

Section 273

The 1st/4th Battalion

3rd Ypres 1st July to 14th October 1917

The 1st/4th had been in the Somme area for some time - They were now to experience the horrors of Passchendaele

Continued from section 263

Bailleulval

30th June to 21st July 1917

The move began on the 30th June when they left the villages of Hermies, Doignes and Beaumetz and marched via Velu and Bihucourt north to Bailleulval a village about 6 miles south west of Arras.

It was pretty obvious that something was afoot as drafts began arriving in huge numbers to take the strength to 930, its highest level since coming to France. Training went on feverishly; the old trenches were the scene of many practice attacks and the specialists too had their practice.

The Brigadier appeared to lecture and inspect each officer's ability to use a compass correctly and the Divisional General turned up to take all the senior officers away for staff rides

The Move to Flanders

21st to 22nd July 1917

There was intense speculation as to what was afoot, but doubts were resolved on the 21st July when they entrained at Mondicourt en route for Flanders. The route was the reverse of the journey two years previously - and the survivors cheered as they recognised the little towns of Marles and Lapugnoy as they passed through. They continued on via Lillers and Hazebrouck, both scenes of intense activity and detrained at Godewaersvelde at 22:45 for a weary march to Houtkerque which they reached at dawn on the 22nd.

Curiously this was next door to their first resting place in Flanders - Winizeele. The journey had taken 20 hours to cover 43 miles as the crow flies although they had actually covered 70.

Prologue

Capt Cruttwell set the scene :-

The prolonged and terrible struggle now about to begin was the last attempt to break through in the west on the old plan. It was believed that the immense collection of guns, ammunition,

railway material and every kind of transport would prove irresistible, that the bombardment prolonged with unparalleled intensity over many days would open to the attacking troops the Flemish coast with the submarine bases then at the height of their most dangerous activity. These expectations were doomed to disappointment. For continuous trench lines which could be smashed to atoms, the Germans substituted an organization of great depth, where machine-gun nests and pill-boxes were almost indistinguishable from the muddy sea which surrounded them. As the foremost zone was lightly held, the attackers after an initial success found their energies almost exhausted by their labours in the mire, and the main resistance still spread indefinitely before them. Many a pill-box, which required for its destruction the direct impact of a 9.2 shell, escaped intact, though the shell all round was torn to pieces. More-over the staff-work of General Gough's 5th Army was thoroughly bad, as far as the 48th Division was concerned. Impossible objectives were given the troops, with inadequate reserves. Artillery support was at times insufficient, and once at least the attack was contingent on the aid of tanks, but was persisted with in spite of their absence. Finally, as is well known, the incredible weather made victory impossible. The great storm which raged throughout the initial attack of the 31st July was the harbinger of a month's almost unprecedented rain. Terrible as was the last month of the Somme Battles, all the events now to be described were fought under far worse conditions. Except for a few pill-boxes no shelter was available for the troops; the corduroy paths, sole means of communication over the bottomless mud, were gassed and shelled day and night. The artillery placed almost wheel to wheel in the morass sunk deeper and deeper, and could not extricate them-selves for days from the storm of shells. Even the light railways, on which their supplies depended, sank themselves from lack of solid foundation. Finally, far behind, junctions, dumps and rest-camps were attacked by long-range fire and bombs with an as yet unequalled persistency. Nevertheless, as General Ludendorff admits, the stubborn spirit of the British soldier tested and shook the German defence to the uttermost.

The First Action

St Julien

31st July to 9th August 1917

The 31st brought the battalion no excitement. They moved up slowly to the battle during the unexpected lull, and relieved the 188th Brigade on the 5th August, S. of St. Julien. Here in the sodden country on either side of the foul Steenbeck brook, water stood everywhere, it blotted out the trenches and flooded the pill-boxes.

After four days of incessant shelling they crawled back through a violent thunderstorm to Dambre Camp, west of Ypres, after suffering losses of eleven killed and

thirty-one wounded.

A sergeant who was home on leave shortly afterwards contributed this account to the Berkshire Mercury of 14/12/17:-

On Oct 10 they took part in what is known as the third battle of Ypres. The battalion had previously crossed a canal and had consolidated about a couple of hundred yards on the other side and their objective was a little piece of ridge on the right of - [St Julien]. To accomplish their task they had to cover a distance of between 600 and 700 yards and to the great credit of the brave Berkshire lads and to the ---[] who were fighting with them they succeeded in achieving this end after about a couple of hours fighting. [TX00615]

Dambre 10th to 15th August 1917

Here for a week they practised sedulously for the new attack of the 16th, a large-scale model of the ground being available for the inspection of officers and N.C.O.s at Divisional Headquarters.

St Julien 15th-16th August 1917

On the 15th they marched by slow stages, with a hot meal at evening, to St. Julien.

Next morning, at 4.45 a.m., the British barrage thundered out its awful salute to the dawn. Men advanced against the enemy on a front of twenty-five miles; the second act of this great drama had begun.

The attack as a whole was a complete failure, though the French progressed on the left towards Houthulst Forest and the 23rd Division took Langemarck. In the centre the progress of the 48th Division was infinitesimal. They were faced by fresh troops, who fought bravely in their defensive labyrinth; the promised tanks were unavailable and the weight of troops was far too weak for the ambitious objectives assigned to them. The task allotted to the battalion proved disappointing; as Brigade reserve it was intended to sweep through the assaulting battalions to the final objective. But its actual rôle was reduced to hanging about almost stationary under heavy shell fire sometimes moving slightly to either flank to fill up gaps against threatened counter-attacks.

