

Section 285

Interlude IV

The 5th Battalion June-October 1917

This covers the period between the start of the Battle of Messines in June 1917 and the opening of the Battle of Cambrai in November. Continued from section 265

Attack by D Coy 19th July 1917

On the 19th July the 5th Battalion relieved the 9th Essex in the front line east of Monchy le Preux. They were immediately in action.

At 1500 a small attack was launched by D Coy to link up several trenches to consolidate the front line. A barrage was laid down to the rear of Long Trench, one of the objectives. This lasted 10 minutes and then the first wave of two platoons on a 240 yard front went forward followed by a second wave supplied with entrenching tools. About 120 yards had to be crossed and it was believed that the enemy trench was only lightly defended. However this was not the case and the men of D Coy were met with a shower of bombs and very obstinate resistance. A few reached Long Trench but found that not only were they outnumbered but that they ran short of bombs and had to retire after about 15 minutes.

They were back in their own trenches by 1530 having suffered considerable casualties, 3 killed, 24 wounded and 14 missing. In addition two officers, 2Lt A Maybury and 2Lt B Lyons were missing believed killed.

The Reading Mercury of 18th August reported:

The loss of Second Lieutenant A Maybury DCM who was killed during a raid is a great loss to the Royal Berkshire's, as he was a most valuable officer. A sergeant of his battalion wrote: "During a bombing raid in which 200 men and a couple of officers took part, one of the officers was second in Lieutenant A Maybury who had greatly distinguished himself throughout the war. This officer led his men all the time through the raid and also into the German lines and he succeeded in gaining valuable information. He also stood on top of the German parapet and killed at Germans galore."

Change of Command 20th July to 7th August 1917

Now that there was a more accurate appraisal of the enemy strength the Divisional Commander decided that he would have to adopt a defensive policy. As a first step Hook and Hill trenches were wired and this was

carried out on the nights of the 21st and 22nd under great difficulties, eliciting congratulations from the Brigadier.

On the 21st July Lt Col F G Willan was recalled to take command of his own battalion, the 2nd Kings Royal Rifle Corps. As a temporary measure Major T V Bartley Dennis was given command with Capt J L Carr as his second in command.

On the 24th July the battalion was relieved by the 7th East Surreys and were able to retire to billets at Achicourt.

Corporal Histed's commentary

Corporal A Histed of the Royal Berkshire Regiment of Rose Cottage Shiplake, who holds the Military Medal writes to Mr F W Nicolson of the Old Vicarage Shiplake stating in the course of the letter: -

It is several weeks since I wrote a line to let you know what that I was in the best of health. I wrote you some six weeks since but I am afraid some of my letters got lost. I hope Mrs Nicholson and yourself are quite well also all the family. I was very pleased to hear that Mr Ned had won the MC. I hope that the garden crops are proving good and plentiful. There is an abundance of fruit on the trees out here, especially plums and pears and other crops look very promising, although the stormy weather is keeping the corn backward. It is interesting to see the people round here cultivating ground that has been dormant for so long until the Germans were thrown back last Easter time. They soon came back to this village and are getting some fine crops vegetables from the ground. They have not been able to take back up a great deal of the ground, as it is still used military purposes, but other ground in the rear has been released so that is as valuable.

We came out of the trenches on Sunday [24th July]. The time flies very quickly as when we are out there is a certain amount of parades and sports and when in the line the time flies even more quickly as there is mostly plenty of work to do and a little excitement at times. It does not seem three years since I left the garden but is so at the end of this month.

They do not seem to be any signs in sight that the war is nearing the end; I trust that they may be hopes of that before long but I am afraid not before another winter in the trenches has been spent. I think we should have stood a good chance of breaking through the German lines had the Russians kept the enemy employed. All our offensives this year were great successes especially the initial stages: but the weather at most times has been most unkind and enables the Germans to concentrate their reserves for the next stage which more often than not gets delayed through the weather. That is happening up

north at the present time and it also happened here at Easter time when we took part in what was one of the most successful offensives undertaken. We took part in that on Easter Monday [9th April] and the following day. It was a glorious day for our division and our regiment. We advanced over more ground that day in company with two more divisions than has ever been done in this war before; but the weather broke, with snowstorms and sleet, which hampered both Transport and troops, and that I think is why we settled down again and were not able to advance successfully in the latter stages of that offensive.

There is no doubt that we have greatly punished the Germans in all those battles although it is no walkover but I firmly think that whatever losses we have, theirs must be more terrible and however much we all long for peace we should be doing the whole world a great injury and wrong if we even contemplated overtures with the Germans at this time. I trust that the Labour Party will see the folly of this and not cause a split in the ranks of labour; if they do they will assuredly let the army down at a time when it is most important to show a united front. It is just what the Germans are working up for, but we must continue to carry on until such times as we can prove to the Germans that their cause is hopeless. It is hard to write like this but there is nothing for it although at times one wonders if there is going to be an end to this terrible strife. One thing is most noticeable and that is the troops out here still retain their spirits and there is no fear of our chaps following the Russians to disaster. I am pleased to say that in the matter of food and everything for our welfare it is better now than ever so we have not much to complain about.

Back to the Trenches

4th to 7th August 1917

They returned to the line on 4th August, this time just north of the Cambrai Road.

8th August to 14th October 1917

On the 8th August Lt Col E H J Nicholls of the East Surrey Regiment arrived to take command as Major Bartley-Dennis was forced to retire to hospital. He had been severely wounded at Neuve Chapelle and had been invalided home twice already.

Next day the Division indulged in a spate of raids but the 5th were not actively involved.

On the 11th Lt F J Oakley was wounded.

Lt Col Bartley-Dennis returned from hospital to resume command on the 14th October and on the same day Lt M B Beattie died of wounds received whilst on patrol earlier.

Trench fighting was still in progress when LSgt Charles Minchin won his DCM, having already been awarded the MM and bar for his gallantry.

Divisional Orders

By this time the main British efforts were being focussed on Flanders and the upcoming Third Battle of

Ypres. However these would not involve the 5th Battalion who stayed in the Arras area until their time came again at Cambrai.

The major-general commanding the division issued the following to the officers, warrant officers, NCOs and men of the division at the end of October:-

The Division has been in the trenches for 18 weeks and has held an important portion of the line. I desire to express my high appreciation of the manner in which all have performed their duties. The consolidation of the line and the improvement of communications have involved a great deal of hard work and the results have been most satisfactory. You have had a considerable amount of fighting, repelled several attacks and have carried out some highly successful raids. You have exhibited strong powers of endurance and by your gallantry and determination have upheld the best traditions of the Army. I am glad to say that those important points of close co-operation and good feeling between the different arms are still well maintained in the Division. *[BC 18/1/1918]*

Bibliography

Petre p226

From Arras to Cambrai

Berkshire Chronicle

Reading Mercury 18/8/1917

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