

## Volume 9 Section 315

# The Spring Offensives

## The 5th Battalion March to May 1918

*The 5th Battalion had recently been transferred from 35th to 36th Brigade at Fleurbaix. Continued from section 305*

### The Move South

#### 21st to 23rd March 1918

The 5th were not in the line when the first German Offensive struck on March 21st. On the 22nd they were bussed to Morlancourt and then marched to Martinsart. Where they joined VII Corps within Byng's Fifth Army.

*Private Harry Harding:-*

"January 1918, in and out of the Fleur Bay and Laventy Sectors. All mud and breastworks, where the daily phut of gas shells was a danger. Hurriedly on the 22nd March we bussed to Morlancourt, then in artillery formation to Bouzencourt, which was being heavily shelled, then forward to Martinsart. The only time I ever saw Royal Horse Artillery galloping into action" [ref 17]

#### 24th to 26th March 1918

The night of the 24th-25th was spent in omnibuses travelling through Aveluy to Fricourt. At 13:00 they marched, from the field in which they had halted at Warloy, to Millencourt, and were informed that they were to be in the vanguard of the brigade marching at 17:30 to Montauban via Mametz.

When they reached Albert they received orders to march through Carnoy and Mametz to Montauban. At Fricourt they were halted from 23:00 to 03:30 on the 26th, as orders were again to be changed. The cold was so great that the men had to walk about to keep warm.

Then they were marched back to Brigade reserve at Martinsart, where they held the railway embankment west of Aveluy Wood.

The whole day of the 26th was spent in reconnoitring positions east and south of Martinsart, and siting trenches.

The Reading Mercury reported the actions in their edition of 30th November 1918:

At 2.30 am on Sunday March 24th they received orders to go to the Somme area and they were taken thither in "buses, their destination being near Warloy. It was a thrilling time, for it was obvious that the Germans were in immense strength, and were bringing tremendous pressure against the weaker British line. There were many exciting incidents for while at Burbure the place was

bombed and the canteen stores were hit.

On Monday March 25th the battalion received orders to go up and occupy a line Montauban-Bernafay Wood. They arrived at 3.15 pm and moved off from Millencourt through Albert about three kilometers towards Fricourt.

Early the next morning the battalion returned via Albert to Martinsart, arriving at 5.45 am. The men went to bed having to sleep in cellars, but at 1.30 pm the alarm was sounded and that day at 5 pm the Germans entered Albert which had been so long in British possession. The outlook indeed looked bleak.

#### 27th March 1918

At 00.30 on the 27th an attack appeared to be developing from the north from Mesnil. One platoon was sent out to cover the Mesnil Road The rest stood to arms, and at 02:00 two companies were sent to help the 37th Brigade which was being attacked.

Germans were now seen marching in a column of fours by the Mesnil-Martinsart Road. The platoon on the road let them come within two hundred yards before opening on them with rifles and Lewis guns. Several were seen to fall, and the rest hastily deployed on either side of the road. At this moment there arrived on the scene a battalion of the 63rd (Naval) Division which chased the Germans back towards Mesnil.

*Reading Mercury:*

At 1.30 on Wednesday March 27th the Germans attacked from Mesnil, but he was held up and dispersed by C Company. The Royal Naval Division were at the other end of the village and by a successful counter-attack by the naval men the enemy was driven through Aveluy Wood back to the railway line.

At 03:00 one of the two companies supporting the 37th Brigade was sent through Aveluy Wood to mop up any Germans in it, and generally clear up the situation. They met none of the enemy.

*Reading Mercury*

At 9.30 am it was reported that Jerry was coming in force. The battalion took up pre-arranged positions and B Company had to bear a heavy weight of attack. The enemy penetrated in force in front of the Berkshires, but the men of the royal county splendidly held their ground and gave him a hot reception.

At 11:00, as a heavy barrage was seen to be falling on Aveluy Ridge, the battalion stood to, the two right companies occupying battle positions S.E. of Martinsart. The 35th Brigade was reported to be counter-attacking.

*Reading Mercury:*

At 11 am A Company who were reinforced made a counter attack on Aveluy Wood, thus relieving the pressure.

At noon the right battalion of the 36th Brigade was attacked. The two Berkshire Companies S.E. of Martinsart were reinforced by the other two and the O.C. 5th Royal Berkshire decided not to return to Martinsart

Between 15:00 and 16:00 the battalion was ordered to face south, as an attack was expected from that direction. A Company was sent forward to clear up the situation in a gap between the 9th Royal Fusillers and the 7th Royal Sussex. It advanced till held up by machine-gun fire from the direction of Aveluy, in front of which the enemy now was. The company commander was killed, and there were a score of other casualties in the company.

The battalion commander now placed the other companies with D on the right front in touch with the Northamptonshire Pioneers, C on the left, and B in reserve in Martinsart Wood south of the village.

At 17:00 came a strong attack from the direction of Aveluy, which forced the left battalion of the brigade to retire; A Company conforming to its movement. Two platoons of C, on the left, being outflanked, also had to fall back, whilst the other two platoons and D held on and inflicted severe losses on the enemy by their fire on his flank.

