

Section 291

Cambrai

The 1st Battalion

The 1st Battalion had been training from billets in Herzelee. They left from Esquelbecq Station on the 24th to take part in the Battle of Cambrai. Continued from 281

Beaumetz Les Cambrai

24th to 26th November 1917

The train which had left Esquelbecq at 04:00 on the 24th arrived at Achiet le Grand at 12:00. They were given tea and set about unloading the train. At 15:00 they were ready and marched off to Barastre which they reached at 18:45. They were billeted for the night in tents and huts and the CO (Col Hunt) returned from his temporary job as Brigadier.

On the 25th November, beginning at 09:15 the Battalion marched to Beaumetz-le-Cambrai which they reached at 12:45. Byng's great offensive had already taken place, without the 1st Royal Berkshire being engaged, and it was now a case of defending the new salient which had been acquired. The long turn out of the main line had raised the battalion morale to a very high pitch and *the men* says Lieutenant Valentine, *were ready to go anywhere, whether to Italy, Ostend or Cambrai.*

It was a miserable arrival. The village was in ruins and the officers managed to find some quarters among the ruins which they could use as a mess. The men had to make do with tents. It was very windy and cold. To make matters worse the village was shelled heavily and they had to turn out to move the tents to the east side of the road from Velu to Beaumetz, suffering 3 casualties in the process.

At 17:00 on the 26th orders were received for their deployment. 99th Brigade was to take over from 107th Brigade a portion of the new line facing north just to the west of Bourlon Wood. At 21:30 they moved off via the main Baupame to Cambrai road to the sugar factory where they were scheduled to relieve the 2/5th KOYLI and the 2/5th York and Lancasters at midnight.

Bourlon Wood

26th November to 4th December 1917

The events which followed in the next few days constituted the most brilliant achievement of the 1st Battalion in the war, a success which was of the most vital importance, preventing as it did the driving in of

the left flank of the newly acquired Cambrai salient, and the possible cutting off of the troops at its apex.

An excellent report on the defence of the line west of Bourlon Wood was drawn up by the late Lieutenant-Colonel G. P.S. Hunt, and his account should stand, together with that of Captain D. Valentine who commanded B Coy on the 30th November.

By the time the battalion reached the sugar factory, delayed owing to congestion on the approach roads, they found that the KOYLIs and the Y&Ls of 107th Bde had begun their attack at 06:20 and were unaware of the Berks coming to relieve them. The Berks took over the accommodation just vacated by the 107th Bde with A&B Coys on the right (North) side of the road, C&D on the left and Battalion HQ in a chateau to the east of the sugar factory. They settled in amidst snow storms and shelling with sporadic machine gun fire.

Colonel Hunt writes:

The battalion came up from Beaumetz-le-Cambrai on the night of 26th/27th November in a blizzard and got very wet, with no opportunity of drying, as companies were in trenches in support of the line. Headquarters in the Sugar Factory and Château were heavily shelled at frequent intervals.

27th November 1917

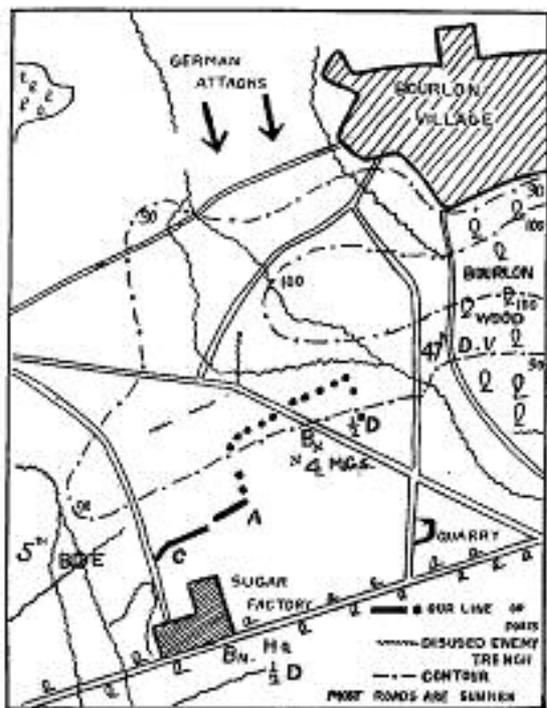
The attack by 107th Bde was not a success. They were being supported by tanks but these were held up by a barricade and the infantry were being forced back allowing the Germans to approach the high ground. To counter this C Coy under Lt D Valentine were moved up at 10:00 on the 27th to hold the sunken road the Germans were moving along and the 2/8th West Yorks moved up to support them

