

Section 274

The Third Battle of Ypres

2nd/4th Battalion, July - August 1917

The 2nd/4th had been training in the back areas and moving gradually northwards in June. (continued from section 264)

2/4th Bn. Royal Berks Regt. [TX00690]

Buysscheure

27th July to 15th August 1917

The train journey north from Auxi le Chateau to St Omer was very tiring but at the end there was still another few miles to march to their billets at St Momelin near Buysscheure. Here training continued through July and the early part of August.

Orders for the next stage of the journey were issued on the 14th.

ORDER NO 88

Ref. Map HAZEBROUCK 5a 1/100,000

14th August 1917

1.The Battalion (less Transport) will march tomorrow, 15th inst to ARNEKE, and entrain for the WATOB AREA. Transport will march as per Orders already issued.

2.Starting Point :- Cross Roads 300 yards N of OOST-HOUCK CHURCH.

3.Time :- 8.20 am.

4.Route :- via Road N of OOSTHOUCK – BALEMBERG.

5.Order of March :- Signals, Drums, HQ, A, B, C, & D Coys. Halts will be made at 15 minutes to the clock hour and the march resumed at the clock hour. Steel Helmets will be worn. After detraining a distance of 500 yards will be maintained between Battalions.

6.Rations for consumption on 15th (tomorrow) will be carried on the man. They will boil their own tea in mess tins Rations for consumption on the 16th inst will be drawn in new area.

7.All Officers Valises and Mess Boxes will be ready at their respective messes for collection by Transport at 7.15 am.

8.Water bottles will filled before departure.

9.All billets will be left scrupulously clean, and certificates rendered that this has been done.

10.Battn HQ will close at BUYSSCHEURE at 8.15am, after which hour reports will be made to head of column during the march.

ACKNOWLEDGE

BY ORDER

Issued at 6 pm.

J S Darby 2/Lieut and A/Adjutant

Brandhoek

15th to 20th August 1917

They left St Momelin on the 15th, marching to Arneke where they were loaded onto a train for Abeele. From here it was but a short march to their billets at Hillehock just west of Poperinghe. Here they were kitted out with what was euphemistically called 'New fighting order kit'

ORDER NO 89

18TH August 1917

1.The Battalion will march today, 18th inst, to GOLDFISH CHATEAU area.

2.Starting Point:- Present Camp.

3.Time :- 2 a.m.

4.Route :- L.10.a.3.5. – SWITCH ROAD – VLAMERTINCHE.

5.Order of March :- Sigs, Drums, HQ, A.B.C. & D Coys.

Halts will be made at 10 minutes before the clock hour.

A distance of 200 yards will be maintained between each platoon throughout the march. HQ will be considered as a platoon.

Succeeding platoons must keep touch.

Cookers will march with the Transport.

Transport will march brigaded. Each Battalion Transport will be divided equally into two echelons, which will march at 200 yards distance. A similar distance will be maintained between Battalions.

Transport Starting Point :- L.17.b.2.1.

Time :- 5.25 a.m.

Route :- via L.11.c. & a.

6.All Officers valises will be dumped at Transport Lines by 12.30 a.m. Mess boxes will be taken by Companies and dumped at QM Stores. Each Company will send valises to Transport at once.

7.Lewis Guns, Spare parts, magazines, etc, will be loaded on their respective limbers by 12.30 a.m.

8.All lines will be left perfectly clean.

9.Battalion HQ will close at 2 a.m. and reopen at new area on arrival. During the march reports will be made to the head of column.

ACKNOWLEDGE

Issued at 12.15 a.m.

BY ORDER

2/Lt & A/Adjutant

2/4th Royal Berks Regt [TX00691]

On the 19th they moved on to Goldfish Chateau camp near Brandhoek.

