

## Section 276

# The Third Battle of Ypres

## The 6th Battalion

### Preparation and Objectives

#### 3rd to 30th July 1917

On the 3rd July 1917 the 6th Battalion went by train to Cassel and marched to Steenvoorde for training with the II Corps of 5th Army for the attack scheduled for 31st July as part of the Third Battle of Ypres. 30th Division were to be in front of 18th Division in a plan to capture the 'Black Line' running east of Shrewsbury Forest, Dunbarton Lakes and Inverness Copse and passing through the centre of Glencourse Wood. On that line 30th Division was to be leap-frogged by 53rd Brigade, whose final objective was the capture of Polygon Wood, some 800 yards beyond Glencourse Wood

On the 30th July at 0900 the Battalion marched to the forming up area at Zillebeke and at 0155 on the 31st the head of the Battalion reached the assembly area to the west of Sanctuary Wood.

### The 30th Division Error

The plan called for the 6th Royal Berks of 18th Division to leapfrog the 17th Manchesters of 30th Division, so at 0550 2Lts HR Hooper and GH Tiggar were sent forward to make contact with the Manchesters 2Lt Hooper was wounded on the way up and 2Lt Tiggar reported back that he could not find the Manchesters but he had been told that the attack was being held up by machine gun fire from Surbiton Villas and Stirling Castle.

At 0715 the Berkshires moved forward up line. The enemy shelling was patchy, falling mainly to the left of the Battalion. The War Diary noted '*No Manchesters were met and the captured trenches do not appear to be garrisoned*'

The Berkshires were informed that the Manchesters had taken Glencourse Wood, but this was incorrect. What had happened was that 30th Division had missed its direction and gone too far to the left. It had taken Chateau Wood in the mistaken belief it was Glencourse Wood. In consequence Blue Line was untouched and 53rd Brigade were left with the job of taking this almost intact line.

The Berkshires, still unaware of the real situation and the falsity of the report, continued their advance through the marshy land south of the Ypres to Menin Road. When they reached Sanctuary Wood about 0830 they

found themselves under heavy machine gun fire, especially from Surbiton villas in front and Clapham Junction on the right. By this time they should have started lining up their main attack on blue line. However the artillery who were also ignorant of what 30th Division were up to, had lifted their barrage from and to beyond blue line which was still intact. The Berkshires had to rely on rifle and Lewis gun fire, supported by trench mortars of the 8th Suffolks as their MG and TM sections were still far behind.

At 0845 they had reached Jackdaw trench and could begin to line up. It was by now clear that black line had not been taken. No troops of 30th Division had been encountered but British troops had been spotted towards Jabber Drive and Westhoek on the left. Two platoons of D Coy were sent out to make contact with them and they turned out to be 2nd Berkshires who were forming a defensive flank on the right of 8th Division.

### The Attack on Black Line

#### 1st August 1917

At 0900 the Battalion commenced its attack on the Black Line which was conducted by rushes under cover of rifle and machine gun fire. There was no artillery support as the artillery had lifted its barrage beyond Blue Line. In spite of strong opposition the line from the Cross Roads at J9 d90.10 to Jargon Switch and Surbiton Villas was captured by 0950. The Battalion was in touch with the 2nd Lincolns on their left and the 8th Suffolks on their right.

The whole advance had been accomplished by the exertions of small parties of men creeping forward from one shell hole to another. The artillery barrage came down as scheduled at 1010 but was in the rear of the enemy who were in the space between it and the Battalion front. The attempt to advance was stopped by rifle and machine gun fire from the Jargon Trench line and at 1030 the Battalion consolidated the line captured at 0950.

At 1500 the enemy was seen to be massing at Glencourse Wood for a counter-attack. An SOS barrage was called for and the attack did not take place. The Battalion was relieved by the 17th Liverpools at 1430 on the 1st August and retired to Ouderham.

It was during this engagement that Captain H Ackroyd

RAMC earned his Victoria Cross for the unhurried way he attended to the wounded with the greatest care and skill under the hottest fire. No less than twenty three separate reports were sent in recommending the award. [ref 76]

Casualties were:

*Officers* Killed 3, Wounded 5

*Other ranks* Killed 35, Died of Wounds 1, Wounded and missing 1, wounded 177, missing 27.

## Once More into the Line

### 10th to 17th August 1917

After a period of training and resting the Battalion were back in the line on the 10th August. The day Capt Ackroyd died without knowing he had been awarded the VC. They were back in the area they had recaptured on 31st July. Early in the morning of the 11th a German counter-attack at 0430 had re-taken the south-west corner of Glencourse Wood, but the Berkshires, together with the 10th Norfolks recaptured it once more.

