

Volume 8 Section 314

The German Offensives

2nd/4th Battalion March 1918

The 2nd/4th had been in the forward area before St Quentin prior to March 21st. Continued from section 304.

The Germans Strike 21st March 1918

When the storm of the great German offensive broke upon the 5th Army, the 2nd/4th Battalion was back in the rear zone at Ugny. At 05:00 on the 21st, when the German offensive was sweeping on with all its vigour, battle stations were ordered to be manned.

At 08:30 the Berkshire Battalion was at Marteville, the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry being in the forward area, and the 2/5th Gloucestershire in the battle zone. The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire held on in the forward area till 16:20, when the Enghien Redoubt which they were holding had been surrounded. Under sanction conveyed to them by a buried cable, they then endeavoured to cut their way back, but only a very few succeeded in doing so.

Meanwhile, the 2/4th Royal Berkshire, on arrival at Marteville, had been put under the orders of the 183rd Brigade. The O.C. of that brigade ordered them to counter-attack on the high ground about Maissemy where the enemy had succeeded in penetrating into the battle area. In this counter-attack, which was partially successful, Lieut.-Colonel Dimmer, gallantly leading it, was killed. Col Dimmer was shot in the head just as he was about to dismount from his horse

According to Pte Herbert Yorke:-

We retired under terrific machine gun and rifle fire. I got wounded in the advance so was already on my way back. Twenty three of my company came out of it alive. My section commander was shot clean through the head in the first five minutes and was killed instantly. The CO led us over the top on horseback. He was first of all wounded, then a sniper fired at him and got him through the head.

Martin Middlebrook described Dimmer's end in his 'The Kaiser's Battle':-

Dimmer decided not only to lead the counter attack himself, but to do so mounted on his horse - a move that he believed would give his men confidence in this hazardous venture. At least one company commander begged him to dismount before coming into range of the German fire but Dimmer refused and rode on, his groom also mounted at his side.

David Harrison in an article on the life of Jack Dimmer

VC continues:-

Two companies of the Berkshires were spread out on either side of their commander and a third company followed in support. Many British troops in nearby positions watched. A man from the 2/5th Gloucesters in a trench on the edge of Holnon Wood remembers " *We were astonished; we just couldn't believe it. It was good riding country but not in those conditions*' And a Royal Engineer: "*We realised that the two horsemen were silhouetted against the skyline and we put up covering fire to protect them. But as soon as they reached the top they were picked off and fell to the ground*" Col Dimmer's horse then ran back through the men following and they had to break ranks to let it pass.

The Germans had been much nearer than had been believed and had themselves been on the verge of attacking. A long line of German infantrymen now sprang up from the ground and, supported by machine gun fire aimed at the Berkshires, came forward. Unnerved by the loss of their commander and by the sudden appearance of the German attack, the Berkshires fell back in confusion. The counter attack was a complete failure.

The ground which had been recovered was again lost. In addition to Colonel Dimmer, V.C., M.C., killed, there were wounded Second-Lieutenants H. G. Champion, E. H. Shelford, W. L. Haile, and W. H. Smith. Of the casualties in other ranks the Battalion Diary merely says that they were "heavy," without giving details, or even totals.

From the Honour Roll one can find the following deaths on 21st March:-

41944	Alley - Frederick George of Chipping Norton
201124	Blake - Walter of Moulsoford
220019	Bodell - James
38740	Browning - Reginald Richard
200186	Butler - Albert Henry MM of Shaw
DI0004	Dimmer - John Henry Stephen VC MC of Lincoln
202319	Finnetty - Matthew James
36046	Fletcher - Albert of Stourbridge
35135	Harvey - Reginald of Bristol
34258	Haskett - Harry Charles of Shaftesbury
220290	Hedges Thomas
35328	Holding - Richard of Kings Norton
38772	James - Peter Arnold of Pendeen
37880	Jeffrey - Robert of South Wigstone
38777	Lee - Harold William of Lutterworth
28748	Levens - Alfred of Earley
201663	Lovegrove - Frank George of Old Bracknell
25804	Palmer - William H of Bristol
19495	Pearce - Francis George
38866	Pridden - John Denton
38887	Shaw - Harry of Wakefield
38888	Shirley - William of Aldermaston
38892	Smith - Leonard Pearson of Burton OT
201033	Thompson - George
38909	Titterington - Albert of Clitheroe

2876 Vass - William Leonard John of Reading
 201566 West - Albert Henry
 38814 Wiblin - Albert of Abingdon

In the Reading Mercury of 24th April 1918 There was also a request for information about Lt W Watson who had last been seen in 'an advanced position' and reported missing, believed killed. This was later confirmed. He had been attached to the 184th Trench Mortar Battery.

On Colonel Dimmer's death command was assumed by Captain and Adjutant J. S. Darby. The acting 2ic, Capt GOW Willink had been sent back to Caix for an officers course and Capt Field was in England on sick leave.