The brigade started to the assault from the eastern bank of the Steenbeck on a frontage of twelve hundred yards. It was expected to advance a good mile without supports through the mud, everywhere ankle deep, and to take three fortified lines on its way. It was faced by the 7th Bavarian Regiment, part of a good division, the 5th Bavarian, which had just come into line and was fully prepared, for the enemy's barrage descended within three minutes of the commencement of our own. It was therefore not surprising that except in one place no impression was made even upon the first of the three

lines, that of the Langemarck Road.

The battle swayed about the pill-boxes, disused gunpits and fortified farms, which studded the country. Each pill-box in particular had to be taken by a distinct operation, the best method being a rush by bombers, who crept up and threw their missiles through the loopholes, which meanwhile were silenced by concentrated machine-gun fire. One of these structures, which was surrounded by water and approachable only by a narrow causeway, defied capture throughout the day.

A Company

The four Berkshire Companies had varying experiences in the battle. "A" Company on the right was heavily hit at zero hour by the barrage, which killed Captain Tripp (3rd East Surrey) and wounded the only other officer, Second-Lieutenant Brooke. Second-Lieutenant Buck then took over and maintained a defensive line in touch with the Ulster Division some two hundred yards in front of the jumping-off ground, and repelled two attempts of the enemy to thrust forward small parties through gaps in the line.

B Company

B Company also experienced great difficulty in getting through the moving barrage. Captain Norrish, their commander, walked up and down looking for a gap, and finally led his men through a rift near the north-east corner of St. Julien. This company spent the day in support to "A" and without getting to grips with the enemy lost forty men.

C Company

C Company alone had some small share of fighting. At 7 am. they encircled and took Hillock Farm which was holding up the advance of the Bucks, killing fifty of the garrison and capturing a few survivors. During the morning the Buckinghamshire pushed bravely and laboriously up to the Green Line on the Langemarck Road, and bit into two hundred yards of it, with both flanks in the air. "C" Company after losing all its officers provided some protection in a defensive left flank by clearing the enemy (who yielded six prisoners) from some gunpits about five hundred yards N.N.E. of St. Julien. This was accomplished under the leadership of CSM Heath, who received the M.C. The losses of this company amounted to at least fifty men.

The Berkshire Chronicle reported:-

CSM W H HEATH MC - csm Walter Henry Heath, Royal Berks Territorials of Sunnyside, Norcot Road, Tilehurst has been awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry on August 16th. When all the officers had become casualties he took charge of the company and carried on the attack. He has returned to England to take

up a commission after having served in France two years and eight months.

D Company

D Company had the lightest trial, for they did not cross the brook until the barrage had slackened at 5.15 am., and throughout the day they remained in support to the Buckinghamshire Battalion near the eastern bank, losing about thirty men. The total casualties, which were the lightest in the brigade, amounted to 35 killed and 138 wounded (including 5 officers) or about one-third of the battle strength.

The Berkshire Chronicle reported in their Sept 14th edition:-

One battalion [1st/4th] in which there is a large preponderance of Reading men, were heavily engaged on August 16th and despite the strong opposition which confronted them they were able to gain their objective and beat off counter-attacks. [TX00253]

A corporal wrote home:-

We have just come through the worst battle in which our battalion has been engaged and I am sorry to tell you that our casualties have been rather heavy, but ours are not to be compared with the enemy, on whom we inflicted tremendous losses. I have never been through such fighting and those who were fortunate enough to get through share the same opinion. The battle took place in the neighbourhood of ----- and after fighting which was most violent we were successful in taking our objective. We had to fight almost every inch of the way, so to speak. The German fire was murderous and I myself had so many escapes - I am sure there not many who did not - that I consider myself fortunate to be alive. They had corporate dugouts and their snipers, - well they seemed to be all over the place. I must say that our bombers did splendid work and our artillery was great. The boys although under heavy fire continuously swept over the ground in that gallant manner which has won the good old ----- [1st/4th] such praise. Talk about shells bursting - they were exploding all over the place! One alone killed a couple of fellows quite close to me. When we had taken the position the fighting had not finished by any means. The Huns made counter-attacks in masses and as the successive waves advanced they were broken up and destroyed in great numbers. They suffered hideously from our deadly shell and rifle fire which annihilated them. Indeed they were just like targets on a rifle range and as they advanced for the purpose of retaking the position they were simply mown down. The slaughter was dreadful. They sacrificed men wholesale and vigorous as their assaults were they never achieved their purpose. But oh dear! It was a dreadful affair with fighting going on hour after hour and I can tell you that I never want to go through another battle like it. Many Reading boys have gone under - Martin [1735] , Sergeant Parker [200670], Lukeman [200861] and Dee [200946] being among them. [TX00177]

The sergeant continued his account in the Berkshire Mercury:-

We launched the attack ay daybreak and three of our companies went over. We had to fight our way up a gradual slope and studded all over the place are shell

holes. Abandoning the old trench system which we could knock to pieces with artillery, the enemy has built a large number of concrete houses, commonly known as pill-boxes. These little garrisons were mostly composed of machine gunners and specially picked men and one can easily guess how strongly fortified is the Boches' ground. These blockhouses proved formidable things - hard nuts to crack, but for all that the Berks sewpt past a whole system of blockhouses in a manner calling for the highest praise.

The Berks achievement is rendered all the more creditable owing to the fearful conditions under which we had to fight. The weather had tuirned bad again and it is a remarkable fact that the division always clicks terrible weather whenever it goes into action. In places one was up to the neck in mud so to speak and of course such conditions are a great handicap to the boys. Many fell into shell holes and had to grope their way forward blindly in a wild downpour of rain and there were several instances where we had to lug one another out. But the lads did not allow all this to damp their spirits, which were wonderful and which stood them in such excellent stead and it is very gratifying indeed to know that our casualties were somewhat slight, A Company in particular escaping lightly.