On the 12th the Battalion was formed up to clear Glencourse Wood, but the 8th Suffolks did not turn up and the operation was cancelled

On the 15th August the Germans counter-attacked from Polygon Wood and the infantry fought it out for two hours with rifle and bayonet. The Berks and Norfolks displayed remarkable resilience and took a heavy toll with the bayonet. Strangely although this was reported in 18th Division's Diary, the Battalion's own War Diary has no mention of it.

## Respite

### 17th August to 8th October 1917

The Battalion was relieved on the night of the 16th/17th August by the 12th Middlesex and, after concentrating at Dickebusche, moved to Roubrouck where they remained until the 23rd September, resting and training.

On the 24th September the Battalion moved by train to Poperinghe and then marched to Road Camp at Jan Ter Biezen.

## Attack on Poelcapelle

### 9th to 13th October 1917

On the 9th October the Battalion was temporarily attached to 55th Brigade to support its attack on Poelcapelle and Meunier House.

At 01:00 on October 12th the leading platoon left Cane Trench for the forming up area. It was so dark and the going was so bad through shell holes and marsh, that the

Battalion had to close up to maintain touch and direction. The advance went without incident until the Steenbeek was reached. From here considerable annoyance was caused by enemy gas and shells. The last company of the Battalion reached the forming up position at 05:10, only 20 minutes before the British Barrage was due to start. The British Barrage was followed, within two minutes, by the German reply.

At 0610 there was no news of the troops in front and it was decided to push on. It was becoming clear that the first phase had failed and the line at which the Battalion was leapfrog those in front, had not been taken. 200 yards from the first forming up position, the leading companies came under heavy machine gun and sniper fire from the Brewery, Meunier House and Beek House. Every movement over the sodden, shell holed, ground was tortuous and slow.

At 0630 the Commanding Officer, Lt Col HGF Longhurst was killed at Battalion HQ and Captain RA Rochfort MC assumed command. He immediately went forward to ascertain the position and then he was badly wounded. Lt JWK Wernham, the only officer left at Battalion HQ took over command.

A private who was also wounded noted:-

"I saw our colonel's name in the casualty list yesterday. I am sorry he is gone for he was a fine officer. They brought his body right back in the Berks transport on a stretcher for a decent burial some way back. [TX00727]

Only at noon was any definite news received. Some of the 7th Buffs on the Battalion right had surrendered and one platoon of 'D' Company had been sent to protect the flank. Before this movement could be completed, the 7th Queens (Royal West Surrey) had moved up and filled the gap.

At 1900 the CO of the 7th Queens Own Royal West Surreys arrived at Battalion HQ with a message from Brigade informing the 6th Berkshires that they were to be withdrawn that night. Runners were despatched to all companies, to summon all Company Commanders to Battalion HQ for instructions. Owing to the darkness of the night and the state of the ground, the runners were unable to find any Company HQ so the withdrawal could not be carried out.

At 0530 on the 13th October, orders were issued to all companies informing them that the 7th Queens were forming a line of posts in the rear of the Berkshires' positions and, when these were completed, the companies were to withdraw their men by ones and twos to Cane Trench.

A Company reported withdrawal complete by 08:00. The other companies found daylight withdrawal too costly and it was decided to wait until dusk. However troops began to filter down and the Battalion withdrawal was completed by 1630. Each company, after a short rest at Cane Trench, moved independently to Murat

## Camp.

The Berkshire Chronicle of 7/12/1917 recorded the affair:-

A battalion of the Royal Berks Regiment has been heavily engaged during the past few months and news of a desperate encounter with the Boche on the 12th October is to hand. The story of what took place was supplied to our representative by a member of the battalion. The objective was gained but unfortunately at some loss. There is some consolation however in knowing that the wounded were in greater preponderance than those who lost their lives, but the battalion had to mourn the loss of their gallant colonel [Lt Col HGF Longhurst] who was killed by a shell just before the attack was launched. He was at what is known as Pheasant Farm and was at the time standing by the side of a tank. The colonel who succeeded Colonel Clay [Lt Col B G Clay], who has been made a brigadier-general, was beloved by all who served under him and his death cast quite a gloom over the battalion. He had been with the battalion since 1914 and rose to the position of CO from the rank of Lieutenant. Another officer to make the great sacrifice was Lieutenant W R Wachter who was killed just before the objective was reached and the adjutant was wounded in the arm which had to be amputated at the Essex Farm Station at a similar stage of the fighting.

