. Cursing him was out of the question. He was far too right for a display of indignation. Indeed, such a thought barely crossed your mind. On the contrary, one side of you urged yourself to justify your conduct, to plead that you should be an object of sympathy rather than abuse; to remove your gas mask so that he could see the medal ribbons which should prove there had been a time when your nerves weren't in rags; to cry, "At least I've been out longer than you." But you were too proud to do that. The other side of you wanted to thank him frankly. For you recognised his rebuke was justified. There was, there never could be any excuse for a manfunking. Spirit was like the widow's cruse of oil from which will could draw inexhaustible supplies. Man had the power in himself always to be brave. The death sentence was therefore justifiable. All this the Canadian private taught you. More, too, you beheld the spiritual power of resolution; the glory of funk-spurning morale. You knew you ought to thank him. You knew you would if you were a sahib. But you were too proud.

For one moment, I say, you two regarded each other squarely. Then, without a word, you continued your journey. It was as if both had mutually and tacitly agreed that nothing had happened. You pretended you hadn't heard; he pretended it wasn't you he had cursed.

The duckboard track across the swamps came to an end and the way took the line of the squelching, shell devoured lane that ran straight up the bank to Passchendaele. The going was fairly good, for your feet, inches deep in running mud, could feel traces of the once metallated surface. Behind, the solitary private had taken on the spirit of Canada. Ahead, the jags and stumps of the village proclaimed the prize it had wrested from the Germans. On either hand was written the cost. For far to north and far to south, dotted haphazard where they had fallen, lay the unburied dead of the Dominion. There seemed to be hundreds and hundreds of them. And the Germans? What of their hideous losses of which we daily read? What of the policy of attrition? Perhaps one in ten of these lead-white, sickly sweet corpses was dressed in full grey. One in ten! Ulysses Grant was prepared to lose three of his Federals to kill one Confederate. Was that the explanation of these attacks—a reason G.H.Q. daren't proclaim to the troops? Was Intelligence deliberately fooling us? Or was it fooling itself and the Field-Marshal? This time you had no doubt. G.H.Q. was living way back in Montreuil in a world of illusion, for you had heard of the order that forbade its members to visit the battlefield lest they lost their sense of proportion. Oh, that book, the Green Curve, with its "Proportion, Gentlemen, Proportion!" For what losses was it not responsible? [TX00796A]

Flinching at the shells, fuming at the staff, appalled at the waste of life, you turned off the lane into a shallow cut that led to a three-roomed pillbox, the headquarters of the Canadian unit. Stooping double you entered one of the chambers. The compartment—a veritable chamber of

Little Ease, for it was only about five foot high-was occupied by three officers and a flag. The last was a small affair, the sort that are borne by patrol leaders of the Boy Scouts. Yet it was the regiment's battle-colour, the tangible symbol for which it would have died to a man. Presented by Princess Pat, there had been no battle fought and no trench held by her troops but this flag had been there. We Regulars left our elaborately embroidered colours at the depot in safety where, because Time's metabolism changes all things, the living reality of their soul degenerated into sentimentalism held together by the stays of ceremonial. These Colonials took their simple flag where they went. Our fellows were taught to love the Colours; these Canadians did not have to be taught. That was the difference in the result.

What a contrast was in this dug-out? On the one hand this hard-bitten, robust, cheery group, outwardly as void of sentiment as their concrete habitation; on the other this flag that, furled up and lying on the floor against the northern wall, was the visible streak of Romance in their characters. Why couldn't our own men have something of the sort, you wondered, say platoon eagles that could feed their shy souls that -you were sure- were starving for Romance?

But had we won the right? These invincible Overseas Storm Troops looked down on us "Imperial Divisions" even as we looked down on the French. There were no two questions about it, we weren't as good as these fellows. But we could be. That was the point. The martial feats of the Guards were a living demonstration of what British troops could become. They gave us just the selfrespect that we needed in dealing with these Canadians and Australians. Because of the Guards we could claim equality; and because of the Guards the Overseas men did not look down upon us too much. And also it was because of the Guards that you yourself were able to laugh and joke and drink with your then hosts, and feel yourself no whit their inferior.. Yes, the Guards had won us the right to these little flags.