Four or five blockhouses fell into our hands but we had to fight desperately to capture them. The Huns always hang onto them very strongly. The capture of these pill boxes is of enormous importance to us as they enable us to mount our guns on them and so get an elevation over our infantry. Many, owing to the state of the ground, were flooded.

Having taken the portion of the ridge we consolidated the position to the best of our ability, but this is a rotten job, owing to the mud and water. Frequently water could be seen oozing out of the dug outs. It is difficult to know how many prisoners were were taken but I know we captured quite a lot, many surrendering. Sergt Holloway [200010 William Charles Holloway] was killed by a shell which also mortally wounded another who was standing by his side 'Skinner' Kinchen [200916 Henry Kinchin] who had been twice wounded in previous engagements also lost his life as did Lance Cpl Brooks [200137 Arthur Charles Brooks]. Both of these had been with us some time. For the interest of Readingites I may mention that Sergt Martin [200620 Stanley Martin], son of Mr Martin of Hatherley Road, is now acting company sergeant major in succession to Sergt Major Heath [201108 Walter Henry Heath] who is taking a commission. [TX00615]

The Battalion report on the actions read:-

Battalion Report on the operations on the 15th, 16th and 17th August 1917 - Maps 20 A, 20 B, 20 C & 20 D

The Battalion moved to Reigerburg Camp midday on the 15th. After dinner, silence hours were ordered till tea time - 5.30.p.m. After tea all stores were issued as per list. A hot meal was issued about 10.p.m.

The Companies moved off in the following order:-

Headquarters: 'A' Company : 'C' Company : 'B' Company : 'D' Company, moving to the place of deployment via the Northern track to Admirals Road, thence along Admirals Road to the centre track, at the far end of which was the tape for deployment of 'A' & 'C' Companies, 'B' & 'D' Companies forming up behind them.

2nd Lt/ Goodenough and his party had marked out the line of deployment with tape, beforehand. The march was

well carried out, the whole Battalion formed up with no casualties. The enemy's shell fire on the brigade front was heavy. They were evidently expecting or looking out for an attack. Companies were in position at:-

'A' Coy - 2.45.a.m., 'B' Coy - 3.30.a.m., 'C' Company - 3.15.a.m.

'D' Coy - 3.30.a.m.

Battalion H.Q. were at a house south of St Julien (17 b 9.7.)

At zero, 4.45.a.m. our barrage was opened. The enemy's barrage came down in under three minutes. The barrage was much heavier on our right than our left and 'A' Companies casualties were heavy. Capt. Tripp who commanded the Company was killed just as he was advancing and the Company Seargent major took command of the Company, moving across the Steenbek and formed up on the farther side. Half platoon, with Company H.Q. took up their position at a concrete emplacement C 12 c 9.1., two platoons along in the line to the left.

About 6.0.a.m. hearing that the Company Commander had been killed and 2nd Lt Brooke wounded, I sent 2nd Lt. Buck to take command of the Company.

About 9.0.a.m. I noticed a small party of the enemy advancing towards the right flank. I sent a message that the Company should take special precautions for dealing with a counter attack.

At 9.40.a.m I again sent orders to them to form a defensive flank linking up with the Glosters on the left, and the Ulsters on the right, the latter about C 18 b 3.7. The two platoons on the left position C 18 2.8. were being heavily shelled so 2nd Lt. Buck moved them forward in three parties - one to concrete emplacement C 12 c 9.1., second to C 12 c 8.2. and third to C 12 c 6.3.

The right party moved forward about 6.30.a.m. to c 12 d 1.2., the other two parties moving to C 12 c 1.5. and C 12 c 5.7. Sniping and machine gun fire were responsible for several casualties as they were moving forward. The enemy were holding the gun pit at C 12 d 7. 4. About 10.a.m. a party of the enemy began to move forward and Lewis Gun and Rifle fire were opened on them, which stopped them. In the afternoon a Strong Point dug by the R.Es., C 12 c 9.£., was taken over by a platoon. On the evening of the 16th a Company of the 8th Royal Warwicks came up, taking over these positions and at 7.0.a.m. on the 17th the Company withdrew to O.G.1.

The platoon under 2nd Lt Brooke detailed to accompany the 3rd line of the Glosters to Wurst Farm was caught in the opening barrage. 2nd Lt. Brooke was wounded and several of the platoon were killed. They reformed and waited till the barrage slackened and then moved on linking up with the Glosters on the left near gun pit 12 d 2.1.

B. Company

While B Company formed up before advancing, they were heavily shelled. When the enemy's barrage came down immediately after Zero, a second barrage came down in front of them along St. Julien - Steenbek Valley. The Company Commander, Captain Norrish, halted the Company and made a persona reconnaissance to see if there were any gaps in the barrage. He found a gap by the village and went back and brought his Company through by the N.W. of the village, and, after crossing the river worked round to the N.E. side. The Company then

formed a line and dug in, forming small posts of about 6 men each. The right flank was near Border House, 18 a 8. 7.6. (sic) on a line running North West. This move was completed by about 7.0.a.m. At 8.15.a.m I sent orders to this Company to assist the Glosters in making another attack on the Green Line if ordered. Boundaries roughly Winnipeg to Spot Farm. About 10.a.m. I sent orders for this Company to remain in support of the 5th Glosters and be ready to counter attack in case they wanted assistance

The shelling on this Company Front was very heavy during the night. These positions were held during the 17th until the late afternoon when the Company withdrew in small parties of twos and threes to O.G.1. where they reformed and moved back to Rigersburg Camp.