Col Hunt seems to have got his dates mixed up as he wrote:-

On the night of 28th/29th November we took over the line, and on morning of 29th 'C' Company, on the left, participated in a small advance to straighten the line. There was a dangerous fire of machine guns and 6 N.C.O.s and men were killed, but all ranks showed marked keenness and did more than their duty, going out to bring in wounded men of the 60th Rifles who have always been our companions in the brigade.

During the day of the 27th and the subsequent evening the Medical Officer and stretcher bearers were kept very busy dealing with the casualties suffered by the attacking troops. The two battalions of 10th Brigade shared the HQ with the Berks until they were relieved

Sketch showing 1st Battalion's action at Bourlon Wood.
November 30th, 1917.



early in the morning of the 28th. Many of their men and many from the KRRC were rescued by men of the Berks who went out against appalling machine gun and shell fire.

28th November 1917

For most of the 28th the Berks sat tight, doing what they could for the wounded. At 20:00 they relieved the 23rd Royal Fusiliers in the front line. B Coy with Lt Valentine on the right, A Coy with Capt Pugh in the centre and C Coy on the left adjoining 1st KRRC. D Coy were in support in Quarry Gunpits.

Col Hunt gave a more detailed description - again there is a discrepancy between his account and the war diary as to the other units involved:-

The line was an extended one, about 1,200 yards, and was occupied as follows: B Company on the right in 12 section posts which were partially connected, and had a little wire in places by the morning of the 30th. One platoon was in reserve, dug in roughly in the bank of a slightly sunken road. Our right was some 800 yards west of Bourlon Wood.

A Company was in the centre in a continuous trench except for two posts dug on the night of 29th/30th November to fill a gap on its right.

C Company was on the left in the same trench, and its left was in the new trench and the posts dug during the 29th November. There was some wire in places, and the posts were 6 feet deep and roughly fire-stepped. The 17th Royal Fusiliers, lent from 5th Infantry Brigade, held the line to our left astride the Hindenburg support line, and the 47th London Division held the line to our right and through Bourlon Wood.

Half of D Company held two posts dug on the two previous nights to form a defensive flank, if necessary, on our right. The other half of D Company were in dugouts and shelters near the Factory.

There were no support trenches at the time, supports being in shelters, etc., round about the Factory, which, being on the main Bapaume-Cambrai Road, was very subject to shelling. The line itself was behind the crest of the hill running west from Bourlon Wood and village, but on the left was on top of the hill, and farther west a good view could be obtained to the north and north-East.

By 23:30 they were fully in position and some advanced parties from 10th DCLI and 483 Coy RE arrived to consolidate the wire and establish strong points to protect the right flank.

29th November 1917

At 06:25 on the 29th the 1st/KRRC launched an attack to capture a triangular salient held by the Germans and so straighten the line. A half platoon from C Coy under Lt E C de Vitre cooperated and the battalion front was extended some 200 yards west with four more posts established.

The sugar factory was attacked all day by shellfire including many gas shells so respirators had to be worn for most of the time. The 10/DCLI and RE built two more strong points to the NE of the sunken road which were then manned by two platoons from D Coy who took over just before dawn on the 30th.

30th November 1917

Col Hunt now tells of the events of the 30th:-

At 8.45 a.m. on the 30th November a heavy bombardment came down on Headquarters at the Factory, and this lasted throughout the two attacks, making it extremely dangerous to approach the buildings. At the same time our right and the 47th Division were shelled. A message came in that the enemy had been seen assembling and deploying for attack beyond the ridge. Our guns put a heavy barrage over the ridge and on the top.