The work done, you started on the return journey. All you can remember is yourself following two officers of a New Army division along the duck board track. Barristers, you put them down as. Why? God knows. Anyhow, shells were bursting all round and those two went straight ahead, whooping and cheering, moving as the Canadian private expected officers to move - upright and unflinching. Somehow it was all new to you. Apart altogether from your nerves, experience and common sense told you to get into a shell hole till the "hate" was finished. But for very shame's sake you followed. [TX00796D]

## **In the Line**

### **16th November 1917**

On the 16th the 8th Division relieved the 3rd Canadian Division in the left sector of the Canadian Corps front towards Bellevue, north-east of Passchendaele. The Royal Berks travelled by tram and relieved the PPCLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) in brigade support.

### **17th November 1917**

Lt Col Hanbury-Sparrow gave a graphic description of the actions of 17th November as they crouched in the

support trench:-

WHEEWH-crump! The flame-riven air shuddered out the candle. Someone lit it again. Its glimmer revealed the low square chamber of the pill box that yesterday the Canadians had occupied; its restless light waved over the drop of moisture-part night-mist and part breath -that glistened on the roof, and chased russet-brown shadows across the four officers) yourself and three others, of the battalion headquarters who) with packs for seats) were squatting on the floor. Somebody collected a row of patience cards that had been disarranged by the explosion.

Whe-ewh we stop breathing - whe-ewh we breathe again - crump! Over. Somewhere in the valley. Whe-ewh crump! The outer blackness is torn by fire, the candle-flame dawks and trembles, and acrid yellow fumes pour in, starving it of oxygen. In the next compartment the mess cook, who is doing his best to get ready some sort of dinner over a coke brazier, swears. That chamber is crowded with mess staff, the sergeant-major, an orderly, a couple of signallers, and an odd clerk or two. They breathe a compound of coke fume, shell fume, stale breath, and night-mist chill as the grave, and they cough harshly with every relaxation of fear tension.

Wheewh-crump! The pill box shakes and rocks. The great eight-inch shell has landed straight on top of the third and last chamber. The strong ferro-concrete shields its inmates, but from amongst those who for want, of room have to take what shelter they can outside, there rises the cry, '(Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers!'" All around is a waste of flooded shell holes; silver black circles in tangled blackness. "Are those orderlies back, Sergeant-major?" you call out. "Not yet, Sir," he answers. "Let me know when they are," you order. But inwardly you whisper, "Thank God!" Your time is not yet come. For the battalion is lying out somewhere in this waste. All they have for trenches is odd lengths of half a dozen shell holes linked together every here and there. It's impossible to get to them by day. Almost impossible to get to them by night. That's what the orderlies are out for-to find the way. When they return you'll go out under their guidance, not before. Otherwise you might well walk into the German lines. One of these orderlies has been out since before your time. He has a perfect genius for finding his way about any new positions. Has a regular feel for it. Now and again you get a fellow like that, and he's worth his weight in gold..

A traversing machine-gun clatters its bullets. There's a lot of muck flying about to-night.

Scream-over-phut! Scream-over-phut! We know the sound well of those gas shells. They're pouring them by the hundred into the valley just behind, building up a concentration in the still night air. Suddenly Wheewh! Wheewh! Wheewh! A salvo of heavies straight into the middle of the concentration, breaking it up, blowing its deadly poisons over the acres, like a stroke of Death's scythe.

Creeping Death climbs the bank; its antennae coil round the pill box groping for the entrances. Sniff! Look out! Gas! Masks on in the instant. We gaze at one another like goggle-eyed, imbecile frogs. Presently you look at your wrist watch. It's barely half.past eight. What a night we're in for!

The gas mask makes you feel only half a man. You can't think; the air you breathe has been filtered of all save a few chemical substances. A man doesn't live on what

passes through the filter, he merely exists. He gets the mentality of a wide-awake vegetable if one can conceive such an impossibility. Whatever be in the air that really gives vitality-cosmic rays and forces perhaps all that is cut off in this purified atmosphere. Anyhow, you yourself were always miserable when you couldn't breathe through your nose; and the clip on the gas mask prevents that. Better far one mouthful of the melinite-tainted, corpse-stenched air outside than half a dozen of this filtered stuff.

