

Section 312

The German Offensives - 2nd Battalion

March to May 1918

The 2nd Bn had been mainly in the Branhoek and Wieltje areas since January 1918 Continued from section 302

The Offensive Begins

21st March 1918

The 21st March 1918 was the first day of the great German spring offensive towards Amiens against the 5th British Army, and on the 22nd the 8th Division was sent to the Amiens - St. Quentin Road, on the extreme British right, to help in stemming the flowing tide of German victory.

Here the diary of the battalion unfortunately fails us; for it gives no detailed account of its movements from the 24th to the 31st March, the most critical period of the great offensive. The only entry in the Battalion Diary for these days is to the effect that it "took 'part'" in operations. We can hardly be surprised at this, looking to the terrible strain and fighting of this period and the enormous losses of the battalion in action. We have only been able to gather a rather sketchy outline of its action from the Brigade Diary.

When the offensive started the 2nd Battalion were in GHQ Reserve billeted in St Martin au Laert.

22nd March 1918

The 2nd Royal Berkshire entrained on the 22nd at Arques, detrained at Guillaucourt, and marched to camp at Chaulnes, which the Germans had not yet reached. At midnight on the 22nd the brigade received orders to move up by omnibus to the left bank of the Somme, between Roncy-le-Grand on the right and Pargny, about two miles downstream. Here it would be facing east. The 2nd Royal Berkshire was on the right, the 2nd Rifle Brigade on the left.

23rd March 1918

The battalion moved first to Bethencourt and the move to the river was under heavy shell fire to relieve the 50th Division which, having been heavily engaged, was now passing back westwards through the 8th. Meanwhile, the enemy had advanced to the right bank, forcing back over the river such troops as were still on that side.

The first orders placed all three battalions in front line,

but the Berkshire were, by later orders, drawn back into reserve. At the close of the day the 2nd Lincolnshire and the 2nd Rifle Brigade were holding the bank, whilst the 2nd Royal Berkshire had two companies at Morchain and two at Monk's Quarry.

24th March 1918

At dawn on the 24th the Germans attacked, passing the river at Pargny, Bethencourt and Fontaine-lez-Pargny by rafts, and by trees felled across the stream. They were at once attacked by all troops in front line, and eventually the brigade reserve (2nd Royal Berkshire) was thrown in. An obstinate defence was put up at Monk's Quarry on the right and other places. In this hotly contested battle Lieut.-Colonels Paton of the Rifle Brigade and Stirling of the Royal Berkshire were both dangerously wounded.

By 14:00 the brigade was holding trenches astride the Morchain-Pertain Road, and west of Potte.

At 22:00 orders were received for the brigade to attack next morning from in front of Licourt, in conjunction with the 24th Brigade and the French 24th Division. The attack was to be by the 2nd Royal Berkshire on the right, and the 2nd Rifle Brigade on the left, each battalion being followed by a composite company one hundred and sixty strong.

25th March 1918

The attack of the 24th Brigade and the French division failed to mature, and the enemy attacked at 06:15

Owing to the British troops having been moved northwards to Licourt for the attack, in order to clear the front of the French division, the enemy found the front only thinly held, with a dangerous gap on the right of the brigade.

At 10:15 the brigade was just south of Morchain preparing to fall back, as the troops on both flanks had already done so. A force of about five thousand Germans had entered Dreslincourt at 09:00 in right rear of the brigade, and strong parties were pushing northwards. The brigade had no troops in hand, and its casualties were terribly heavy.

At 15:15 it was back at Omiecourt, and the enemy had occupied the western edge of Pertain, and was advancing twelve hundred yards on the right flank of the brigade. There is no further record for the 25th March.

26th March 1918

The retreat seems to have continued slowly; for at 07.30 on the 26th the 25th Brigade was just west of Lihons, about four miles behind Omiecourt. At 08.30 it was reorganized, with orders to be ready to move at ten minutes' notice.