The Third Battle of Ypres

The official start of the Third Battle of Ypres was to be the 25th July 1917 with the bombardment beginning on the 15th. The principal aim of the battle was to capture the channel ports, especially Antwerp, to deny the Germans their use as submarine bases. To this end the 8th Royal Berks had been in training for an amphibious assault on the Belgian coast. Haig was confident that a concerted attack through the Ypres salient would enable his forces to break the German line and swing north to reinforce the amphibious operations. A second objective was to divert German effort from the French front to the south which had been weakened by mutinies and doubts about the level of American participation in the war.

The plan began auspiciously with the exploding of nineteen giant mines under the Messines Ridge on the south of the salient on the 7th June. When the main assault was eventually launched on the 31st July it soon floundered in the mud and the rain. The breakthrough never happened and the amphibious operation was called off.

The 2nd/4th joined this maelstrom on the 20th August when they relieved the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire in the left support trenches at Wieltje, N.E. of Ypres.

Their order to join the battle came on the 20th August

BATTALION ORDER NO 90

Ref. Map. BELGIUM 28 NW 1/20,000 FRENZENBERG Edition 2 1/10,000

20th August 1917

1.The Battalion will relieve the 2/4 OXFORDS in LEFT SUPPORT tonight 20/21st inst.

2.STARTING POINT:- Road junction [unreadable].

3.TIME:- 7.15 pm.

4.ORDER OF MARCH:- Sigs, HQ, "A" "B" "C" & "D" A distance of 200 yards will be maintained between platoons.

5.GUIDES who have reconnoitred the area today will be responsible for leading their platoons to Support Area.

6.All Trench Map, Sketches, aeroplane photos, SOS Signals, Trench Stores etc., will be handed over and receipts given for same in triplicate. The copies will reach Battn HQ by 12 noon 21st inst.

7.Rations will be carried on the man.

8.Lewis Guns will be carried by Companies.

9.Officers valises will be dumped at Guard Room by 5 pm

today. Mess boxes will dumped at Guard Room by 7 pm today.

10.Lines will be left perfectly clean. OC "D" Coy will leave a party of one 2/Lt and 4 men to hand over Camp. They will remain here tonight and rejoin Battn by 8 am tomorrow, 21st inst.

11.Code for completion of relief:- "JOCK".

12.Battn HQ close at 7 pm and re-open again at WEILTJA Area on arrival.

ACKNOWLEDGE

Issued at.....

BY ORDER

JS Darby

2/Lieut and A/Adjutant,

2/4th Bn, Royal Berks Regt [TX00692]

Entering the Battle

21st August 1917

Their move was completed by 22:00 and next day was fairly quiet with heavy shelling between 09:00 and 11:00 in which one man was killed [220209 William Underwood of Pewsey] and 13 wounded.

A gun of A Battery, 307th Brigade R.F.A., had been blown up by a shell and several men buried. Captain Willink, with a sergeant and three men, volunteered to go forward under heavy shell fire, and by their gallant exertions several buried men were dug out and saved. This action would in any previous war probably have been rewarded with the VC. He received the MC instead on the 18th September.

Orders for the forthcoming battle were issued on the 20th.

ORDER NO 91.

Ref. Map. FRENZENBERG 1/10,000

20th August 1917

1. The 184th INF BDE will attack the enemy defences from D.14.c.6.7. to D.7.c.35. For boundaries, see Map attached to these orders.

The 44th INF BDE will attack on the Right.

The 48th DIVISION will attack on the Left.

Division between 44th INF BDE and the 184th INF BDE will be a line drawn through

D.19.a.3.4 – D.13.d.4.2 (GALLIPOLI exclusive to 184th INF BDE) – D.14. Central MARTHA HOUSE) inclusive to the 184th INF BDE).

2. ZERO will be about 4.45 am.

Exact hour will be notified later.

The Infantry will advance and the barrage commence at ZERO.

3. The Brigade Attack will be divided in RIGHT ATTACKA and LEFT ATTACK.

The BUCKS will attack on the Right.

The OXFORDS will attack on the Left.