C. Company

'C' Company, at Zero advanced, and crossed the river and, at the request of the Officer Commanding Bucks Battalion, two platoons went forward to assist the Bucks who were held up at a Strong Point C 12. c. 3.7. The Lewis Guns pushed forward and kept a continuous fire on the loopholes of the concrete shelter and Farm, thus enabling the point to be rushed. About 50 of the enemy were killed at this point. The Company then dug in about C 12 c and, about 11.30.a.m., two platoons moved forward to protect the left Flank of the Bucks Battalion. There was no sign of the Oxfords on their left and there was a dangerous gap at this point, They took up position in rear of gun pits at C 12 a 3.4. and 1.7. The casualties were heavy and they were continually sniped. They dug in about 100 yards clear of the gun pits, sending back 6 prisoners they had taken in this position. At 4.15.p.m. I sent them orders to be prepared to assist the Bucks in clearing up the situation. These dispositions were held till about 6.0.a.m on the 17th, when the two rear platoons withdrew to O.G.2.: the remaining two platoons withdrew about 6.p.m. to O.G.1. and thence to Reigersburg Camp.

About noon Captain Holmes was wounded, The Acting Company Seargent major took command as all the Officers were casualties and at 1.20.p.m. I sent orders to 2nd Lt. Crust to take command

'D' Company.

As there appeared much congestion on the Steenbeck, O.C. 'D' Company did not take his Company across till about 5.15.a.m. By this time the enemy's barrage had slackened and the Company only suffered slight casualties. At 6.0.a.m. they were in position behind the Bucks, about C 12 a 1. 1. to C 12 c 1.6. About noon one platoon was sent to watch the Bucks Right flank, taking up position across the road C 12 c 4. 5. Touch was obtained with 'B' Company on the right but no touch could be obtained with the Oxfords on the left, till the afternoon. These dispositions were held till about 6.0. a.m. on the morning of the 17th when the Company withdrew to O.G.2.

I beg to draw special attention to the handling of their commands to Capt Norrish, Captain Holmes and Company Seargent Major Heath. They carried out their duties in a skilful manner. The behaviour of the two platoons of 'C' Company was especially good. They gave the much needed assistance to the Bucks Battalion, working in close co-operation with them in the attack on the Strong Point and later taking up the position to defend their left flank.

Our casualties were as follows:-

Officers: Killed - Capt. H Tripp, 3rd East Surrey Regt, Attached

Wounded - Capt F Winsloe 2nd Lt. G.A. Brooke 2nd Lt. D Wood 2nd Lt. J H Oldridge Capt. B F Holmes, 4th Norfolk Regt, Attached

O. Rs: Killed 34, Wounded 123, Wounded (at duty) 10, Missing 5

While 'A' Company, 'D' Company and half of 'C' Company were in O.G.1. on the 17th orders were received to find various parties. They were detailed as follows.

'D' Coy. 1 Officer and 60 O.Rs.- for Stretcher Bearing. Relay Posts between BUFFS ROAD & ST JULIEN

" 2 Officers & 31 O.Rs. - Straggler Posts on Canal Bridges and guarding P.O.W. Cages#

1 Officer & 22 O.Rs. - Corps P.O.W. Cage

'C' Coy 1 Officer & 38 O.Rs. - Stretcher Bearing. Three Relay Posts between Kitcheners Wood and Calf Trench.

These parties returned on the morning of the 19th

On the night of the 17th a hot meal was issued to 'A' & 'B' Companies and also to two platoons of 'C' Company at Reigeresburg Camp. They then moved back to Dambre Camp, the move being completed by 1.0.a.m. on the 18th

The behaviour of all ranks in the march to the place of deployment, the actual deployment and the advance across Steenbeck was excellent. The gallantry and coolness of the stretcher bearers and runners, who were out all day and night, generally under heavy fire was beyond all praise.

The weather on the night fortunately was fine but the state of the ground was vile. There had been rain day and night for the last 10 days: the ground was pitted with shell holes which were half full of water.

In the original scheme Tanks were to have assisted but it was found impossible to move them owing to the heavy ground. The going was about as bad as it could be: men were often over their ankles in mud and great difficulty was experienced in the advance.

The enemy had solved the difficulty of defence by building a series of reinforced concrete emplacements and strong points, strong enough to keep out certainly 6" shells - possibly larger. These were arranged for mutual support to each other for flank fire only. One was quite surrounded by water and marsh except for a pathway. It was impossible to advance direct on this point. The only way of dealing with them was to get the Lewis Guns covering the loopholes whilst men crept up to the entrance with bombs and bayonets.

Although the Brigade was not successful in taking all their Objectives, yet they did all that was possible under the circumstances. The remarks of the Divisional General when he addressed the Battalion on the 19th show his opinion of the Brigades work.

The troops opposed to us belong to the 7th Bavarian Regiment of the 5th Bavarian Division - a good Division which had only just come into the line: they fought well and their morale was evidently good

21 August 1917 (Sgd) R J Clarke, Commanding 1/4th R. Berks [TX01268]

Trying again 27th August 1917

The battalion had a short respite from battle, but was brought back to attack the same ground on the 27th August. For although no renewal of the general assault was found practicable until the 20th September, it was deemed necessary, as a preliminary, to seize the low ridge of Gravenstal, which rises sixty feet above the Steenbeck, and gave the enemy eyes to see our preparations as far as Ypres. The same objectives were assigned, though the 145th Brigade was this time in reserve to the other two.