The retirement ceased on the line of the ridge one hundred or two hundred yards S. of Martinsart, where a strong line was formed and dug in. After dark strong patrols were sent out to reconnoitre, and by 21:00 the position occupied before the retirement had been re-established. The O.C. 5th Royal Berkshire now, after consulting the O.C. 9th Royal Fusillers, posted his battalion thus

The right company was in touch with the left of the Northamptonshire Pioneers and the right of the left company, which in turn joined up with the right of the 9th Royal Fusillers. The other two companies were in support at Martinsart.

*Reading Mercury:*

About 6.30 pm C and D Companies were strongly assailed and with the troops in front withdrawing again, the Berkshires eventually became the front line troops, but the thin khaki line held; the ridge above the sunken road near the battalion headquarters being held with all possible troops. The men dug themselves in, the officers meanwhile walking up and down encouraging them, their revolvers in one hand and perhaps a bit of army biscuit in the other.

It was a critical time and a few elements of the Berkshires were forced back, but the remainder held on firmly. In the heavy fighting Capt George Gordon Paine was severely wounded, succumbing three days later and 2nd Lieut S Matthews was killed. Lt J S Noble was also badly hit and

he died on April 2nd.

The adjutant of the battalion wrote to Paine's mother:

I cannot say how deeply grieved we all are at the sad death your son Gordon. He had only been with us such a very short time, but long enough for all the officers and men to have got to love him. Several of us knew him before, when he was at Havant and at Fort Nelson and he had many friends in the battalion.

Your son was severely wounded while gallantly leading his company in a counter-attack against the village of Aveluy near Albert. He was wounded in the side and was lying in a very exposed place. To such an extent had he already won the devotion of the men that four men volunteered to risk their lives to get him in. The fourth one Corpl McAllister was successful and has been recommended for the act. But your son died almost as soon as he got into hospital and was buried there.

The whole battalion extend the warmest sympathy to you in your sad loss and can only hold out as comfort that he died a very gallant death.

**28th March 1918**

At 09:00 on the 28th the left company reported an attack in force from Aveluy, with the enemy massing in the sunken roads. The British artillery, being warned of this, put down a heavy barrage on Aveluy Ridge, and the enemy were met by the fire of both the Royal Berkshire front companies.

By 10:00 the attack had been repulsed, and the enemy were seen carrying back their wounded over Aveluy Ridge. The artillery duel lasted till half an hour after noon. In this fight C Company lost its commander and about twenty others.

Immediately after dark strong patrols went out to clear up the situation. All of them reported the enemy north of Aveluy Ridge, but one patrol, of an NCO and eight men, managed after a short fight to establish a post on the Aveluy-Bouzincourt Road.

*Reading Mercury:-*

How hard pressed were our men during those terrible days and what superb gallantry they displayed our people at home have scarcely yet realised.

At 9.30 the next morning (Thursday) the enemy made a serious attack on B Company. The enemy displayed great boldness, pushing up his machine guns and massing his infantry on the flanks, but Lieutenant Likeman had some fine snipers under his command and they picked off the machine gunners at 800 yards while the divisional artillery were top-hole and worked unceasingly

So stalwart was the defence that by 7 pm the German attack and advance were stopped. It was a great feat on the part of the defending force. The Berkshires lost Capt Ernest Henry Lloyd, severely wounded and he succumbed on April 3rd.

## Into Reserve

### 29th March 1918

In the early hours of the 29th the two front companies of the 5th Royal Berkshire were relieved by the 6th Royal West Kent, and the battalion went to Brigade reserve, with two companies in Martinsart and two in the defences west of it.

At 08:00 the battalion was moved to a position N.E. of Martinsart, where, at 19:00, it stood to on account of patrol encounters with the enemy. The disposition of the battalion during this day was, two companies in an orchard ready to man the line towards Mesnil, one in the defences N.E. of Martinsart, and one in support.

Reading Mercury:-

The next day, Good Friday, the battalion were moved to a new position, heavy rain adding to the general discomfort, but later the same day they were relieved.

### 30th March 1918

At 00:30 on the 30th March the battalion was relieved by the 23rd London and sent back to Warloy, where it arrived between 03:00 and 04:00.

Reading Mercury:-

The next day they were inspected by General A B Scott who complimented them on their gallant work and told them how critical was the situation. Heavy rain again made the conditions additionally cheerless.

The losses of the 5th Royal Berkshire in these days had been: *Officers. Killed:* 2nd-Lieut. J. H. Mathews. *Died of Wounds:* Capt. G. G. Paine, M.C. *Wounded:* Capt. E. H. Lloyd, Lieut. J S. Noble. *Other Ranks: Killed* 10; *Wounded* 65.

### 2nd April 1918

On the 2nd April the Royal Berkshire, from Warloy, took over front-line trenches in front of Albert from the 7th Border Regiment.

The Germans attacked the trenches of the Suffolks and the Essex but with assistance from the Lewis Gun section of the 5th Royal Berks the attack was beaten off.

Colonel Nicholls was taken with influenza and had to go into hospital.