4. ASSEMBLY.

Arrangements to be made with OC Assaulting Battalions as per Map attached.

5. OBJECTIVES.

Platoon.	Commander.	Objective.
No 1	Lt HILL.	FOKKER.
No 2	Lt GLOVER.	CROSS COTT.
No 3	Lt KIRKLAND.	AISNE HOUSE
No 4	Lt St LEGIER.	SOMME.
No 5	Lt JEWEL	SCHULER.
No 6]	Lt GILMOR]	POND FARM
No 13]	Lt WILMOT]	
No 7	Lt SAW	Left flank guard for OXFORDS.
No 8	Lt EXLER	HINDU
No 9]	Lt STEVENS	MARTHA HOUSE
No 12]	Lt ROBINSON	
No 10	Lt MACKINNON.	GREEN HOUSE
No 11	Lt GRIFFIN	GUN POSITION near 15. Central.

6. After 10 pm, 21st inst, all Platoons, except Nos 14 7 15, will come under orders of the Battalions to which they are attached.

7. BARRAGE TIMES will be notified later.

8. FLARES will only be lit in the front line and any Post in Advance of same.

9. CONSOLIDATION.

Each platoon will consolidate its objective when taken and hold at all costs, until relieved by another Battalion.

10. CONTACT AEROPLANES will be marked by two black projections on each [TX00693]

On the evening of the 21st, the battalion moved into assembly trenches for an attack on the following day

Attack on the Strong Points 22nd to 24th August 1917

This attack, in so far as it concerns the Royal Berkshire Battalion, was that of the 184th Brigade on the enemy defences S.E. of St. Julien. On the right of the brigade was the 44th Brigade (15th Division), on the left the 3rd Brigade. The direction of the attack was north-eastwards and the front-line troops of the 184th Brigade were the 2/1st Buckinghamshire on the right, and the 2/4th Oxford and Bucks on the left.

The function of the 2/4th Royal Berkshire was to supply thirteen platoons for dealing with the numerous strong points which were known to exist in the area to be attacked. The Berkshire platoons were to follow close up behind the leading battalions, and, as each strong point was approached, were to dash through the leading waves

and assault it, leaving the leading battalions to pursue their way without having to consider the risk of leaving the strong points in rear. These would be either taken by the Berkshire men, or so surrounded and blockaded as to be unable to harass the assaulting battalions in flank or rear.

The Berkshire platoons were thus detailed to deal with the several strong points.

Platoon. Officer Commanding. Strong point to be attacked.

1	2nd-Lieut. A. C. L. Hill	Somme
4	2nd-Lieut. G. W. de St. Legier Do.	
2	2nd-Lieut. A. K. Glover	Cross Cottages
3	2nd-Lieut. C. L. B. Kirkland	Aisne House
5	2nd-Lieut. H. W. Jewell	Schuler
7	2nd-Lieut. A. E. Saw	To act as left flank guard for 2/4 OBLI
6	2nd-Lieut. G. A. F. Gilmor	Pond Farm
13	2nd-Lieut. F. A. N. Wilmot	Do.
8	2nd-Lieut. F. Exier	Hindu Cottage
9	2nd-Lieut. W. H. Stevens	Martha House
12	2nd-Lieut. A. H. Robinson	Do.
10	2nd-Lieut. D. Mackinnon	Green House
11	2nd-Lieut. H. S. Griffin	Gun positions about centre

Pond Farm

The first strong point encountered was Pond Farm towards the left. This was attacked from the right flank by Second-Lieutenant Wilmot with No. 13 Platoon, and from the left by Second-Lieutenant Gilmor and No. 6. Both these officers were wounded at the commencement. Owing to the strong machine-gun fire, Sergeant Shackleton (in charge of Wilmot's platoon after the latter was wounded) was unable to get into the farm, but the fire of the platoons from the positions they had attained so occupied the attention the garrison as to completely prevent their interference with the assaulting troops. Sergeant Shackleton, who afterwards received the D.C.M. for his conduct this day, having reorganized his platoon, made a second attempt to take the farm, but was held up twenty yards from it. He succeeded in surrounding it and keeping the garrison fully occupied till the afternoon, when he was joined by two platoons of the 2/5th Gloucestershire whom he helped in the storm of the farm, where thirty-five prisoners were taken.