At 10:55 the Royal Berkshire was on the railway south of Lihons, on the line Lihons-Méharicourt, with the 1st Sherwood Foresters on its right.

The 23rd and 24th Brigades had been withdrawn clear to Lihons at 14:00, and at 16:30 p.m. the 25th began its retirement, which ended in its assembly at 18:00 west of Rosières en Santerre. On this line the 8th Division was ordered to hold to the last. The German pressure had apparently slackened somewhat, and the night was fairly quiet.

27th March 1918

At 08.30 on the 27th the fighting strength of the 2nd Royal Berkshire was reduced to nine officers and one hundred and sixty-eight other ranks, and the other battalions of the brigade were even weaker.

At 09.15 some troops of the 8th Division which were still east of Rosières fell back, but were again carried forward by the General-Officer-Commanding 25th Brigade and strengthened by the 2nd Rifle Brigade. At the same time the Royal Berkshire were ordered southwards to replace the 2nd Rifle Brigade behind the right front of the division.

At 13:00 the retirement of the division on its left resulted in exposure of the left flank of the 8th Division. From this time till 20:00 a series of counter attacks northwards was carried out by portions of many units, including the 2nd Royal Berkshire. Men were thrown in from different brigades, transport lines, and every available source.

At 18:00 the troops to the left of Rosières station were placed under the command of Brigadier-General Grogan of the 23rd, those to the right under Brigadier-General Haig commanding the 24th Brigade. The 25th Brigade was ordered to the left of Rosières station. At this time there were serious reports of the enemy massing for attack.

At 19:30 the line had been established through Rosières station north-westwards to Harbonnières cemetery, and the 50th Division was ordered to relieve the 8th in it.

28th March 1918

The withdrawal of the 25th Brigade commenced about 09:00 on the 28th March, and by noon it was in Divisional reserve.

At 15:00 it was ordered to retire to Moreuil, where it was assembled, the 2nd Royal Berkshire being still in reserve.

29th March 1918

On the 29th after being ordered back to Jumel and again forward to Moreuil, the brigade was posted astride of the road leading N.E. from Moreuil, facing E.S.E. and with orders, if forced back, to retire northwards fighting rearguard actions.

They appear to have had no fighting on this day, and at 23:00 they were ordered to the high ground north of the wood which they had held during the day. The Germans had been found earlier in the day occupying the wood E.S.E. of Moreuil.

30th March 1918

On the 30th at 01:00 a French regiment was found about three-quarters of a mile from the brigade position. Its commandant proposed crossing the Avre, by the bridge at Castel, to the left bank. By agreement with the 20th Division, the 25th Brigade was to move to Castel and hold the bridge there; but when it was reached, about 06.30, it was found that the French were in sufficient strength to hold it. The brigade, therefore, followed the rest of the 8th Division to Rouvrel, S.W. of Castel. Here they had some food and rest on the Dommartin Road north of the village, and then crossed the Noye stream to Cottenchy, where they were well behind the farthest point of the German advance.

At 12:45 the brigade was ordered back to Rouvrel to protect the right flank of the 24th Brigade, and took position south-east of the village on the south side of a wood, where they were placed temporarily under the General-Officer-Commanding 24th Brigade, their own G.O.C. being then at Divisional Headquarters.

At 17:00 they were sent across the Avre at Castel to support the 23rd and 24th Brigades which were relieving the 24th Division.

31st March 1918

The morning the 31st March was fairly quiet. The 2nd Royal Berkshire were in Castel, supported by the 2nd East Lancashire on the railway.

At 14:30 came news of the line being broken, and the 25th Brigade, as reserve of the 8th Division, was ordered to restore the situation. The Royal Berkshire and East Lancashire were ordered to assemble on the railway west of Castel, and at 15:14 orders issued for the counter-attack. It was to be commanded by Major Griffin of the Berkshire, who had under him also three companies of the East Lancashire with machine guns.