At about 9 a.m. the Germans were seen coming over the skyline in large numbers. We immediately opened a heavy fire with rifles and Lewis guns, assisted by 2 machine guns of the 47th Division with 'B' Company, and inflicted enormous losses on the enemy. The enemy, however, succeeded in forcing back some posts of the 47th Division.

At about 10 a.m. he also succeeded in entering 3 of the left posts of B Company, some 300 Germans having attacked one platoon which stood most gallantly, but was overpowered before it could dispose of so large a number. One post of this platoon, however, under Sgt. Woollard, held its own through-out the day. The attack continued for three hours, and B Company's position was often critical, but every man used his arms resolutely, and finally drove the enemy off.

Those that had reached our line attempted to retire about 12.30 p.m., but were nearly all mown down.

The attack had not come on to A and C Companies to the same extent, but the men of both companies showed the utmost keenness under the machine gun and shell fire, and undoubtedly assisted B Company to beat off the enemy. At one time the left of C Company was in the air, owing to the withdrawal and partial surrender of some posts on our left.

At about 2 p.m. the enemy was again reported to be assembling for attack. At 2.30 p.m. the 47th Division put up the S.O.S Signal, and the enemy was seen advancing again over the ridge. The attack again came on B Company on both sides of the sunken road, and on the 47th Division as far as the edge of the wood. Left of the sunken road the enemy advanced in large numbers, but the attack was held up by our heavy fire, and that of the three machine guns on the sunken road, and it never reached our line. Between that and the wood the posts of the 47th Division were weak, and the Germans succeeded easily in driving them back, leaving our right in the air. Three of our posts fell, fighting to the last, and a Lewis gun was lost with them. The remainder succeeded in bringing the enemy to a standstill.

All ranks behaved with the greatest spirit and determination and never gave ground. The Lewis gunners seized every opportunity to get to better positions to kill the enemy.

In both these attacks the Germans advanced regardless of loss. They were in full marching order with packs, and evidently thought they would break right through. The total casualties of the battalion were only 3 officers and 63 men, of which 46 were B Company. That company alone probably accounted for 500 Germans.

According to Intelligence Reports, at least two German Divisions were annihilated on our Divisional Front. Many cases of great personal bravery were reported by Company Commanders. The Company and Battalion runners had to face the bombardment on the Factory occupied by Battalion Headquarters, a bombardment which was admittedly very heavy and much more so than a barrage. They came through it with the utmost cheerfulness, and fortunately suffered few casualties.

Lieut. Valentine commanded B Company with characteristic skill and coolness, and inspired confidence in all ranks. Capt. Pugh, M.C., commanded A Company in the centre, and his men worked under him splendidly. Capt. Jackson, who commanded C Company, was killed while getting to his posts on the left. His men were full of keenness. Half of D Company under Capt. Mousley did very good work in carrying up ammunition under heavy fire, and the other half, with 2nd-Lieut. Leach, held the posts on the right, and materially assisted in bringing the enemy to a standstill.

All ranks were imbued with the highest sense of duty, which enabled them to do their work so well and to act up to the best traditions of the Regiment.

We now come to Lieutenant Valentine's account. After saying that dawn had passed so quietly that, between 08:00 and 09:00, he had begun to think there would be no attack that day, he writes:

I was sitting, very sleepy, on the side of the road drinking cocoa when the nearest sentry came tumbling down from his post exclaiming with great eagerness '*S.O.S. gone up in twenty-seven different places and the Boche coming over the hill in thousands.*' Our artillery response to the

S.O.S. was immediate, and one of the quickest pieces of work I had seen. It was now that the previous weeks of training and rest told as each commander, down to the section leader, at once carried out his orders or used his initiative, and it is to this that we owe the killing of that first attack.

To mention one instance of this, a young lance-corporal, just been given his first stripe, in charge of a Lewis gun, at once took his gun forward in order to enfilade the single miserable strand of wire that we had managed to get out the night before. The damage he was able to do with his gun, which he managed to keep in action all day, was enormous. He was recommended for the D.C.M., but received the M.M. instead.

Shelling was very heavy, but fortunately, as we had no set line of trenches, most of it was behind us, though a good deal fell near. Our rifle fire was very accurate, as the enemy had to come down toward us from the crest of the ridge, giving us an admirable target. The first wave of the attack crumpled and died.