You always felt this poison gas was so mean and treacherous. It wasn't so much the harm it did to the body, which was always much over-estimated in the popular imagination, as the harm it did to the mind. A shell might make terrible wounds, but its burst was all over in an instant. It was a case of hit or miss which left no ill-will behind. But this harmless-looking, almost invisible, stuff would lie for days on end lurking in low places waiting for the unwary. It was the Devil's breath. It was Ahrimanic from the first velvety phut of the shell burst to those corpse-like breaths that, a man inhaled almost unawares. It lingered about out of control. When he fired it, man released an evil force that became free to bite friend or foe till such time as it died into the earth. Above all, it went against God-inspired conscience. In using it the user degraded himself, for war even more than peace should be inspired by moral law. The greater the power of the user, the greater the need of restraint. Restraint is essentially something that must be perceived by the moral senses, for by the time the necessity of it is grasped by the intelligence, the power to be controlled has gained a quasi-independent life of its own. Whether one takes sex, drink, machinery, or war, all need a restraint that must first be suggested by the conscience, for the intellect cannot at first perceive the necessity. War pushed to its logical conclusions-to gas and air bombing-means either race suicide or the tyranny of the dead hand of a hide-bound tleaty. All things need restraint-even logic-even gas.

Slowly the gas clears. We remove our masks. Then it starts again in the valley. Scream-phut, scream-phut. "Is dinner ready?" you shout. "Yes, Sir," calls the mess corporal. "Then bring it in." We'd better eat it quickly before the gas comes again. So in it came, those fids of fried meat on the enamel plates, those boiled potatoes, the dish of tinned fruit, and the can of Ideal milk masquerading as cream. As a rule we fed like decent Christians, the comic batman and mess man beloved of the stage hadn't got to the point of their joke before they were buzzed off back to duty. You wouldn't stand that kind of insubordinate impertinence. But to-night the meal is below standard. Conditions are absolutely impossible. Twice have we had to put on our gas masks before the meat course is finished-the pill box sustains another direct hit which jars over the fruit juice and puts out the candle-and within you and without you is the almost unbearable tension of tight suppressed fear that meets the food and curdles it before ever it reaches the end of the gullet.

Two signallers go out to repair the telephone line to brigade. Hardly are they back before it's cut in half in a dozen more places, and out they have to go again.

It's obvious the Boche are making a dead set at this pill box. It was theirs once; it's ours now. They know its position to an inch, know its entrances are facing towards them, and, as they built it-presumably know how much of this treatment it will stand. Oh, but he's made it strong as

he has made them all strong. The ground is too wet to dig deep dug-outs as he did on the Somme. So he has taken a tip from Verdun and built these things of ferro-concrete. In a way he made them too good. His idea was to use them simply as dug-outs above ground. The moment the barrage lifted the troops were to rush out and man the trenches. That was his theory, and therefore he provided them with no loop holes. The wall facing the English was solid blank. But because these dug-outs were so safe and our fire so terrifying, his men wouldn't run out when the moment came, and unable to resist within the eyeless shelter, got captured. He had realised his mistake and his latest orders had directed that all the new structures were to be loopholed for machine-guns. Of course once they were loopholed his men would never have faced the music outside, and had it gone on the fight would have been an attack against mutually supporting machine-gun emplacements. How blockaded Germany found the concrete was a marvel. We never could.

Because their location was known and their entrances faced the wrong way, these pill boxes were not as safe for us as for the Boche. But how we welcomed them! Despite all their disadvantages they were as oases in a desert, solid tussocks in a quagmire, termite heaps in a world of decaying slime. But how much hammering would they stand? Nobody knew. What were the chances of a shell finding the entrance? Too good to bear thinking about.

"Orderlies have got back now Sir," reports the sergeant-major. "Tell them to have some tea and I'll set off in a quarter of an hour." "Shouldn't go yet, Sir," says the sergeant-major. "There's a lot of straffing about."

There is indeed. Outside in the darkness the whole battlefield's on edge. Rifle bullets crack and whistle; machine-guns clatter; every track and road back to Hellfire Corner and even Ypres is under intermittent fire; every hollow's being filled with gas, and invisible night raiders are droning in the sky. Ceaselessly the German Very lights rise, burst into cold light, and die. As far as a man can behold, east, west, south, and north, there is no safety. "Perhaps you're right, Sergeant-major; I'll wait."

Outwardly you're calm enough. You alone know how terribly thin this external shell is wearing. Its molecules are being torn apart by the ever-increasing tension and pressure within.