It was in the Moreuil Wood that the breach had been made, and the objective was an outlying copse on the north-west of that wood opposite the Castel Bridge. The attack was completely successful and Major Griffin occupied a line running from S.W. to N.E., passing between the copse and the main wood. But in front of him there was higher ground held by the enemy in the

wood, which he reported rendered his position dangerous, and, as his men were very wet and weary, he asked to be relieved when darkness should render this feasible.

At 19:45 p.m. the 23rd Brigade was ordered to relieve him, but the operation could not be completed till the early hours of the 1st April.

For the period 22nd/31st March officer casualties can be given for each day, but those of other ranks are only given in mass. The officer casualties were:

22nd March. Wounded: 2nd-Lieut. H. Bromhall.

23rd March. Wounded: 2nd-Lieut. H. G. Rew, Captain J. A. Lowe, 2nd-Lieuts. B. Mountjoy, J. C. Murray, L. Smelt, Capt. S. L. Rozelaar.

24th March. Killed: 2nd-Lieut. J. F. House.

Died of Wounds: Lieut.-Col. C. R. H. Stirling, DSO., MC. *Wounded:* 2nd-Lieuts. T. P. Latchford, A. V. Raper, F.C. Parsons, H. T. L. Wooster. *Missing:* 2nd-Lieut. R. C. Hurry.

25th March. Wounded: 2nd-Lieuts. A.B. Jeffries, E.G. Smalicombe, L. Tremellen. *Missing:* Capt. H. A. Curtis. 2nd-Lieuts. T. D. Burne, A. E. Farmer.

26th March. Nil.

27th March. Wounded: Capt. W. H. Glenister.

28th March. Wounded: Capt. H. H. Flint, M.C., 2nd-Lieut. J. E. Pettit.

29th March. Nil.

30th March. Nil.

31st March. Killed: 2nd-Lieut. L. C. Wells. *Wounded:* 2nd-Lieuts. W. A. Applegate, G. W. Mant, M.C., A. D. Wiltshire, J. B. M. Young, M.C.

Total: Killed 2, Died of Wounds 1 Wounded 21. Missing 4. Total 28.

Other Ranks for whole period- *Killed or Died of Wounds 35. Wounded 182; Missing 88. Total 305.*

The Enemy

The Battalion's Digest of Service gives some interesting information about the enemy facing them:-

During this period the 8th Division fought no fewer than 18 different German Divisions, including 3 Guards Divisions. The German Divisions opposite the Divisional front at 6pm daily were as follows:-

23rd March. 18th, 23rd, 4th Guards, 19th, 208th, 28th, 88th, and two unidentified Divisions total 9

24th March. 18th, 23rd, 25th, 19th, 6th, 88th, 187th and one unidentified Division total 9

25th March, 25th, 4th Guards, 113th, 19th, 208th and 5th. Total 6

26th March, 243rd, 19th, 6th and 5th. Total 4

27th March, 113th, 6th and 5th, total 3

[28th and 29th March not given]

30th March 6th, 107th, 88th and 28th, total 4

31st March, 208th, 88th and 23rd, total 3

1st April, 199th, 243rd, 88th and 23rd, total 4

According to prisoners belonging to the above Divisions, we inflicted very heavy losses on the enemy by our artillery, M.G. and rifle fire. At BRIC, the enemy suffered so severely from our fire that one Company at least was reduced to 20 strong.

The O.C. 3rd Btn, 74th I.R., 19th Division received orders to attack on 31st March but replied that this was impossible owing to the heavy casualties his Battalion had sustained.

A Sergeant of the 122nd Fusilier Regiment 243rd Division estimated that the losses sustained by his Regiment amounted to 80% in four days fighting. The NCO was captured in MOREUIL WOOD on 30th March.