22nd March 1918

The 22nd March dawned in thick mist, and a heavy German barrage was followed by an attack by infantry in great strength. B and C Companies were in position between Ellis Redoubt and Villecholes. The Gloucestershire were farther to the right, holding the Holnon Wood defences. The Royal Berkshire maintained their positions and inflicted heavy losses on the attacking Germans up till 12:30, when they were ordered to retire to the line Vaux-Villeveque, about half-way between Vermand and Beauvois, to which the Gloucestershire also retired when the flanks of the position at Holnon Wood were turned.

The Royal Berkshire reached the new line in good order, and without suffering much loss in the retirement. The battalion was then reorganized and distributed in depth. But this line was scarcely defensible, with its trenches only eighteen inches deep.

At 18:30 a terrific barrage fell upon it, and overwhelming forces of German infantry attacked with great determination. The attack was heaviest on the right of the line, which was broken through at Vaux, and the Royal Berkshire, with their right flank thus exposed, had to retire another six hundred yards. Here, at 19:00, they were again reorganized and held on till midnight, when they were ordered back to Voyennes on the Somme, and on to Longuevoisin, just S.E. of Nesle, where the rest of the night and the whole of the 23rd were spent unmolested.

The casualties on the 22nd were:

Officers. Killed: Capt. E. Knott. *Wounded:* Lieuts. H. F. F. Coggin, K. P. Smith. 2nd-Lieuts. W. A. Cozens, J. Tullett. *Missing:* Capt. G. Hinchcliffe. 2nd-Lieuts. G. W. de St. Legier, M.C., J. Lawrence.

The casualties for other ranks are not stated.

23rd March 1918

During the attack east of Beauvois the Brigadier, the Hon. R. White, C.M.G., D.S.O., was wounded and was succeeded on the 23rd by Lieut.Colonel Weatherall, D.S.O., M.C., of the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Bucking-

hamshire Light Infantry.

On the 23rd command of the 2/4th Royal Berkshire was assumed by Captain G. O. W. Willink, M.C who had returned from his course at Caix with three other officers of the 2nd/4th and a number of officers from other battalions who had also been on the course. They arrived back at 22:00 having had a very exciting lorry drive.

24th March 1918

On the 24th the battalion moved out to take up a defensive position at the bridgehead where the Voyennes Road crosses the canal. Eventually it took post on the line of the railway and dug itself in. The enemy opened intense machine-gun fire at 23:00, but no infantry attack followed.

25th March 1918

In the morning of the 25th nothing particular happened beyond activity by British snipers, who accounted for a good many of the enemy.

During the day the Germans gradually worked round the flanks of the bridgehead position, rendering it untenable by 18:00 and necessitating a further retirement. The battalion fought a delaying action, and got back with slight loss to a quarry behind Breull, which is on the west bank of the canal south-east of Longuevoisin, not far from the line which then divided the French and British Armies.

Eventually they dug in on the line Cressy-Billancourt which was astride the dividing line, with Cressy actually in the French area. The Berkshire and Oxfordshire Battalions held Billancourt, with the Gloucestershire on the right at Cressy. French troops were assisting in the defence.

The Germans made a half-hearted attempt to attack at Quiquery Ridge but the 2/4th repulsed it.

On this day Captain G. L. Worlock, M.C., and Second-Lieutenant J. W. Barber were wounded, but the casualties in other ranks are not stated.

26th March 1918

At 01:00 on the 26th came orders to withdraw to Roye, which was reached without loss by 05:00. Here rations were issued. By now confusion reigned with men from several brigades mixed up together and the retirement towards Mezieres was chaotic, although there was no panic.

It had been placed under the orders of the the xxth Division since the 24th.

At 07:00 the retirement in the direction of Amiens continued, and one senior officer of 20th Division was heard to call out to his men as they passed:-

Look at the Berks, that's the way to march!

After a halt at the Hangest cross roads the general reformation of the brigade took place. Markers were set for each battalion and the men fell in alongside their markers. By noon the exhausted men reached Fresnoy-en-Chaussee where they were played in by the band, who with the rest of the brigade train awaited them.

The party of pioneers and transport, the Berkshire portion of which was commanded by Lt J Brain had had their own adventures getting there and were commended later by General Maxse for the good work they had done at Ham.

Towards 14:00 the brigade concentrated in the neighbourhood of Mezieres, which village the 2/4th Royal Berkshire commenced putting in a state of defence.

At 20:00 the brigade received orders to retrace its steps and defend Le Quesnel on the Amiens-Roye Road. Here the 2/5th Gloucestershire took post south of the road as far as Hangest.

27th March 1918

The Royal Berkshire were on their the east of Le Quesnel Wood, where they improved the defences during the 27th. They were acting here again with the French. The enemy did not attack during this day.

When the French troops began moving in to take over the trenches at Le Quesnel, they were greeted with cheers by the British who had just been informed that they were going into rest.