You open Handley Cross at your favourite chapter the "Cat and Custard Pot" day-which you now know almost by heart, and try to lose yourself in the glories of the run. [TX01048A]

## 18th November 1917

Lt Morris diary resumes briefly:-

18th November

.....and got up in about ¾ hour, a terrible journey over very rough road, falling in shell holes and over dead men. The men were very heavy loaded as we had to carry water cans, rations for 24 hrs for two Coys and 6 boxes of ammunition. I finished up in carrying a very heavy a heavy bag. [sic] It was quite quiet tonight. Capt Flint MC and I were the only two officers with the Coy. The trench was only breast high and very wide and most of it was shell holes. It was terrifically cold and we could not sleep that night. We had absolutely no cover at all and all we did was to sit in the trench.

### Hanbury-Sparrow:-

The Army was being strained beyond endurance; its resilience would be gone for good. We were to be attacked in the spring, and it was obvious that our resistance power would henceforth be but a tithe of what it had been. Your battalion, for instance, had not merely to face a night like this, but was under orders to do a local attack next time it was in; and the Germans were now said to be putting down barrages of 8-inch howitzers. It was altogether too much to expect men to face, and be as good as before. They couldn't be. It was beyond flesh and blood.

"They're straffing very heavy on the right, Sir," says the sergeant-major. "The sentry says he thinks an S.O.S. has gone up. Had we ought to stand to?" You reflect a moment. "No!" you answer. "It'll be only a local raid. They've put too much of their own 'beastly gas down our way to attack here-for a few hours, anyhow."

"Straffing." That's the second time the sergeant major has used the word, and each time with a vaguely comic implication. But the German is comic. That's the ludicrously ridiculous part of the horror of this night. He, with his short jacket that showed off his fat hams, his glass eyes, and the child-like earnestness of his "God strafe England" and other fantastic phrases, is comic. He tickles us even as he terrifies. "The Germans are children with all the cruelty of children," some stray officer had once declared in the long ago. You often think of the phrase. He who said it wasn't far out.

### 19th November 1917

#### Morris:-

*19<sup>th</sup> Nov Sunday.*

Early in the morning the Boche came over in large aeroplanes about 5 of them and they hung about for two hours until one of them was crashed by one of our men. Capt Flint and I were in the trench when he was about 100' up and he must have seen us looking at him because we saw him swing his gun over and fire straight at us. We threw ourselves flat against the side of the trench and we could see the bullets striking the other side of the trench only about 2' away. The Boche shelled us very heavily today and he knocked in a part of our trench and they were falling all round. It was very strange, but we could see the shells dropping all the time but nobody was hit. Several men of the Camerons on our left were hit while running back, trying to miss the barrage. I saw two direct hits on a pill box which was being used as a dressing station at the time only about 100 x away. About 2 in the afternoon my servant was hit in the shoulder. We bound him up and he went away. I was hit 4 times during the day once on the foot and it bruised it slightly but the leather saved me. Once I was asleep in the trench and a small piece hit my leg and made it sting but it did not pierce my puttees. Another piece hit my revolver case and another piece hit me on the arm but did not do anything. One shell knocked in our trench and buried some kit but I had just moved the men up the trench a bit for foot inspection. We lived on bread and jam and bacon today. They shelled Battalion Hd Qrs with gas shells and H.E. shell this evening and gassed a lot of people including Colonel Hanbury Sparrow, Major Allaway and Lt and Adj Brown. At about 9 o'clock we were relieved by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolns and we walked right the way to Wieltje railway station where we entrained and

went to a camp about 4 miles west of Vlamertinghe and about 2 ½ mile east of Poperinghe. We were awfully pleased to get away from Passchendaele. I led the company out and it was an awful walk falling in shell holes and tripping over dead men in the road. We left Wieltje and 12 and got into camp at 3 in the morning. Had dinner and went to bed at 4. You could stand on the ridge at Passchendaele and look 5 miles without seeing a single blade of grass. All there is a few tree stumps and pill boxes and one or two duck board tracks, there are shell holes everywhere and bits of men lying about – old German and English rifles and equipment.

#### Lt Col Hanbury-Sparrow makes his final contribution:-

About midnight a whizz-bang crashed and burst against the forward face of the pill box. Instantly a screaming yell of terror arose. Four men sheltering in the forward trench had been wounded. The stretcher-bearers had left with the earlier cases. There were none to get these men away. We sent runner after runner to the aid post. Either they wouldn't or they couldn't go through the gas-filled valley with its geysers of shells, or the stretcher-bearers wouldn't or couldn't face it. Probably couldn't, for, on the whole, stretcher-bearers did their duty well.

"Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers!" "Won't someone go for stretcher-bearers?" Continually through the dragging hours the cry came from the agonised men round whom the devils of fear, released by the wounds, were dancing. It tore the unwilling listeners to pieces. It was indescribably harrowing. Only were they quiet when gas compelled us to clap masks on their faces. Then indeed you were thankful. You hated these men for tearing so remorselessly at your own fragile guard. The gas masks stopped their cries.

Otherwise there was no escape from their suffering. Apart altogether from your own funks and fears, the front had so livened up that you decided you would not in any case be justified in going round the companies - and there was nowhere else to go. Indeed, you were beginning to wonder if the Boche were not going to have a go at Passchendaele within the next few hours, and that was why they were filling the valley with gas to stop reinforcements getting through. It was just sheer unadulterated strain.

At last the second-in-command, reliable Allardyce, suggested going himself to the aid post. He got through and got back with stretcher-bearers, but by this time the men were dead. They had died like Falstaff, getting colder and colder from the feet upwards, and though their mates had given them all their blankets in answer to their complaints, yet it was all no good. One by one they died peacefully.

By dawn we were all gassed. I had to send the rest of the H.Q. officers down, and face another night of it alone. As a result, I was rather bad. Passchendaele broke me. When I got out again in April, I only lasted three months, as I simply couldn't stand it any longer. [TX010148B]

## Ridge Camp

### 19th to 28th November 1917

The Brigade were relieved by the 24th Bd on the 19th, the Royal Berks being relieved by the Sherwood Foresters. They moved to Ridge Camp where they spent most of the rest of the month.

On the 22nd Lieut. Colonel Hanbury-Sparrow, having

been badly gassed on the 19th, had to give over the command of the battalion to Lieut.-Colonel C. R. H. Stirling, M.C., of the 2nd Scottish Rifles.

Lt Morris:-

*20<sup>th</sup> Monday.*

Got up late and had a foot inspection at 2 o'clock. Went to bed early. Got a new servant named Legg.

*21<sup>st</sup> Tuesday.*

Got up early and went to baths with the Coy at Poperinghe in the morning. Had a foot inspection in the afternoon. Nothing else happened.

*22nd*

Ordinary parade this morning. General Henniker DSO and General Coffin VC and Col Lord Fielding came on the field and had a look at us. Viscount Fielding is one of our staff Cols and is a jolly fine man. A big dark good looking chap. I had to see him when I had the hangar to pull down. Col the Hon Roger Brand commanding the 2nd Rifle Brigade – the other Battn in our Brigade was also on parade. Col Sparrow got very bad and went to hospital today.

*23rd. Thursday.*

Ordinary parades today. Had a new col – Col Sterling MC of the Scottish Rifles – jolly decent chap in every way. Went into Poperinghe in the evening with Burne. Went to "Skindles" for tea. Bought a new torch.

*24th Friday.*

Still practicing for our attack for the final Passchendaele Ridge. Cpl Jackson went to England today to go to a cadet school. Wrote letters in the evening.

*25th Saturday.*

Practiced again on the tapes for the attack. General Coffin was there.

*26th Sunday.*

Quite a slack day today, only church parade in the morning. I am orderly officer today. Tremellan joined us from Portsmouth today. Grove came back from leave.

## **The Last Act of Passchendaele**

**29th November to 1st December 1917**

The Royal Berks moved to support on the 29th, relieving 24th Bde. The next day they moved up to the line relieving the 2nd Middlesex of 23rd Bde in the right front. They were arranged with B Coy on the left, 2 platoons of D on the right with C Coy forming a defensive flank on the right. A Coy and 2 platoons of D were in support.

The 2nd Battalion were to take part in one more action before the battle of Passchendaele finally flickered to extinction. On the 1st December the 25th Brigade was in line on the right front of the VIIIth Corps, with orders to attack next day in conjunction with the IInd Corps on its right. The brigade was to attack on a three-battalion front, with the 2nd Royal Berkshire on the right, 2nd Lincolnshire in the centre, and 2nd Rifle Brigade on the

left; Royal Irish Rifles in reserve.