All prisoners testify to the accuracy of our rifle and machine gun fire, and admit that it is greatly superior to theirs. With the exception of a few snipers the enemy are not trained for fighting at a greater range than 200 yards. The moral effect of our fire has therefore been very great.

A fair estimate of the casualties suffered by the enemy during his offensive would appear to average from 25% to 50% Infantry per Division, depending on the number of days fighting in which they were involved. [DOS102]

Resting

1st to 23rd April 1918

On the 1st April the battalion was relieved by French troops and proceeded to billets at Cottenchy, whence it proceeded by stages to Le Quesnoy,.

On the 3rd April they went by route march and bus to Reincourt and next day on to Le Quesnoy where they stayed until the 11th. Here it was busy reorganizing and receiving reinforcements: 383 men joined on the 5th and 168 on the 9th.

On the 12th they route marched to Hangest where they entrained for the Riviry area. They spent the period from the 13th to the 19th in Divisional Reserve and engaged in training. They were billeted at La Motte and Bre Biere.

On the 20th it relieved the 54th Australian Battalion in the defences N.E. of Villers Bretonneux, and became the centre attack battalion there. This was the extreme point in the advance on Amiens reached by the Germans. They remained in a defensive position until the 24th

In Action at Villers Bretonneux

24th April 1918

The Battalion Diary makes little mention of what happened on the 24th, but the Brigade Diary gives further particulars. On that day the German offensive was renewed north and south of Villers Bretonneux.

At 07.30 the Royal Berkshire reported that the enemy was in the aerodrome on the main road. The attack there had fallen upon the 2nd Rifle Brigade, the right

company of which had given way, but the centre had held on. One company of the Berkshire was ordered to counter-attack the western "hangar" of the aerodrome, in order to establish connexion between the centre company of the Rifle Brigade and the reserve about Villers Bretonneux.

The company moved out, but found that the enemy was in complete possession of Villers Bretonneux, and the attack was impracticable.

By 10:00 the enemy was in the western outskirts of the village, and at 10:50 the 2nd Royal Berkshire was ordered to attack from the north, aiming at the eastern edge of the village. This attack also being found impossible, the battalion formed a line north of the village, facing south, whilst the Australians and other troops faced Villers Bretonneux on the west.

25th April 1918

A counter-attack in the night, by the 18th Division and two Australian Brigades, resulted in the village being practically surrounded by the morning of the 25th. In the attack on that day the 2nd Royal Berkshire came under orders of the 15th Australian Brigade attacking from the north and west.

At 06:30 they counter-attacked

At 08:50 it was reported that the Germans had machine guns on the railway to the west of the village and the 2nd Royal Berkshire was sent to deal with them. After this it was engaged in mopping up the village. During these operations the battalion captured about three hundred prisoners, and mopped up 35 machine guns and trench-mortars. Another 25 were taken by the Durham Light Infantry with whom the Royal Berks were working.

After noon these two battalions were ordered to leave one company each to complete "mopping up," the rest to organize defences against the enemy on the east and north-east of the village.

The Casualty Clearing Station was in Hennecourt Wood where the 5th Bn were resting.

The casualties of the 24th and 25th were: *Officers.*

24th. Died of Wounds: 2nd-Lieut. S. B. Cooper. *Wounded:* 2nd-Lieut. A. A. Davison.

25th. Killed: 2nd-Lieut. H. A. Mossman, M.C. *Died of Wounds:* 2nd-Lieut. K. E. Moore. *Wounded:* 2nd-Lieuts. E. T. R. Hoare, J. Breakell, W. Vaughan, M.M., C. A. Jones, J. L. Carter, A. S. Knight, M.C.

Other Ranks for the two days: *Killed or Died of Wounds* 66. *Wounded* 183; *Missing* 8. *Total* 257

Out of the Line

26th April 1918

The battalion remained at Villers Bretonneux on the 26th and next day went back out of the line, on relief, to

billets at Glisy.