Attack after attack followed all day, in one case supported by low-flying aeroplanes, which dropped bombs and fired at us. The Lewis gun of the reserve platoon was mounted on a mound and replied to the 'planes, and in one case I am practically certain hit a 'plane at about 50 feet up. The 'plane crashed just over the ridge, but in a fight of this nature it is almost impossible to take or give credit for an event of this kind, as there are many factors that may destroy a low-flying machine.

By this time a corporal, who had been with the battalion on and off since 1914, found a discarded machine gun and plenty of S.A.A. The quantity of S.A.A. left behind by the cavalry, who had reached this point in the first attack, was phenomenal. The corporal, who was by way of being some-what of an expert with automatic guns, managed to get it working, and this materially assisted us.

About midday, the platoon of my company on the left, where contact was made with A Company, was dislodged from their posts and went back a short way to other posts; 2nd-Lieut. Palmer was wounded. On the right our posts remained intact, though the battalion on the right was suffering heavy losses and was nearly decimated.

By this time (late afternoon) the attack had died down, and a detachment of Fusillers were sent up to bomb out the enemy in the post vacated by our left platoon. They found that most of the enemy were dead or had retired, as my reserve platoon had previously been bombing them in an effort to dislodge the survivors.

When night fell, it was found that certain other small posts had been swamped, each one dying to a man, and with full toll of the enemy in front. The masses of German dead in front of our line must have numbered nearly 500, and, considering that the success the action fell on the shoulders of the subordinate commanders and men, the spirit can well be judged.

We were relieved at night, and went back to the dugouts where we spent the first night, a depleted exhausted crew, but elated with success. I have had the opportunity of talking with Hauptman K. Andersen, since the war, who commanded a German company of machine gunners opposite me. He informs me that there was a good deal of mis management on the part of the German Staff, and that, owing to delay, the attack had to take place in broad daylight. The Germans did not extend into open order properly, as they had been informed that there were so

few troops in front of them (a fact, having regard to their numbers) that they could walk over us!

The weather was fair, occasional rain falling, though the day of the attack was fine. [TX00587]

The action of B Coy was commented upon in the Berkshire Chronicle of 22/2/18:-

The garrisons of the three posts on the front of the 2nd Division fell fighting to the last and when the line at this point was restored such a heap of German dead lay in and around the posts that it was impossible to find the bodies of our men.

In this locality five other posts held by a company [B] of the 1st Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment repulsed all the enemy's attacks and maintained themselves until our reinforcements had restored the situation. This company showed the utmost valour and steadfastness in a most critical period, extending over some six hours. The enemy made attack after attack, always in vastly superior numbers and time after time came right up to our posts only to be mown down by our fire and driven back in disorder. The casualties of this company were 46 of all ranks. They claim to have killed over 500 of the enemy.

The story of the gallant fight against odds put up by the garrisons of these posts, both those who survived and those who died valiantly constitutes one of the many examples furnished by the fighting of this day of the supreme importance of the resistance that can be afforded by small parties of determined men who know how to use their weapons and are resolved to use them to the last. [TX00382]

The edition of 8/3/18 recorded the exploits of three of the medal winners:-

Second Lieutenant Leach received his MC for his bravery in holding on to an isolated post when the Germans attacked and drove in other forward positions. Sergeant McCann received the DCM and Sergeant Crawley the bar to the Military Medal for the same affair. Lieutenant Leach displayed great bravery at the battle of Cambrai on November 30th when, with two platoons of his company he drove back the enemy who had advanced along a sunken road. [TX00397]

Sgt McCann's citation Was recorded later:-

8834 Sergeant J McCann Royal Berks Regiment (Clapton) - For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He was in command of a section of the front line trench when the enemy made a determined effort to raid and occupy our line of advanced posts. On his own initiative he organised his section and despite the heavy barrage led it out to reinforce one of the posts, materially assisting the garrison of the post in repulsing the enemy with heavy loss. His prompt action was an inspiring instance of the value of a fine fighting spirit. [TX00451]

How greatly the splendid defence of the 1st Royal Berkshire was appreciated by the Higher Command is shown by the following congratulatory messages:

30 Novr. 1917. From Genl. Pereira, G.O.C. 2nd Divn.

Units of 2nd Division and 36th Divisional Artillery assisting them engaged in to-day's fighting have done magnificent work. Probably two German Divisions have been smashed.