Orders read:-

Battalion Operation Order No 63, dated 26-8-1917 - Operations to be carried out on the 27th and 28th August 1917

The Battalion will leave Dambre Camp at 7.15.p.m. today the 26th Inst. And will proceed to Canal Rank at 8.30.p.m.

Route - High St.-Bath Road-Trench Board Track. 210 yards distance will be maintained between Companies.

Tomorrow, the 27th Instant: the head of the Battalion will W. of Canal Bank at Zero. Route - Trench Board Track from Bridge 2a marked with blue arrows to Buffs Road thence along St Julien Road or North or South of it across country. Zero will be notified later.

Method of advance to first halt.

The battalion will move to the Point of Assembly of the 143 Brigade at about 12 d 5.5. to 12 b 1.4. If moving across country on the double Company Front: 'B' & 'D' Coys - First Line, 'A' & 'C' Coys second line

Method of advance to forming up position. The Battalion moving from the above mentioned place of deployment will move on the double Company Front or on three Company Front:

'A', 'B' & 'D' Companies. 'C' Company behind 'A' & 'B' Companies. Company Commanders will decide which method, according to circumstances.

Method of Advance from place of Deployment.

Companies will form up on the place of deployment, each Company in three waves, each wave of two lines, about 25 yards distance between lines and 50 to 100 yards between waves. If these distances are not possible at the place of deployment, the lines will be formed up closer and distance made good as each line advances. Place of Deployment in the RED Line at Zero plus 3 hours.

Line of Advance.

(a) Right boundary - About 200 yards south of the St, Julien - Winnipeg Road

(b) Left boundary - A line drawn through 12 a 5. 2. , Springfield and the S in Stroppe Farm. The Battalion frontage is about 600 yards.

Objectives

A' Company -Trenches etc square about 7 b 4. 4. to 7 b 0.4. 'A' Company will find Liaison Post with Brigade on the right, at house at 7.b. 3.2.

'B' Company - Von Tirpitz Farm

'D' Company - Stroppe Farm and gun pit 7 a 95.95.

'C' Company - Will be in reserve not moving beyond the Red Line unless required.

No Posts will be withdrawn without special orders unless relieved.

The above orders apply if everything goes well according to programme.

Counter attack as per special instructions already issued.

Trench Mortars Two Stokes Guns will be attached to the Battalion. Special orders will be issued to the Officer in charge.

Machine Guns Four machine guns will accompany the last wave of the Battalion. Special orders will be issued to the Officer in charge, his chief care being the Right Flank of the Battalion.

Consolidation will be carried out by each platoon. Intensive digging will be commenced at once. If water is met with, extra length trenches will be dug. Shell holes can be utilized. The actual sighting of these trenches must be left to the senior officer or N.C.O. on the spot, who must decide whether to dig in front of the strong points or to their flank. A guiding wire should be run back as soon as possible from the strong point to the Red Line to mark the direction.

Transport Cookers, Water Cart, Mess Cart and one G.S. Limber for stores will move with the Battalion today.

Stores will be issued on the morning of the 27th as per list.

Dump

A dump for ammunition, water, extra rations and stores has been made near Northern House C 12 c 4. 8.

Rations for the 28th will be sent up early tomorrow morning to the canal bank. These, as well as the iron rations will be carried by all ranks

Signalling

Special instructions have been issued to the Battalion Signalling Officer.

Issued 1.10.p.m. (Sgd) S C Larn, Captain & Adjutant

1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment. [TX01269]

On the right of the 48th was the 61st, or second-line Territorial Division; their first co-operation on the battle-field was not fortunate, for both were unable to make headway and lost heavily. The plan of attack, which lacked all imagination, shook general confidence in the 5th Army Staff. The same impossible advance was expected without the aid of tanks, though by now the water lay knee-deep in the valley. Men struggling forward could be seen hoisting one another out of the glutinous mud which had engulfed them to the middle. To crown all, the attack started at the singular hour of 13:55 All the final preparations were open to the enemy's eye, and throughout the afternoon his machine guns played with deadly effect on the reserves crowding up the narrow tracks.

The only success achieved was the seizure by the 144th

Brigade of five hundred yards of the Green Line between Springfield and Keerselare Cross Roads. The Berkshires were not engaged, but took over at nightfall from the Warwick Brigade, who had exhausted themselves in fruitless attacks on the right of the Divisional front

Further attempts next day by the 1/4th Oxfordshire to extend our occupation of the Green Line proved unavailing, for the combatants were entirely exhausted.

An unnamed NCO gave his account:-

The Huns put up a very stubborn resistance and sold every hundred yards of ground as dearly as they could. I was informed afterwards that the fighting had been savage and fierce and when ultimately we relieved them which was about seven o'clock in the evening, we discovered a large number of machine guns and you can guess also a large number of dead. There was every evidence of their having gone to the utmost limit to check our men's advance, for high inside and out, dead bodies were to be found.

As regards ourselves we left at about two o'clock in the afternoon and had to travel a distance of between three and four miles to reach our destination. The ground was in shocking condition. In the dry weather a few days previously there was only a thin crust above the bogs between the shell holes but the rain which we experienced just prior to our advance turned it into a slough again. This of course makes it hard going for infantry laden with equipment for attack but for all that one and all stuck to their task manfully and with that cheerful spirit which is so characteristic of the British soldier - to back up those brave lads who were out to seize these concrete strongholds in which Germans sit with machine guns handy and heaps of ammunition.