The advance was made at 7 o'clock in the morning and within a couple of hours we had accomplished our task. The Boche did not put down a very heavy barrage at the start but as we went on we were exposed to a scythe of shells and bullets and by the time we reached our objective the intensity of the enemy's fire had increased to a marked degree. Still for all that the battalion (all four companies were in it) swept over the ground in a manner calling for the highest praise, and when one considers we covered a thousand yards in so short a time our performance must be written down as a very fine one. Having got to a given point we consolidated our position and other battalions came through to continue the advance.

The ground was fairly level but it was very difficult to negotiate being studded with shell holes. There was no trench warfare. What we had to take were strong concrete positions known as pill boxes and to capture these is no easy matter. It meant much in desperate fighting before they fell into our hands but we were greatly helped by our splendid artillery. Altogether about twenty of these were taken and my platoon bagged a couple. The machine guns inside were of no use, they had been put out of action. On the side of the road was a large brewery. In this the Huns had a large concentration of machine guns which were causing a great deal of damage and a heap of snipers. In time the machine guns were silenced and rushing the place the building was captured and the Germans left alive were taken prisoners. The Germans seemed to have plenty of snipers all over the place. These men are always difficult to locate but when once discovered they pay the penalty. All the same they accounted for a large number of our men. Other casualties were chiefly caused through mustard gas shells which were used very freely against us and the Boches' enfilading fire. We simply had to fight our way through by dodging the fire and I might say that we lost a good number before the attack was actually launched owing to the intensity of the Germans shelling although as I have already said it was not so fierce when we started on our errand. There was not a lot of bombing

but I should like to pay a tribute to our stretcher bearers who performed magnificent work under heavy shellfire. They rescued many a wounded man who, without aid, could never possibly have got back. The German losses were heavy. One officer of ours - a second Lieutenant - who fell was a member of the National Sporting Club He was killed about half way through the fight. We also lost several sergeants and other NCOs. [TX00638]

From the 'Malvern News' - 3 Nov. 1917

"Mr and Mrs. J. W. Jeakes, of Taynuilt, Graham Road, Malvern, whose only son, Lieut. John William Jeakes, Royal Berkshire Regiment, died from wounds on Oct. 12th, have received the following letter from a Captain: [?] Soon after the battle started your son was mortally wounded by a bullet, and he died within a short time. His conduct to the time of death was splendid. He took no notice of heavy fire from rifles and machine guns but urged his men forward, and set them a fine example of courage and devotion to duty. His death is a very great loss to us. We all liked him and admired him immensely. Please accept my deepest sympathy in your sad loss. I hope it will be a solace to you that he died a soldier's death, cheering on his men, and in his last moments when he knew all was over, kept up his spirit and told the men who stayed with him to go on and leave him."

Another officer writes:- I expect you have already heard the sad news of your son, who was killed in action. He had not been with us very long and it was his first fight with this Battalion. His reputation was that he was an extraordinarily brave man in action, and he more than lived up to that. The attack began in very heavy rain, and, added to that the appalling state of the ground, the Company got somewhat disorganised. Your son did his best, and more than partially succeeded in getting his men together. He died within a short time of being hit. He was in my Company, and I can only say what an awfully good fellow we all thought him. [TX00722]

In his dispatch issued at 10.24 on Monday night, Sir D Haig said :-

Highly successful minor operations were carried out by our troops this morning on the battle front in the neighbourhood of Poelcapelle and in conjunction with the French south of Houlthui Forest.

East of Poelcapelle battalions of the Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Berks Regiments and Northumberland Fusiliers attacked on a front of about one and a half miles and captured a number of strongly fortified buildings and concrete redoubts on the hill east of the village.

Rain had again fallen during the night rendering the ground slippery and the task of assembly difficult. In spite of this the whol of our objectives were captured after fierce fighting in which many Germans were killed.

Our troops south-east of Poelcappelle then pressed on and carried other valuable positions beyond the line of their objectives." [TX00739]

Lt Col Liddell took over Command. General Higginson wrote to Captain Rochfort

'The 12th was a very unfortunate day for the Brigade. Neither your Battalion nor the Suffolk ever had a chance. It was cruel luck, two such splendid Battalions being wasted'

Casualties were:-

Officers Killed 6, Died of wounds 1,  
wounded 8

Other ranks Killed 33, wounded 155, missing 10

Refer to Sgt Milford winning MM Here.

### **Sources**

History of the Royal Berks (Petre pp 274-283)

War Diary

Berkshire Chronicle

Malvern News