2nd Decr. 1917. From Brig.-Genl. R. O. Kellett,

commander 99th Infantry Brigade

May I thank you all very sincerely for once more having added, on 30th November, to the laurels already won by you on many fields. The 99th Brigade has had a short but a pretty strenuous life, and in their many successes they have no page that they wish to turn down or forget, no 'regrettable incidents.' 'I am very proud of my splendid Brigade, and I am confident that a ranks will go on as they have always done in the grim determination to beat the enemy wherever we meet him, and die sooner than give back an inch of ground that we or any of our comrades in other Brigades or Divisions have gained. "Please convey the contents of this to all ranks." [TX00586]

2nd December 1917. From Field-Marshal Sir D. Haig.

I congratulate you and the Officers and men under your command upon the successful resistance maintained by the Third Army yesterday against the powerful attacks delivered by the enemy South and West of Cambrai. In particular I desire you to convey to the General Officers commanding the 2nd, 47th and 56th Divisions, and to all ranks serving under them, my warm appreciation of their magnificent defence of the important positions entrusted to them. Though exposed throughout the day to the repeated assaults of superior forces, they beat off all attacks with the heaviest losses to the enemy, and, by their gallant and steady conduct, contributed very largely to the security of the Divisions engaged on the whole front of attack."

Perhaps an even more valuable tribute is contained in the following quotation from a precis drawn up by the General Staff of the Fourth Army:

On the left their attack was driven off with heavy loss by machine gun, Lewis-gun, and rifle fire, but on the right the enemy forced back the Brigade on the right of the Division, and captured the three extreme right posts, the garrisons of which fell fighting to the last, and there was such a heap of German dead in and around these posts that, after the line had been restored (2nd December), it was impossible to find the bodies of our men.

The other five posts on the right stood firm and repulsed all enemy attacks, until reinforcements restored the situation and drove the enemy back behind the Ridge. Too much praise cannot be given to this splendid company of the 1st R. Berks. Regt. and its commander, Lieutenant Valentine, for their valour and steadfastness in this most critical time, extending over some six hours. They met attack after attack of the enemy, who were always in vastly superior numbers, and who came on right up to them time after time, only to be mown down and retire in disorder. The casualties in this company were 46 all ranks, and a Lewis gun, but they never flinched. They claim to have killed over 500 of the enemy, and it is believed that this is no exaggeration.

The following is an extract from the General Staff Pamphlet entitled '*The Story of a Great Fight*'

The story of the subsequent fighting on the Bournon-Moeuvres front is one so brimful of heroism that it deserves its place in English history for all time. The most determined attacks of four German divisions, with three other German divisions in support, were utterly crushed by the unconquerable resistance of the three British

divisions in line. The 30th November, 1917, will be a proud day in the lives of all those splendid British soldiers who, by their single-hearted devotion to duty, prevented what would have become a serious situation had they given way.

The garrisons of three posts on the front of the 2nd Division (1st Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment) fell fighting to the last man and when the line at this point was restored, such a heap of German dead lay in and around the posts, that it was impossible to find the bodies of our men. In this locality, five other posts, also held by the 1st Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment, repulsed all the enemy's attacks and maintained themselves until our reinforcements had restored the situation. These posts showed the utmost valour and steadfastness in a most critical period, extending over some six hours. The enemy made attack after attack, always in vastly superior numbers, and time after time came right up to our posts, only to be mown down by our fire and driven back in disorder. The casualties of these posts were 46 of all ranks. They claimed to have killed over 500 of the enemy. The story of the gallant fight against odds put up by the garrisons of these posts, both those who survived and those who died valiantly, constitutes one of the many examples furnished by the fighting of this day of the supreme importance of the resistance that can be afforded by small parties of determined men, who know how to use their weapons and are resolved to use them to the last.