Sgt Shackleton was awarded the DCM - his citation read:-

No 202908 Sgt Shackleton F "D" Coy, 2/4th Bn Royal Berks Regt (TF).

"At POND FARM, near WIELTJE in the attack on 22nd August 1917, when his Platoon Commander was knocked

out at the outset, took command of the platoon and showed the greatest courage and skill in his handling of it. This strong point was assaulted three times before being finally taken, and this non-commissioned officer participated in each attack. In the last attack he took the residue of his Platoon over with one of the two platoons of the Gloster Regt, making the final and successful assault. It was due to his initiative in engaging the enemy machine guns during the initial stage of the attack that the casualties in the leading wave were considerably reduced". [WD4.2 21/9/17]

Hindu Cottage

The next strong point on the left was Hindu Cottage. Here Second-Lieutenant Exler was wounded as soon as the advance began, but the platoon went on. Marshy ground prevented it from entering from the front, but it got beyond the strong point and surrounded it, thus enabling the assaulting waves to go on without hindrance from it.

Schuler

The remaining strong point on the left was Schuler, which fell to the lot of Second-Lieutenant Jewell and No.5 Platoon. Despite the fact that the Division on the left was held up, and his left flank was consequently exposed, Jewell pushed gallantly on and stormed the galleries constituting the strong point. In it were taken two officers and seventy-four Germans of other ranks. After despatching these to the rear, Jewell set to work to consolidate the position which, owing to a retirement on his right, and a failure to get up his left, was almost isolated.

In this post he held on for two days, making up three local counter-attacks of the enemy. After two days he and Private Pike in Hindu Cottage, was relieved by the 2/6th Gloucestershire. For his exploit Jewell received a well-earned Military Cross.

His citation read:-

2nd Lieut H W Jewell, 2/4th Bn Royal Berks Regt (TF).

"Near WIELTJE, at SCHULER FARM, on 22nd August 1917, shewed great courage and resource when, after taking the concrete gallery he came under exceptionally heavy machine gun and rifle fire, and finding the attack on the left was held up and his flank badly exposed, he threw back a protective flank and succeeded in dispersing an enemy counter-attack which was forming up on his left front". [WD4.2 18/9/17]

Somme

We must now turn to the strong points on the right of the attack. The first of these was Somme. As Second-Lieutenant St. Legier approached he and two men rushed ahead through the leading waves and the British barrage in front of them. This enabled them to enter the strong point from rear and to kill the whole garrison. St. Legier also consolidated his position, like Jewell, and held it till relieved two days later. He repulsed several

counter-attacks during this period, and also received the Military Cross.

St Legiers citation read:-

2nd Lieut G W de St Legier, 6th Bn Devon Regt attached 2/4th Bn Royal Berks Regt (TF).

"Near WIELTJE on 22nd August 1917, this Officer was detailed with his platoon to assist in the capture of SOMME FARM, a strong point known to be very formidable. On nearing the objective he with two others rushed through our own barrage and round the flank at considerable personal risk and bombed the position with the greatest gallantry from the rear. But for his action this post might have fallen, and would most certainly have held out a considerable time and delayed the advance of the Right attacking Battalion. After taking the post this officer held it against heavy fire from the strong point GALLIPOLI on his Right, and also a bombing attack which he completely defeated, killing every one of the hostile bombers". [WD42-18/9/17]

Green House, Cross Cottage and Martha House

Owing to the 15th Division being held up on the right, there was such a heavy machine-gun fire from that direction that the attacks on Green House, Cross Cottage and Martha House were impracticable; but the platoons detailed for them were able to give valuable assistance to the 2/1st Buckinghamshire in forming a curved line which ran from in front of Somme post on the right, north-eastwards in front of Hindu Cottage and Schuler posts on the left. On this line three counter-attacks were repulsed.