28th March 1918

At 02:00 on the 28th the men boarded omnibuses for the journey to Villers Bretonneaux. They were without greatcoats and it was very cold. However after a short while the buses turned off to the right and carried the battalion to Marcelcave on the Amiens-La Fere railway, reaching it at 03:30. Here, however, it appeared that the enemy had during the night crossed the Somme at Saily Laurette, thus endangering the position of all troops holding the line south of the Somme. This German movement necessitated their stopping at Marcelcave, in order that an attack might be made northwards on the enemy at Warfusee.

The Brigade-major had intended that as soon as they arrived the Division should launch a night attack but all the Brigadiers protested. One stated:-

The troops had not all come up, the position had not been reconnoitred, the men were tired out.

The action was postponed.

The British troops collected at Marcelcave were a very mixed lot of different regiments from several brigades.

The rest of the night and the morning were utilized in getting some rest and food whilst the responsible officers spent some time in examining the ground to the

N and NE where the enemy could be seen, in the fringes of Lamotte, rushing about on foot and with motor cycles and lorries.

At 11:00 the 184th Brigade, with the 183rd on its left, received orders to attack Warfusee and Lamotte-en-Santerre.

The distance to be traversed before reaching the objective was considerable; about a mile and a quarter from the edge of Marcelcave to the edge of Lamotte and a good two miles from Marcelcave to Bayonvillers on the NE. It was a steady advance by rushes, although with the lack of cover it was really all rush. The Royal Berkshires were on the left with the Gloucesters on the right. As they moved forward they encountered very severe machine-gun fire from Warfusee and Lamotte in front, and from Bayonvillers on its right flank. A partial change of direction towards the right was ordered and it was in carrying out this movement that Captain Willink fell. He had been standing in front of his thin line waving the men around when he was shot through the head. At this point they were forced to retire, after reaching within two hundred yards of their objective.

Lt Whitfield had, with a small party and two machine guns, reached the western outskirts of Lamotte.

Capt Darby took command again but he too was killed about an hour later just before the retirement was completed. Lt Brain then took charge until he too was severely wounded in the little shallow railway cutting that same evening.

The attempt was obviously desperate in the circumstances and the Brigade Major, writing a few days later said it was '*impossible*'. The terrain was perfectly open and very slightly undulating. It was commanded from the enemy's side with no cover except the ruins of an old trench running obliquely across the front, with some wire, which was an obstacle and inconvenience. There had been no artillery preparation: nor was there any artillery support except two field guns, which fired about six rounds and then retired. The Divisional artillery had been withdrawn on March 24th to support the French. Lastly there were very few machine guns compared to the Germans who were well equipped. The only reason for the attack was essentially to gain time by showing a bold face.

At 18:00 the enemy attacked and succeeded in securing a footing on the Amiens-La Fere railway, on the right of the 184th Brigade, which entailed a general withdrawal to a line running north and south five hundred yards to the west of Marcelcave. Here the Gloucestershire were north of the railway, the 2/4th Royal Berkshire astride of it facing east, and the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry south of it. At this time Brigadier-General Pagan assumed command of the brigade and Lt Whitfield took over as the CO of the Battalion, having rejoined the survivors after his separate escapade.

29th March 1918

During the 29th the enemy were endeavouring to push down the valley of the Luce River towards Aubercourt, on the right of the brigade. In the afternoon the battalion was moved to a position east of Villers Bretonneux.

Soldiers Died

Reading Mercury 20/4/1918

Royal Berkshire's Honour Roll

Continued in section 324

30th March 1918

At 08:00 on the 30th the Germans drove in the right flank northwards from Aubercourt, and the British line south of the railway also gave way temporarily, but recovered its line later.

In the afternoon the Germans attacked the brigade front. They were driven off, but succeeded in capturing Marcelcave, where they consolidated a line four hundred yards in front of the British. An Australian Brigade counter-attacked towards Aubercourt, and recovered part of the lost ground.

At 22:00 this brigade was ordered to relieve the 184th, which was withdrawn to Gentelles, about four miles S.W. of Villers Bretonneux.

Lt John Brain was seriously wounded in the back.

There is no list of casualties in these operations either in the Battalion or the Brigade Diary.

Aftermath

When the 61st Division was transferred out of his command at a later date, Lt Gen Ivor Maxse said, of the events of the 20th to 30th March :-

The 61st Division has thus established for itself a high reputation for fighting qualities and gallant spirit; and I wish to thank all ranks for the cheerful alacrity whenever they are called upon to make a special effort.

The 184th Brigade had suffered enormous casualties:-

	Officers	Men
Gloucestershire	20	550
Ox and Bucks	23	700
Royal Berkshires	20	500
total	63	1750

Casualties were surprisingly high in senior officers, 5 Brigadiers were put out of action and the 2nd/4th lost 3 COs. The 61st Division still survived but was down to less than one tenth of its rifle strength.

Sources

Petre pp 194-197

China Dragon

1918: The Last Act Barrie Pitt p 112

The Kaiser's War by Martin Middlebrook

Jack Dimmer VC MC by David J Harrison