The front was a little north of Passchendaele, at the extreme eastern limit of the British advance in 1917 in this direction, and the object was a line running from N.W. to S.E., passing one hundred and fifty yards west of Wrath Farm to a point about two hundred yards north of Exert Farm, where it curved back towards the south-west. The left boundary of the battalion's area was a line directed N.E. towards Wrath Farm. The assault was to be in three waves. The formation was B Company on the left, half of D on the right, C and the rest of D to form a defensive flank on the right in the later part of the advance, and A to act as reserve.

The attack was to be carried out at night, and the battalion was formed up as soon as it was quite dark. A lost its way in the dark, and did not reach its reserve position till 21:00. Others were also in difficulties in the marshy ground, which had to be passed on duck-boards, which had in places been destroyed. It was not till 23:30 that the battalion could be manoeuvred into its proper stations for the attack, and it had already lost some men from shelling.

### **2nd December 1917**

At 01:55 on the 2nd December B and D Companies were led forward by Colonel Stirling. The 2nd Lincolnshire were in touch on the left. For the first three minutes the movement was unobserved by the enemy, as the moon was hidden by clouds. Then he began sending up signals, and opened a heavy but ill-directed and not very damaging fire. The Lincolnshire now bore off too much to their left, and it was found impossible to keep the left of B Company in touch with them.

At 02:04 the German barrage fell heavily on the road in rear, and on the reserve and support platoons of B Company, and the Head-quarters of the company was blown up. Meanwhile, a platoon each of B and D had made its way into the Southern redoubt and were engaged in bayonet and bomb fighting, with many casualties on both sides. They lacked support, owing to the left of B having been moved to the left to try and keep touch with the Lincolnshire. The remnant of these platoons was finally forced back to the S.W. corner of the redoubt, where they dug in.

The rest of B Company, on the left, had gained the trenches connecting the Northern and Southern redoubts, killed many Germans, and captured three machine guns. This party was led by Second-Lieutenants Upton and Tremellan.

On the right C Company, under Second-Lieutenant Smith, had formed a defensive flank as directed, but had had much fighting to get into touch with D. It captured an officer, thirty men, and one machine gun. Beyond these points, which were considerably short of the objective, the battalion seems never to have pushed forward, and it had some difficulty in holding on where

it was during the day.

The operation was by no means a complete success, and its failure is attributed by Colonel Stirling to want of depth in his centre, due to the easing off to keep in touch on the left.

The casualties were: **Officers. Killed:** Lieut. S. H. Troup. **Wounded:** 2nd-Lieuts. W. A. Grove, H. E. E. Osborne, C. E. Morris. **Missing:** 2nd-Lieuts. H. A. V. Wait, F. Giddings (both now recorded as killed). **Other Ranks: Killed or Died of Wounds** 35. **Wounded** 83. **Missing** 33. Total 151

The Brigade Report read:-

25th Brigade Report on Operations (North of Paeschedaele) 1st/2nd December 1917 (Ref Map. 28 N.E.)

1(a) Objective - To capture the Redoubts in V 30 b and W 25 c and Venison Trench and to establish a line some 50 yards East of Venison Trench in conjunction with the 32nd Division operating on our left.

1 (b) Date. - The operation was carried out on the night 1st/2nd December 1917. Zero was at 1.55.a.m.

1 (c) Weather. - The night was fine and clear and the moon was particularly bright. Individual figures could be distinguished at 100 yards.

1 (d) Ground. - The ground had been severely torn up by artillery fire, but was on the whole unusually dry and the going was good

2 - Prior to the attack - The line was held by the 2nd R. Berks, on the right and the 1st R. Irish Rifles on the left. One Company from the Left and Centre and half a Company from the Right attacking Battalion took over the line on the frontage for attack of their respective Battalions early on the night of the attack. On completion of relieve the 2nd R. Berks assumed their attack formation and the 1st R. Irish Rifles (Less one Company) withdrew to support.

Unfortunately the Company of the 2nd Lincoln Regiment detailed to hold the front line in the centre was heavily shelled on the way up and was caught in the enemy's barrage at the head of the duckboards. On arrival in the front line this Company was only 20 strong and one Company of the 1st R. Irish Rifles remained in position in our front line.

One Company of the 2nd West Yorkshire Regt was ordered to report to the the 1st Irish Rifles at Meetcheete to take the place of this Company.