Private Pike's Exploit

In connexion with the attack on Hindu Cottage the Battalion Diary tells a most extraordinary story to the following effect: Private Pike, of A Company, who had lost his own platoon, happened to get into the strong point, apparently unobserved. In it he found nineteen Germans, of whom thirteen were unwounded. He took the whole lot prisoners and remained there alone guarding them for two days, till he was relieved by an officer of the 2/6th Gloucestershire. How he managed to bluff these nineteen men into surrender to a single private, and to avoid being overpowered by them during the two days, is almost inconceivable. The only possible explanation seems to be that they knew they were surrounded and could not escape.

That the story was substantiated is clear from the fact that Pike was awarded the Military Medal for his exploit. There are other points which are mysterious, such as why the strong point was not entered by the attacking platoon.

Private Pike has kindly furnished us with his own account of his exploit of which the following is the substance:

About 5 a.m. his platoon was lying out in No-Man's Land, waiting for the barrage, with orders to make a right incline towards its objective. Pike, however, made a mistake and went straight forward. He only discovered

his error when he found himself alone Presently, he found himself with some of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and was with them at the clearing of several strong points. He was then asked by a sergeant of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry to carry back a message. He started with it, hoping to get back to his own regiment after delivering it. He had gone some six hundred yards when the fire was so hot that he got into a shell-hole for shelter and had a shot or two at a German sniper whom he saw. He then worked his way over to the strong point, hoping to get his direction from it. Arriving there he found himself in an awkward position, as it was in German hands. One of the Germans came out and attacked him, but was wounded and got back into the strong point. He apparently told his friends inside that they were surrounded, and, when summoned by Pike, they held up their hands and he was able to remove all their arms and bombs. After this they began to show symptoms of resistance, but there was only one entrance to the strong point, and Pike outside that was able to overawe them, as he was armed and they were not. There he remained for two days on guard, unable to eat and not daring to sleep, for a moment's unconsciousness meant that he would be done for.

About 2 a.m. on the second day, when he was utterly exhausted, he heard footsteps coming round the strong point and, supposing them to be the enemy, believed he was lost and prepared for a fight. Fortunately, the footsteps turned out to be those of an officer of the Gloucestershire Regiment and his party, and Pike's troubles were at an end. The Germans were duly fetched out as prisoners. It was only when they recounted that Pike knew how many prisoners he had. The Gloucestershire officer was wounded and Pike accompanied him as retired. He then thought of delivering the Oxford and Bucks sergeant's message, which was probably not of much value after two days' delay. It hardly surprising that Pike found he had lost it. He was told, with what truth we do not know, that he had been recommended for the V.C.

The diary of the 2/6th Gloucestershire Regiment made no mention of the incident.

Overview

The attack had on the whole not been too successful. Tanks had been unable to give the assistance intended, owing to the marshy ground. In the night of the 23rd-24th the line was taken over by the 183rd Brigade and the 2/4th Royal Berkshire returned to Goldfish Château.

Casualties

The Battalions casualties were heavy:-

Officers. *Wounded:* 2nd-Lieuts. F. A. N. Wilmot, G. A. F. Gilmor, F. Exier, C. L. B. Kirkland, A. K. Glover,

A. H. Robinson, A. E. Saw. *Wounded and Missing:* 2nd-Lieuts. H. S. Griffin, D. Mackinnon. 2Lt Griffin was later reported killed.

Other Ranks: Killed 32, Wounded 111, Missing 79 (25 of them known to be wounded).