Accurate rifle shooting played a large part in the repulse of the enemy's attacks. Hundreds of men actually killed Germans, and there are instances of one cleaning and loading a rifle for a comrade who was picking off Germans. When an attack had been beaten off, men cleaned their rifles and collected small-arm ammunition to be ready for the attack. [TX00585]

The following is an extract from a despatch by Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig dated 20th February 1918

After a heavy preliminary bombardment and covered by an artillery barrage, the enemy's infantry advanced shortly after 9 a.m. in dense waves, in the manner of his attacks in the first battle of Ypres. In the course of the morning and afternoon no less than five principal attacks were made in this area, and on one portion of the attack as many as eleven waves of German Infantry advanced successively to the assault. On the whole of this front a resolute endeavour was made to break down by sheer weight of numbers the defence of the London Territorials and other English battalions holding this sector.

Early in the afternoon large masses of the enemy again attacked west of BOURLON WOOD and, although beaten off with great loss at most points, succeeded in overwhelming three of a line of posts held by the 1st Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment, on the right of the 2nd Division. Though repeatedly attacked by vastly superior numbers the remainder of these posts stood firm, and when, two days later, the three posts which had been overpowered were regained, such a heap of German dead lay in and around them that the bodies of our men were hidden. All accounts go to show that the enemy's losses in the whole of his constantly repeated attacks on this sector of the battle front were enormous. One battery of eight machine guns fired 70,000 rounds of ammunition into ten successive waves of Germans. Long lines of attacking infantry were caught by our machine guns in enfilade and were shot down in line as they advanced. Great execution also was done by our Field Artillery and

in the course of the battle guns were brought up to the crest line and fired direct upon the enemy at short range. [TX00400]

The greatest credit is due to troops at Masnières, Bourlon and Moeuvres for the very gallant service performed by them on this day. But for their steady courage, and staunchness in defence, the success gained by the enemy on the right of our battle front might have had serious consequences.

Casualties

Considering the casualties the Royal Berks inflicted upon the Germans, their losses were remarkably light, one officer and 12 men killed, two officers and 25 men wounded, 20 missing and 6 to hospital.

Captain E. P. Jackson of C Company was killed, and Second-Lieutenants Smeaton and Palmer were wounded. Of the missing most were from B Company.

Those killed were:-

27th November

17864 - Pte Alexander George McLean of Islington

28th November

28778 - Pte Sidney Charles Shaw of Knowl Hill

7081 - Sgt Frederick A Wells of Reading

29th November

38430 - Pte Reginald Herbert Bevis of Bournemouth

6650 - Cpl Frederick Henry Coleshill of Cookham Rise

17618 - Pte Gerald Percy East of Kennington

22127 - Pte Robert William Gristock of Totterdown

38361 - Pte George Richard Harrold of Swaffham

6098 - Cpl George Smith of Chaddleworth

9304 - Sgt Charles Stevens of Maidenhead

30th November

38423 - Pte Ernest Bayliss of Worcester

38428 - Pte Edward Charles Bratchell of

39226 - Pte Albert William Thomas Dancock of Pershore

26359 - Pte Ernest Henry Dowling of Faringdon

33321 - LCpl Ernest Charles Garland of Bedminster

17086 - Pte William James Griffin of Henley OT

38605 - Cpl Frank Francis Hatchard of Southsea

26511 - Pte Thomas Frederick Hyde of Bristol

JA0002 - Capt Edward Philip Jackson of Maidenhead

21090 - Pte Harry Pettifer of Birmingham

33406 - Pte Alfred John Powell of Reading

32510 - Pte William Salmon of Bedminster

7508 - Sgt Arthur Charles Verney

16483 - Pte Henry Wise of Hungerford

6434 - Pte Frederick Woolcott of Camberwell

9784 - Sgt George Wootton of Newbury

17341 - Pte Edward Young of Clapton Park

2nd December

30126 - Pte Harry Denness of Thatcham

12103 - Pte Albert Victor Matthews of Notting Hill

3rd December

41475 - Pte Robert Edward Taylor

Sources

Petre pp 37-47

War Diaries

China Dragon 1928

Berkshire Chronicle 22/2/18, 8/3/18

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