3 - Assembly

Routes (a) Track No. 5 and Southern Extension

(b) Road to Waterloo, thence Northern extension of No. 5 Track

The northern route was allotted to the 2nd Rifle Brigade the southern to the 2nd Lincoln Regt

Time: 2nd Lincoln Regt left Wieltze at 4.30.p.m.. 2nd Rifle Brigade left Capricorn at 5.0.p.m.. The first Company reached the head of the duckboards at 8.20.p.m.

Condition of the Routes: - The southern extension of Track No 5 was in a deplorable state. The Boards which had been laid on trestles high up off the ground, were

severely shelled and there were few cases of more than 20 yards in one stretch in good condition. The height of the Boards from the ground and the bad state of the ground in the vicinity of the Track made it very difficult to regain the track after passing a point where the boards had been blown away.

Guides - Guides were provided from the head of the tracks under Brigade arrangements to lead Battalions to the right of their forming up tapes

Forming Up was carried out on a single tape laid from 150 yards South East of Teal cottage to E 1 a 15.50. this tape was laid on iron pickets each bearing a sign painted white denoting the frontage of the various Battalions. Direction tapes 50 yards long leading from the forming up tape in the direction of the advance had also been laid.

No difficulty was experienced in getting into position though it is thought that individual groups of men were observed by the enemy, their rifle fire being fairly severe. The hostile Artillery, however, was unusually quiet.

The original intention was to lay the forming up tape to Teal Cottage. This however was found to be in the hands of the enemy. For this reason the left flank of the 2nd Rifle Brigade was thrown back on a front of 150 yards, touch being maintained with the 32nd Division on our left.

The Advance - At Zero our attacking troops advanced. On the left the enemy's Machine Guns opened fire immediately. Two were seen firing from Teal Cottage and three from the front trench of the Northern Redoubt, but there were certainly others firing direct fire from the left flank.

On the Right and centre the enemy's machine guns did not open fire until Zero plus 3 minutes. A few coloured lights were also sent up at this time.

By Zero plus 5 , intense rifle and M.G. fire had been opened along the whole front of attack and lights of various colours and designs were sent up in great numbers by the enemy.

On the right the enemy's fire was found to be mostly inaccurate, on the left and centre, however, heavy casualties were suffered, the Centre Battalion losing all the Officers of the attacking Companies.

The enemy's Artillery Barrage came down on the Passchedaele-Vindictive Cross Roads, road one minute after our guns opened fire, namely at Zero plus 9. On the left our troops were well clear of the line of the enemy's barrage, but unfortunately on the Right the Support Platoons of the attacking Companies were caught in the barrage and suffered heavy casualties.

The Enemy's Dispositions - The enemy were holding Teal Cottage, the Northern and Southern Redoubts and the trench connecting them, in considerable strength. Isolated groups of men had also been pushed well out in front. These were holding a shell hole position.

The Fight - The progress of the fight was as follows:-

On the extreme left the 2nd Rifle Brigade were compelled to throw back a defensive flank so as to keep in touch with the 32nd Division on our left, Teal Cottage being still in the hands of the enemy.

The Centre Battalion and the Right of the Left Battalion were unable to proceed further owing to the number of casualties which they had sustained and owing to the strength in which the enemy were holding Venison Trench and the trench connecting it with the Southern

Redoubt.

In the Centre our troops were within 30 yards of the enemy's main defensive line. Many shell hole positions occupied by the enemy were over-run by our advancing troops and it is believed that in some instances this led our troops to believe that they had reached their objective. The majority however state they were compelled to dig in at this point owing to the heavy fire to which they were being subjected.

On the Right fewer casualties were suffered by the enemy's fire and the leading waves of the attacking Company reached the Southern Redoubt where heavy fighting took place. Heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy with bayonet and bomb

Unfortunately the left platoon of the Right Battalion (2nd R. Berks) in their endeavour to keep touch with the Centre Battalion (2nd Lincoln Regt) appears to have borne too much to its left and made a gap in our troops on the left of the Southern Redoubt and so left the troops in the Redoubt without sufficient support.

Heavy fighting continued in the Southern Redoubt, many casualties, including the Platoon Commander, being suffered and the Platoon was eventually forced out, taking up a position close to the S.W. front of the Redoubt, where they dug in.