All went well until we got within about a thousand yards of the spot and then the enemy sent down a heavy barrage. The drumfire of their guns never slackened for a moment and as for ours it had never stopped for I do not know how long in its steady slogging hammering. As we continued to go forward the noise of fire all round seemed to quicken and become intensified to a monstrous and overwhelming tumult. Under the fire which could be described as nothing less than murderous, we lost at least a couple of officers and some men. The officer of B Company [Capt Norrish NO0005] who fought through Gallipoli was killed by a shell and Captain ---- [Tripp TR0005] who I believe came from the Surreys was wounded. So was Sergt Paddick [200405] of Caversham who has won the Military Medal, Sergt Henson [200122] of Reading and Sergt Page [200296] of Wokingham. Well in time we reached our destination to find that our confreres had put the enemy to rout and we held the position for twenty-four hours when we were relieved. [TX00253]

A private too gave his account:-

The Berks in the final stages went forward under a terrifically heavy machine gun fire. Shells were continually falling around us and there were many who escaped death by chance. Capt ---- [Norrish] who was in charge of B Company was killed by a shell just before we reached our destination as was his orderly Drummer-Bugler W H Meads [201494] of Reading who lost his life by the same shell. We reached the strong points about two hours after the other battalions and for them to have accounted for the enemy in so short a time must be regarded as an

excellent performance. We discovered the Huns in shell-hole pits and as for snipers they were all over the place, many being cleverly concealed and exceedingly difficult to locate. Our progress was considerably retarded by the deplorable conditions of the ground. In places you went up to your neck in mud so to speak and as for the dead bodies they were to be seen almost everywhere. All this went to show the severity of the fighting which had taken place.

When we had taken over the positions which we had won we advanced a short distance beyond them but the enemy did not launch a counter attack. He was content with sending over at frequent intervals and from what we could hear in different directions he is fighting at various points with a great deal of artillery behind him. As for our guns they are simply great. It is creditable to the Royal Berks and those along with them that they did so much under such vile conditions. One thing more, and that is I should like to pay a tribute to the runners and stretcher bearers. On the occasion of our attack on August 16th they behaved magnificently. So they did in this instance. The runners who went backwards and forwards again and again through that slough of despond were real heroes. Yes we owe a lot to both our stretcher bearers and runners. [TX00253]

The Battalion report read:-

Battalion Report on Operations carried out on August 27th & 28th 1917

The Battalion moved from Dambre Camp to the Canal bank on the evening of the 26th.

The morning of the 27th was spent in issuing stores etc as per list.

The Battalion moved off in the following order:-

Headquarters, 'B' Company, 'D' Company, 'A' Company, 'C' Company

The head of the column leaving E. side of bridge 2a at Zero - 1.55.p.m. The route followed was the corduroy track to Buff Road, thence along the St. Julien Road to the Black Line, then in Artillery Formation along the road North and South of it.

The enemy's barrage came down chiefly in two places, about 300 yards South of St Julien and again 200 yards North of the Steenbeck. It was heavy in places, but by good leadership, the Battalion passed through both barrages with few casualties.

On arriving at my Headquarters, Northern House, St. Julien. I got in touch with the Commanding Officer of the 8th Warwicks, who informed me that the 143 Brigade Attack had not made progress. 'B' & 'D' Companies by this time were beginning to arrive, and under the circumstances I decided it would be of no use to push on and take up their assembly positions. The machine gun fire was very heavy at this time sweeping the St Julien-Hillock Farm Road. About 5.30.p.m. I sent orders to O.C. 'B' & 'D' Companies to get in position, if possible in small parties, as the machine gun fire was heavy, as by this time I knew definitely that the 143 Brigade attack had not succeeded.

At 8.20.p.m., 27-8-1917, I received orders to relieve the 143 Brigade with my Battalion, and, after conversation with the Commanding Officers of the 8th & 6th Battalions, the relief was carried out as follows:-

'A' & 'C' Companies relieved 5th & 6th Warwicks on the

Right

'B' & 'D' Companies relieved 7th & 8th Warwicks on the Left.

This relief was completed by 2.50.a.m. 28-8-1917

On the morning of the 28th I sent orders to O.C. 'C' Company to get in touch with the troops at Border House and to my surprise found that about 3 platoons of a Company of the 8th Warwicks were on my Right. The position of these troops had not been notified to me by either of the Commanders. I instructed O.C. 'C' Company to relieve these troops at dusk on the 28th, which relief was carried out.

The day passed with the Battalion holding their dispositions. 'A' Company had a good lot of sniping and Lewis Gun fire at parties of the enemy who tried to advance from the Winnipeg-Springfield Road but who each time failed. In front of 'B' & 'D' Companies the situation was very quiet all day. The collection of the wounded was carried on throughout the day, the stretcher bearers working extremely bravely and hardily, in spite of the terrible condition of the ground.

At dark we were relieved by the 2/10th Londons, one Company relieving our two Right Companies, a second Company relieving our two Left Companies. The relief was completed by 10.45.p.m. passing off very well.

The terrible condition of the ground was greatly responsible for the none success of the other Brigades, the ground in many places was nearly knee deep in water, and often men were stuck up to their waist in mud and had to help pull each other out. The rain on the night of the 26th had been exceptionally heavy and had converted the ground into a quagmire. The enemy's barrage was heavier in the afternoon than in reply to our 7.0'clock barrage. Their fire again at night was heavy - they did not put down any regular barrage.

The majority of casualties were from machine gun fire which was heavy along the St Julien-Hillock Farm Road.