27th April to 9th May

From the 27th April to the 5th May, when it moved into the IXth Corps area, the 25th Brigade was at various places out of the line.

They left Glisy on the 29th marching to billets in Boutillerie. Here they stayed until the 1st May when they marched on towards the Hallencourt area, being bussed the last part of the journey. There they set up Battalion HQ at Zalleaux, A Coy were at Beke, B Coy at Baincourt, C Coy at Zalleaux and D Coy in Sainast.

The 8th Division was now about to be sent for a supposed rest cure into the French area, where the front from Soissons to Rheims was to be held by four British and four French divisions only. The 25th Brigade went, on the 5th May, by rail from Saleux near Amiens to Fere en Tardenois and marched to billets at Loupeigne where they remained until the 9th. They were temporarily part of IX Corps.

9th to 26th May 1918

On the 10th, it marched to Coulandon and was attached to the VIth French Army.

Next day it marched to Ventelay, and on the 12th it relieved the 258th French Infantry Regiment in the right sector of the front of the French 7th Division.

The 2nd Royal Berkshire took the place of the 4th Battalion of the 358th French between the 27th April and the 26th May at Guyencourt, a short way south of Pontavert on the Aisne. A and B Coys were in the front with C and D in Support

On the 20th May it was relieved by the 2nd Rifle Brigade and marched to billets at Guyencourt.

On the 24th they relieved the 2nd East Lancashire in the right sub-sector of the brigade front. There had been no casualties. This time C And D were in the front with A and B in support.

Third German Offensive

27th May 1918

Four French and three British Divisions, almost all composed of tired or raw troops found themselves facing eighteen fresh German divisions with seven more in close support, at Chemin des Dames.

On the 27th May the Germans commenced their offensive against the Aisne which carried them to the Marne once more, the nearest point to Paris which they had reached since their defeat in the First Battle of the Marne in September 1914. Again for this offensive the Battalion Diary, as in March, gives no details beyond saying it took part in the operations, and we have to seek information in the diaries of the 25th Brigade and the 8th Division.

The position of the 25th Brigade in the early morning of the 27th May was just north of the Aisne, on its right bank, in the angle between the river and the high road Laon-Rheims. The 2nd Royal Berks was in front line towards La Ville-aux-Bois.

In support was the 2nd Rifle Brigade, with the 2nd East Lancashire reserve near the right bank of the river. Brigade Headquarters were the left of the reserve. The German attack burst with great fury on the whole front of the Brigade, carrying everything before it.

Gas shelling began at 00:45 and the casualties found it nigh impossible to make their way to casualty clearing stations. The main artillery barrage on the trenches, and heavy shelling of the back areas commenced at 01:00. The barrage was perhaps the fiercest ever launched and the 15 mile long hill quivered under the shock of the impacts.

At 04:05 the German infantry attack commenced, supported by tanks, and covered a smoke screen. Within an hour the redoubt line had been penetrated the left, and even Brigade Headquarters were involved in the fighting. The Brigade Commander passed to the left bank of the Aisne at Gernicourt organize defences along that bank. On the left of the 25th was the 24th Brigade.

At 06.35 a pigeon message from the Headquarters 2nd Royal Berkshire reached the Divisional Headquarters saying that Lieut.-Colonel Griffin, Captain Clare, and the rest of the Head-quarters were surrounded, but were holding out to the last in the hope of being relieved. They were apparently north of the river and they never could be relieved. In a message, the hour of which is not decipherable, the 25th Brigade notified the division that it had been forced across the river and had blown up the bridges.

At 14:30 the 8th Division could no longer hold the line of the river, and a new line was set up from Bouffiguereux on the right through Roncey and Concevreux to Maizy.