The Berkshire Chronicle of the 7th September 1917 gave the following account:-

A battalion composed to a large extent of Reading men was, on August 22nd., engaged in a fierce conflict and in the words of one of the officers it "did splendidly" The Berks followed other regiments being assigned to the duties of 'moppers up', in other words they had to take a number of strong points. Of these there were many. They consisted of concrete blockhouses or emplacements which the enemy had built as his new means of defence. In every one of these, as well as in the dug-outs he had machine guns and as for snipers, to use the phrase of one who went through the engagements, there were 'bags of them'. The ground too was literally smothered with shell holes and as the Berks with their confreres went forward over that shell-destroyed ground, they left behind them Germans hidden in shell holes who sniped our men in the rear and picked off many, until later in the day they were routed out. Soon after the advance had started rapid machine gun fire poured out of two concrete emplacements but these were captured after several rushes. Another gave great trouble. It contained a number of machine guns and a garrison of about 30 gunners and snipers and it did not fall until night time. The Berks bombing parties did exceedingly good work and took quite a number of strong points. There were however instances in which the use of the bayonet had to be resorted to. In one dug-out a Berks sergeant was being badly treated by three Huns. He was being kicked and struck in the jaw, but on being discovered was soon rescued and the Germans will not have the opportunity of again meting out similar treatment to British soldiers. The fortunes of the day alternated, but at the end we had gained and held the ground that we intended to.

It was at dawn when the objective was taken and then the enemy launched counter-attacks all of which were beaten off. However the enemy's barrage fire was fiercely sustained and was still intense when the Berks were relieved. "The casualties, I am afraid, were heavy" said one NCO "The enemy were continuously pouring fire on us as we advanced, using shells of the heaviest calibre which burst monstrosly while explosive bullets were extensively used. When near our destination some were caught by the cross fire of the German machine guns and many went to the last limit of endurance and had to fall back a little. Then came the final charge - and what a charge - Unitedly we stormed the enemy's last stronghold on the ridge and into our hands it fell. But what a terrible time it was to see poor fellows lying on the field of battle wounded. It was impossible to rescue some of them at the time owing to the intensity of fire, but a good number were eventually brought in, though they were out there for several hours. One wounded sergeant who managed to crawl back to our lines said that dead bodies - English and German - were all over the place. He described it as a 'Valley of death' I am afraid he is not far wrong in his description. Every man of the good old Berks showed a most stubborn courage and do not be surprised if you hear of several honours knocking about.

They and their confreres went forward with a desperate

valour without which we could not have achieved our object. Second Lieut Glover, one of the platoon officers who belongs to the Devons was wounded after an hours fighting. Second Lieut Wilmott who comes from Oxford had a rather nasty wound and Second Lieut Gillmor son of the vicar of St Giles Reading was I am afraid badly wounded."

Another member of the battalion wrote:- "The prisoners we captured looked as if they had not had anything to eat for some days. All of them were about 16 or 60. They looked proper wrecks and were very pleased to be captured."

An officer writing of the battalion since it has been back resting says:- "The men are very cheerful considering what they have just been through. They are wonderful chaps and I wouldn't swap them for any troops in the British Army" [TX01127]

Medals

Medals for the actions of 21st/22nd August were awarded on the 18th September. MCs went to 2Lt G W de St Legier, Capt G O W Willink, 2Lt H W Jewell and 2Lt G C Mills with Military Medals for 202761 Cpl W H Carey , 203021 Cpl D Kew, 200482 Pte H B Tyte 201156 Pte D Gilford, 201511 Pte F E Grover, 12051 Pte M Jacobs, 18661 Pte W Heaver, 203011 Pte P H Brown, 220201 Pte E W B Pike, 202586 Pte G W Dakin and 201838 Pte F S Beston (attached RE)

Aftermath

The battle continued until the 10th November when the line was consolidated following the capture of Passchendaele village. The result was over 70,000 British soldiers killed and over 170,000 wounded. The 2nd/4th had by comparison suffered lightly and acquitted themselves well. They remained in the area until the 19th September when they moved back south to the Arras area.

Sources

Petre pp 185-189

War Diary

Continued in Section 284