Our total casualties were:

Officers - Killed - Captain W Norrish (10th Middlesex Regt, Attach)

Wounded - Captain C C Shaw (4th Northants, Attach)

Other Ranks - Killed 9

D.of W. 1

Wounded 47

Shell Shock 4

The behaviour of all ranks, ably led by their platoon Commanders in the march up through the barrage, and throughout the operations was excellent

After the relief (The last Section being in about 2.0.a.m.) th Battalion returned to Reigersburg Camp thence moving back to Dampre Camp on the 29th

(Sgd) R J Clarke, Commanding Officer, 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regt [TX01270]

Relief

28th August to 16th September 1917

On the night of the 28th the battalion was relieved by

two companies of the 2/10th London Regiment, thus half a battalion held defensively the whole attacking front of a brigade. The losses this time amounted to 11 killed, including Captain Norrish (10th Middlesex, attached) and 51 wounded.

Withdrawn to Dambre Camp and then to St. Jan Ter Beezen, the battalion was pursued with long-range shelling and night bombing, but moved far to the rear on the 16th September to Audenfort near Calais.

Audenfort 16th to 27th September 1917

At Audenfort the inhabitants, sheltered from the realities of war, proved at first far from friendly. During the musketry training which occupied most at the time, "A" Company had the satisfaction of beating all the other companies of the division in a practice fired under the eyes of the G.O.C.

Last Gasp 27th September 1917

A final return was made on the 27th September to the same blighted region, now enveloped with the dense mists of autumn. The tide of war had flowed forward for more than a mile since the great attack of the 20th, and the British troops were pursuing their bloody way beyond the eastern slopes of the Gravenstal Ridge.

On the 30th Lt G M Gathorne-Hardy was hit by a bomb. The Berks Chronicle of 19/10/17 reported:-

We regret to state that Lieutenant G M Gathorne-Hardy MC Royal Berks son of the Hon A E Gathorne-Hardy JP of The Priory Donnington Newbury was wounded by a bomb on the night of September 30th and that it was necessary for the left foot to be removed below the ankle. He is progressing favourably. [TX00740A]

Col Clarke reported:-

The Battalion moved from Audenfort at 12. o'clock midnight 26th September 1917 and marched to Auduicq where we entrained at 5.30.a.m. (27th) arriving at Brielen at 11.10. a.m. From Brielen the battalion marched to Reigersburg Camp. At 4.0.p.m. orders were received to move up into Canobus Trench, with Battalion Headquarters at Cheddar Villa.

On the night of the 29th/30th September we relieved the 1/5th Gloucesters in the Right Sub-Sector front line, the relief being completed by 10.30.p.m.

On the morning of the 30th, the enemy bombarded behind our front line at 6.0.a.m. but no infantry attack developed. The weather was very foggy and it was not until 8.a.m. that anything could be seen.

On the night of the 1st October the front line positions were moved forward 50 to 100 yards. This move was successfully completed by 1.0.a.m. without any interference on the part of the enemy. The object of moving the front line posts forward was to enable the 143 Brigade to form up for their attack on the line of our original front line. [TX01271A]

4th October 1917

On the 4th October the 143rd Brigade advanced some fifteen hundred yards, with the 145th in support. For the next three days the Royal Berkshire moved about uneasily behind the front lines, changing their bivouac every night, continuously soaked by the rain which again fell pitilessly.

The Battalion withdrew from its dispositions at 4.0.a.m. on the 4th October, less the Outpost Company which consisted of two platoons of 'C' Company and two platoons of 'D' Company, leaving the 143 Infantry Brigade in their forming up positions on our original front line ready for their attack which followed shortly after. On withdrawal the battalion proceeded to Reigersburg Camp arriving at 7.30.a.m. The Outpost Company withdrew at 8.0.a.m. rejoining the battalion at Reigersburg Camp.

At 9.0.a.m on the 5th October we moved from Reigersburg Camp to shelters in Canal Bank, taking over from the 1/4th Gloucesters. [TX01271B

]

7th October 1917

On the 7th they crawled through the trackless mire, plentifully besprinkled with gas by the way, to the front lines. In twenty-four hours the 7th Worcestershire took over after a long and arduous relief, which was complicated by the killing or burying en route of nearly all the guides sent back to direct them.

At 9.30. a.m on the 7th Inst the Battalion moved from Canal Bank to Dambre Camp. At 2.30. p.m. verbal orders were received to take over the line and the Battalion moved off in Motor Busses, to Admiral's Road, leaving Dambre Camp about 8.0.p.m. We took over the Right Sub-Sector front line dispositions which were held by four battalions namely:- 1/4th Oxfords, 1/5th, 1/6th & 1/8th Royal Warwicks

'C' Company was lent to the Bucks and took over support position in the Left Sub-Sector front line.

The weather was extremely wet and the march from Admirals Road to the front line was particularly unpleasant one, owing to the thickness of the mud and the constant rain: many men having to be pulled out of the mud on the way up. 'A' Company were in the front line, 'B' Company in Support and 'D' Company at Springfield.

The Battalion was relieved by the 1/7th Worcesters who formed up for the attack of the 144 Brigade, behind our front line. The night was a particularly bad one with constant heavy rain and the ground was in a perfectly appalling condition. The four Companies of the 1/7th Worcesters were successfully guided to their forming up positions in spite of the fact that it was impossible to see anything in the darkness and heavy rain, and in spite also of the fact that the party of guides detailed for them by 'A' Company were shelled on the way to Battalion H.Q., knocking out most of the party. The few remaining men arrived at Battalion H.Q. in a deplorable condition having been buried by shell fire and being covered from head to feet in mud. These men however, after recovering somewhat from their experiences managed to lead the Worcesters to 'A' Company H.Q., where O.C. 'A' Company superintended the taking up of their forming up positions.