The position at this time was as follows:

Parts of the wood of Gernicourt, on the right front of the line, were still held by remnants of the 22nd Durham Light Infantry, 1st Sherwood Foresters, the 25th Brigade, and a French territorial battalion. The South Lancashire was between Bouffiguereux and Roncey, with the Cheshire on their left at Concevreux. The remains of the 23rd and 24th Brigades were mixed up with these battalions, and the Borderers were in close support at Roncey. The whole of these troops were placed under the General-Officer-Commanding 75th Division behind Roncey, who was to hold this line to the last, and to arrange as far as possible to withdraw the remains of the 8th Division at night into support.

All the 8th Division artillery and the French batteries had been reported captured or out of action before the earlier position had been lost. The Brigadier, Brigade Major, and Signal Officer, and Captain Lowe (attached)

of the 25th Brigade were casualties, the two former missing, the others wounded. The 74th Brigade (50th Division) held the line from Concevreux to Maizy, the 25th Division was on the right.

The result of the day's fighting was that the centre and left of the IXth British Corps had been forced back to a position between the Aisne and the Vesle facing west and north-west, whence on the succeeding days it was driven across the Vesle, and gradually south-eastwards between the Vesle and the Ardre.

In *The Great World War* the authors give a brief description of the action:-

The 8th British Division, linking up with the right of the 50th, held an outpost line between Craonne and Berry-au-bac, which they were told to hold to the last; an order which was carried out to the letter. In the battle zone itself the Germans pierced the line held by the 8th in a dense fog almost before they were discovered. The Berkshires fought with the utmost stubbornness for some hours, together with reinforcements from the Lancashires, but the survivors were eventually forced to retire when the rest of the troops fell back across the river to Bermericourt. [TX00899]

We have to deal with the casualties as in the case of the March offensive, that is, giving dates for officers, but not for other ranks. The casualties for the 27th were: *Officers*:. *Killed*: 2nd-Lieuts. W. F. G. Joseph, J. C. Gunn. *Wounded*: 2nd-Lieuts. J. W. Pavey, E. H. Horncastle, W.H. C. Rooke.

No dates are given for the missing, but they probably nearly all belonged to the 27th. They were: Lieut.-Colonel J. A. A. Griffin, D.S.O., Capt. A. D. Clare, M.C., Lieuts. H. G. Senior, E. S. Haighton, O Wild, R. V. Gilliat, R. A. M. J. de C. McDonnell, 2nd-Lieuts. F. H. Miller (killed), H. G. Nicholls, D.C.M. (killed), C D. Williams, W. A. Upton, R. B. Haddow, G. L. Gold, H. E. Flight, J S. Halley, J. M. Bennett, W. Vaughan, M.M., Captain R. Whittaker, Captain C. M. Fowler (R.A.M.C. attached).

Other Ranks: *Killed or Died of Wounds* 2. *Wounded* 51; *Missing* 653. *Total*: 24 Officers and 706 Other Ranks.

The number of missing is indicative of the nature of the battle, for is evident that a large proportion of these must have been killed or wounded and whom it was impossible to bring back. Many, too, no doubt were surrounded and cut off like the Head-quarters of the battalion.

The deaths from the 27th to the 31st were:-

SERIAL	SURNAME	XNAMES	HOMETOWN
27th May			
42265	Abrahams	Edward James	Bristol
42271	Bearley	William Henry	Ettington
43568	Britton	Louis Webb	Exeter
202690	Brown	Charles S	Birmingham
50566	Challis	Herbert	Reading
12249	Cook	John	Cannock