Meanwhile the left platoon of the Right Battalion, which had stayed to the left had captured a portion of the trench connecting the 2 Redoubts killing many Germans and capturing 3 Machine Guns. They succeeded in establishing themselves in this trench, on the frontage of the 2nd Lincoln Regiment, in spite of some trouble which they had with a strong point near their left – this was suppressed chiefly by Rifle Grenades.

On the extreme right the defensive flank was formed without difficulty. Brisk fighting, however, ensued while the Company forming the defensive flank was endeavouring to gain touch with the troops who had been ejected from the Redoubt. This fight resulted in the capture of 30 prisoners, including an Officer, and a machine gun.

Several minor attempts were made by the enemy to dislodge our troops from the position they held immediately in front of the Southern Redoubt – These however were all repulsed.

After the Fight – At dawn the troops East of the Southern Redoubt found themselves without Officers and with their left flank in the air. They also observed the enemy working back into the Redoubt round their left flank, and after inflicting casualties on the enemy withdrew to gain touch with the troops S.W. of the Redoubt.

The day of the 2nd December – At about 8.00.a.m. stretcher parties on both sides were at work and the shelling, which had up to that time been heavy, slackened somewhat. Orders were issued by the Right Battalion to fire on the enemy's stretcher bearers, as these appeared to be taking advantage of their freedom to

to approach our position. This was done and several of them were hit.

The enemy's attitude throughout the day was aggressive. Several attempts were made to raid our posts on the left, bombs and rifle grenades being employed- these were all repulsed, without difficulty and touch was maintained with the Division on our left.

The enemy's Counter Attack – At 4.0.p.m. the enemy's shell fire became intense and the S.O.S. signal was sent up by the Division on our left at 4.15.p.m. This was repeated on our front and Artillery opened fire at once. Although no action followed on the part of the enemy's infantry, it is believed that they were forming up in considerable strength opposite our front and that they were caught and scattered by our Artillery Fire. The wide front over which lights were sent up led me to believe that the enemy was about to carry out an attack on a large scale.

Knowing that my line was but thinly held owing to casualties which had been sustained I decided to order the 3 remaining Companies of the 2nd West Yorks to move up to Bellevue. At the same time the 41st Infantry Brigade were informed of the situation and warned to be ready to reinforce if required.

At 6.0.p.m. the enemy's barrage began to die down and unusual quietness prevailed. Information was also received that our line was intact and at 5.20.p.m. a message was sent informing the 2nd West Yorks that the 3 Companies were not now required.

At dusk the left Platoon of the Right Battalion, which had strayed into frontage of the Centre Battalion, was withdrawn from its advance position and filled the gap between the Right and Centre Battalions.

The Relief – The leading Companies of the 41st Infantry Brigade reached Waterloo about 8.30.p.m. and the relief was carried out by small parties and was completed without any great difficulty, by about 2.0.a.m. when the Brigade withdrew to St Jean area

7th December 1917 - Brigadier General, Commanding 25th Infantry Brigade. [TX01064]

#### *Berkshire Chronicle 24th January 1918*

**Lt F J Smith** (awarded the MC) who belongs to Slough has been awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous bravery on December 2nd when a battalion of the Royal Berks Regiment took four lines of trenches and a pill box on the Paschendaele Ridge at Ypres. The objective was taken after about an hours fierce fighting although the Berks and the other battalions fighting with them were opposed to far superior numbers. Lt Smith is described by one of his men as a very brave man and on this occasion he led his company with great gallantry and under fire which was described as 'murderous'. In the pill box were about forty Germans, the majority of whom were either killed or taken prisoners. The next morning the Boches attacked with waves of men but were repulsed with heavy losses which they also sustained the previous day. The battalion still held the positions until they were relieved. Lt Smith was a Quartermaster-Sergeant in C Company until he got his commission when he was transferred to A Company. He has been with the battalion for some time. [formerly 8454 CQMS F J Smith]

**Corpl Chapman** (awarded the MM), who belongs to Reading, got his award for bringing in prisoners of war under heavy fire.

#### *Berkshire Chronicle 1st Feb 1918*

##### SEVERE FIGHTING AT PASSCHENDAELE

An account of a successful attack made on the German lines by a Berkshire Battalion on December 2nd at Passchendaele Ridge on the Ypres front is to hand. The plan of campaign was to capture four lines of trenches and the attack was made at 1 o'clock in the morning. The