On relief, which was completed by 1.50.am. The Battalion moved to Cheddar Village, taking up the same dispositions as those held on the 27th ulto, the Battalion being in Divisional

Reserve. [TX01271C]

8th October 1917

Next day the familiar rôle of Divisional reserve was allotted to the battalion while the 144th were being shattered in another fruitless attack.

According to Cruttwell the battalion were not engaged:-

The 144th Brigade attacked again on the 8th-9th October, under the worst possible conditions; our battalion, in Divisional Reserve was allotted to the Brigade and lay out scattered by companies until dusk on the 9th ready to repel counter-attacks and to lend help as required but was not actively engaged. [TX00616]

However, according to an unnamed sergeant giving his recollections to the Berkshire Chronicle, published 14/12/1917 they were indeed very actively engaged:-

On Oct 10 they took part in what is known as the third battle of Ypres. The battalion had previously crossed a canal and had consolidated about a couple of hundred yards on the other side and their objective was a little piece of ridge on the right of - [St Julien?]. To accomplish their task they had to cover a distance of between 600 and 700 yards and to the great credit of the brave Berkshire lads and to the ---[] who were fighting with them they succeeded in achieving this end after about a couple of hours fighting.

Describing what took place the sergeant said: We launched the attack ay daybreak and three of our companies went over. We had to fight our way up a gradual slope and studded all over the place are shell holes. Abandoning the old trench system which we could knock to pieces with artillery, the enemy has built a large number of concrete houses, commonly known as pill-boxes. These little garrisons were mostly composed of machine gunners and specially picked men and one can easily guess how strongly fortified is the Boches' ground. These blockhouses proved formidable things - hard nuts to crack, but for all that the Berks sewpt past a whole system of blockhouses in a manner calling for the highest praise.

The Berks achievement is rendered all the more creditable owing to the fearful conditions under which we had to fight. The weather had tuined bad again and it is a remarkable fact that the division always clicks terrible weather whenever it goes into action. In places one was up to the neck in mud so to speak and of course such conditions are a great handicap to the boys. Many fell into shell holes and had to grope their way forward blindly in a wild downpour of rain and there were several instances where we had to lug one another out. But the lads did not allow all this to damp their spirits, which were wonderful and which stood them in such excellent stead and it is very gratifying indeed to know that our casualties were somewhat slight, A Company in particular escaping lightly.

Four or five blockhouses fell into our hands but we had to fight desperately to capture them. The Huns always hang onto them very strongly. The capture of these pill boxes is of enormous importance to us as they enable us to mount our guns on them and so get an elevation over our infantry. Many, owing to the state of the ground, were flooded.

Having taken the portion of the ridge we consolidated the position to the best of our ability, but this is a rotten job,

owing to the mud and water. Frequently water could be seen oozing out of the dug outs. It is difficult to know how many prisoners were were taken but I know we captured quite a lot, many surrendering. Sergt Holloway [200010 William Charles Holloway] was killed by a shell which also mortally wounded another who was standing by his side 'Skinner' Kinchen [200916 Henry Kinchin] who had been twice wounded in previous engagements also lost his life as did Lance Cpl Brooks [200137 Arthur Charles Brooks]. Both of these had been with us some time. For the interest of Readingites I may mention that Sergt Martin [200620 Stanley Martin], son of Mr Martin of Hatherley Road, is now acting company sergeant major in succession to Sergt Major Heath [201108 Walter Henry Heath] who is taking a commission.

Strangely this account resembles the battle fought near St Julien which Cruttwell allots to August 10th, however the sergeant's description and accuracy is supported by the dates recorded for the deaths of Holloway, Kinchim and Brooks.

That night motor-lorries took the exhausted men back to Dambre Camp. Their losses were not heavy — 16 killed and 68 wounded — but they had enjoyed no real sleep for five nights, and all agreed that the hardships they had experienced far exceeded all others in the war. Thus ended their intermittent share for seventy days in that tremendous and ill-conducted battle, which had cost them in all over four hundred men.

On the 9th inst the Battalion remained in Reserve in Canopus Trench and California Drive with battalion H.Q. in Cheddar Villa.

The 144th Infantry Brigade attacked at 5.20.a.m. and orders were received at 11.50.a.m to move two Companies forward to repel Counter Attacks. 'C' & 'D' Companies moved up to the vicinity of Winchester Farm taking up their positions in Shell Holes. Captain O.B. Challenor M.C. moved forward with 'C' and 'D' Companies and got in touch with Lt. Col. H St G Schomberg of the 1/6th Gloucesters

Battalion Headquarters 'A' and 'B' Companies received orders to move to Springfield at 2.20.p.m. 'A' Company taking up dispositions in shell holes in the immediate vicinity of Springfield and 'B' Company occupied shell holes just in front of Arbre. Headquarters being established and Janet Farm.

On the 10th inst the two forward Companies, withdrew at 5.10.p.m. Battalion H.Q. 'A' and 'B' Companies withdrawing at 6.0.p.m

The Battalion reformed on the Canal Bank and proceeded by lorries to Dambre Camp, the last Company arriving at midnight.

The conditions throughout this tour in the line were abnormally rough, and the Commanding Officer issued a special order of the day expressing his appreciation of the way in which the Battalion had successfully passed through a most trying time.

Our casualties during this tour were:- Officers:- Gassed 3

Other Ranks - Killed 16, Missing 1, Wounded in action 51,Gassed 8

29-10-1917 (Sgd) J N Aldworth, Major, Commander 1/4th

R.Berks [TX01271D]

Sources

Petre pp

Cruttwell pp117-129

Berkshire Chronicle

War Diaries