42304	Cooper	Alfred James	Edgebaston
43581	Cooper	William Edward	West Hampstead
44865	Coutts	Alexander	
44864	Davis	Harry	
41537	Emmens	Ernest George	Kingswood Common
201111	Frost	Joseph	Wallingford
34084	Fuller	William Henry	Reading
42327	Galeford	John Harry	
GO0014	Gold	George Rome	Glasgow
GU0005	Gunn	James Campbell	Leven
42337	Gunningham	Gilbert George	Stogursey
9140	Hawkins	Robert	
44832	Hewett	Walter	Chelton
43616	Hill	Henry	Bampton
44835	Hooper	Wallace Lionel	Weston Super Mare
5922	Hughes	Herbert	Exeter
44850	Hyde	Kenneth Frederick	
227056	Izon	Andrew	
44909	Jakeman	Thomas Richard	Aylesbury
44857	Jesse	Frank	East Knoyle
JO0004	Joseph	William Franklin	George
42438	Macdonald	Donald	
MI0005	Miller	Frank Henry	East Greenwich
NI0001	Nicholls	Harry	George
42380	Osborne	Stanley	St Stephens
5731	Preston	Jesse	Chichester
50710	Quinney	Frank	Wilbert
37726	Roy	Charles	Herbert Birmingham
44906	Strange	Frank	Yate
42418	Walley	Thomas	Charles St Gluvias Corn
33408	Wareham	John	Arthur Custom House
42427	White	Reginald	Ernest Chalvey
42433	Wilson	Joseph	
44863	York	John	Mornington Otto
28th May			
G10013	Gilliat	Robert	Vincent Oldham
36879	Gristock	John	Bristol
42338	Hammersley	Ernest	
50712	Roddy	Edward	Charles Coventry
29th May			
44874	Cooper	Frank	Robert
ST0008	Stirling	Colin	Robert Hoste
31st May			
6959	Carruthers	Alfred	Edward Clerkenwell
43609	Hobbs	Herbert	Matthew Nailsea
42346	Holton	James	F
36861	Thompson	William	Edward Bristol

The Reading Mercury of the 20th July 1918 gave the following account:-

Very high tributes are paid by the war correspondents to the gallantry of the men of the Royal Berks and other units of the 8th Division when the Germans made their great attack on May 27th between Rheims and Soissons. The 8th Division were on the right of the 50th between Craonne and Berry-au-bac; the Berkshires belonged to a battalion which was in India when the war broke out, and has seen some very heavy fighting.

No British Division had suffered more heavily in the March fighting on the Somme than the 8th, first in holding massed German attacks along the river in the Christy-Flavy area and later around Villers-Bretonneux. The Division therefore contained a large proportion of new men when it went into the line in Champagne and was given a front of over 10,000 yards to hold. Its advanced

line was held with outposts, behind which was the formal battle line on the north side of the Aisne, with a second series of defensive positions south of the river, based on Germicourt, north west of Rheims. As with the other divisions our men knew the attack was coming on the previous afternoon and every possible preparation was made to meet it and the men stood to all night.

The bombardment began about 1 o'clock in the morning and continued with great intensity and with an enormous amount of gas shells and very heavy trench mortar fire on the forward positions for three hours, when, about 4 o'clock the infantry attack on the right portion of our front began. There was a dense fog so that it was impossible to see 50 yards and the Germans seem to have been through and around all our outposts and before 5 o'clock up to the battle line before they were discovered. At 6 o'clock the Germans seem to have pierced the battle line on the extreme right.

At five minutes past six a pigeon message dated 5.15 am was received from the colonel of the Royal Berks saying that he and his headquarters staff were surrounded. "*The Germans threw bombs down the dug-out*" he wrote "*and passed on. They appear to approach from the right in considerable strength. No idea what has happened elsewhere. Holding out in hopes of relief*" That was one of the few messages received from the men on the other side of the river up there in the outpost lines. The first thrust of the Germans seems to have fallen as far as the 8th Division was involved on the right and the men holding and fighting desperately were gradually forced back except where the Royal Berks were still holding their ground. Reinforcements from a Lancashire regiment were sent forward in support and the troops continued to resist stubbornly causing the enemy heavy losses until they were borne down by the overwhelming weight of numbers. The Germans using tanks against those on the left. By 6.30 that morning the brigade on the right had fallen back to the line of the river at Germicourt, trying to blow up the bridges of which there were 34 as they went. The troops holding the centre and left were fiercely attacked from about five o'clock and eventually forced back. It was necessary for the 8th Division to take up a new line between Bouffignereux and Rouey and every living man, including the Lewis gun class was called in to hold this new line at all costs. The Germicourt positions had been turned from the south-west and the garrison which included some of our men with French troops fought to the last with the most noble courage. Incessant attacks developed, the enemy sending his men forward continually in a kind of dribbling tide, creeping up from folds in the ground, rushing their field guns into the near woods and establishing machine gun positions at close range.

On May 29th our exhausted troops received support and later in the day our battalions were intermingled with French regiments.

On the 29th and 30th the battle raged between Vandeuil and Faverolles and some men of the Wiltshires held a line from Faverolles to Treslom, magnificently against extremely heavy attacks.

The remnants of the 8th Division remained to help holding the line for many days before they were relieved after as testing a time an experience as soldiers could well be called on to endure. They had amply earned the praise given them by the Commander-in-Chief as well as the generous commendations bestowed on them by the French. [TX01043]

Captain Alfred Clare was one of those captured. After

the war and his release he made the following statement:-

The Battalion relieved the French in this southern sector of BERRY-AU-BAC about the middle of May 1918, and occupied in its second tour of duty a position in the left sector of the Bde front, with another Btn of Bde on right, and the third Btn on Bde in support at GUYENCOURT. Immediately on arrival in this new sector (about May 14th) which was a large salient, the Comdg Officer – L'Colonel A.A. Griffin DSO (Lincoln Reg attd R.Berks) reported to Bde HQ how impossible the position was, should the Germans make an attack, as they had direct observation of our whole line from HILL 108 on our right, and from rising ground on our left between our left and the MIETTE stream.

1. On the evening of May 26th orders came for us to send out of the line officers, NCO's and men surplus to requirements as laid down in a certain trench warfare manual, and immediately afterwards:

2. A message from Divisional HQ that a German attack was expected early the following morning.

The CO at once reported that were he to comply with 1. with a smaller Btn on so large a front, he could not hold himself responsible for the result of any action in 2.

The Germans launched their attack at 1 am on 27/5/18 by dropping a tremendous barrage, covering the ground from Btn HQ and including our two rear companies; (one in close support and one in reserve) and then back to and including the Divisional Artillery and the AISNE bridges. Our two forward Companies were almost untouched. We were defending in depth as well as breadth. About 3.30 am reports came from our rear Companies that Germans were all round them in very large numbers, and had attacked from HILL 108 and from our left. This we soon confirmed as Germans were visible from Btn Observation Post everywhere in large numbers, and had overcome our forward Companies by excess of trench mortars and machine guns. Under such circumstances with no artillery support, chances of a scrap were absolutely useless. Orders were given by our CO for "every man for himself" and he, I and others of Btn HQ waited at Btn HQ on the chance of a counter attack by the Btn in support at GUYENCOURT. A pigeon message was sent to Division about 4 am stating the position. This message appeared in the Times account of the 8th Division about 28/9/18. I was captured with Colonel Griffin at 7 am 27/5/18. [TX01149]

Lt R A M J de Courcy MacDonnell, Manchester Regt., attached 2nd R. Berks made his statement:-

On the 27th May 1918 I held up the enemy during his attack until, having lost three officers and more than half of the Other Ranks, all communication with flanks and rear being cut off. I managed to fight my way back with the remainder of my Company to the MIEITE RIVER, where I was captured in an attempt to cross the said River. [TX01150]

Sources

Petre *History of the Royal Berks Vol 2* pp 98 - 108

Pitt *1918 The Last Act* pp 140 - 143

Reading Mercury 20/7/1918

Soldiers Died in the Great War

The Great World War - Vol 8 Page 142/3

Digest of Service 2nd Bn (PRO WO)

POW Debriefs (PRO WO339)

Continued in section 322