### 3rd - 4th April 1918

The 3rd was a quiet day, but the German shelling increased on the 4th and Captain L. Fenton was wounded.

Reading Mercury:-

Colonel Nicholls was taken with influenza and had to go into hospital. This was on Easter Tuesday and the same evening the battalion left Warloy and went into line in front of Albert, where for a day or two it was fairly quiet.

On Easter Thursday the enemy started his second great bid for Amiens and there was increased shelling on the divisional front. In the course of this Capt L Fenton was wounded.

## Under Attack at Bouzencourt

### 5th April 1918

At 04:00 on the 5th warning was received of an impending attack, and at 07:00 the enemy put down a barrage on the front-line trenches, and on the British batteries about Bouzincourt. The attack commenced in the south behind an intense barrage working up from that direction.

By 09:30 the artillery fire of every description was tremendous on the whole British system. Infantry attacks were launched on the whole length of the 36th Brigade front, but were everywhere repulsed. The enemy, advancing in close formation, made three several attacks on the left and centre companies of the 5th Royal Berkshire, but each was repulsed with the assistance of the 9th Royal Fusiliers on the left.

By 10:00 the situation was normal, but at noon the barrage again opened, and the attacking German infantry succeeded in entering the trenches held by the left and centre companies of the Royal Berkshire. The right company and one platoon of D held firm.

At 14:30 the C.O. sent up the three reserve platoons of D to restore the situation. As they advanced up a slope, they were exposed to intense machine-gun fire, from which they lost 50 per cent. of their numbers, including Captain J R West and Lieutenant A. C. Punnett. When they had reached the line of the support trench they dug in. The front of the 9th Royal Fusiliers, on the left, was still intact; and the CO of that battalion reported that he was gradually regaining the trench lost by the left Berkshire company.

By 18:00 he had extended his right by three hundred yards, which still left a gap of six hundred yards from which the enemy had not been ejected. Colonel Nicolls now decided to counter-attack, with the help of two companies of the 7th Royal Sussex placed at his disposal.

The counter-attack as delivered behind a barrage at 20:15, but was only partially successful, owing to machine-gun fire on a ridge which had to be crossed.

The Reading Mercury of 21st December 1918 picked up the story from the edition of November 30th.

The next day (April 5th) the battalion received warning of the probability of an attack at dawn and about 7 am a heavy barrage came down on batteries in front of Bouzincourt and on the front system of trenches. The back areas were freely shelled.

The attack culminated at 9.30 am in an intense trench mortar barrage and all calibre shells over the whole

system. This was the signal for the launching of an attack along the whole brigade front. These attacks were with great gallantry repulsed at all points. The enemy advanced in close formation five different times against A and C Companies but were repulsed each time with the help of the Royal Fusiliers.

At noon a heavy barrage again opened on the whole system and the enemy succeeded in entering the trenches held by A and C Companies. However the position of B Company and no 1 Platoon of D Company remained intact. The three Companies of the reserve battalion were, early in the afternoon, sent up to try to restore the situation. The side of the slope up which the company had to advance was exposed to intense machine gun fire and fifty percent of the company became casualties, including the company commander, Capt J R West MC of Erleigh Road Reading and Lieut A G Punnett.

The company reached the line of support trench and dug themselves in. The 9th Royal Fusiliers by good work succeeded in re-occupying the line held by C Company of the Royal Berks and by 6 pm he was holding the original front line for 300 yards of his original boundary. This left a gap of about 600 yards still occupied by the enemy or under his control.

The officer commanding thereupon decided to deliver a counter attack with two companies of the 7th Royal Sussex at dusk. The attack was accordingly delivered under a barrage soon after 8 o'clock but owing to the intense machine gun fire on the ridge which had to be crossed was only partially successful.

### 6th April 1918

At 4 a.m. on the 6th the other two companies took over from the 9th Royal Fusiliers the reconquered part of the left of the Berkshire trench, and also relieved the right company. There were very few survivors of the right and centre companies, and the remains of the battalion had to be re-organized in two companies.

One, about one hundred strong, composed of A and B, was placed the disposal of the O.C. 9th Royal Fusiliers; the other, ninety strong of C and D, was made over to the 7th Royal Sussex.

The 6th was quiet till 17:30 when the outposts of the 35th Brigade were driven in by a barrage and an infantry attack.

At 23:00 the 37th Brigade took the place of the 36th, and the 5th Royal Berkshire was attached the 35th Brigade. Its trench strength was then two hundred and thirty.

Reading Mercury:-

The Berks had nobly played their part in checking the German hordes, but they were sadly depleted. At 4 o'clock the next morning (April 6th) the remaining two companies of the 7th Royal Sussex relieved the Fusiliers in the line originally held by the 5th Berks C and B companies. There were very few survivors of the Berkshire C and A Companies and after relief the battalion was organised in two companies A & B and C & D. A&B Company, approximately 100 strong, was placed at the disposal of the 9th Royal Fusiliers and D company,

approximately 90 strong at the disposal of the 7th Royal Sussex. It showed how sternly the Berkshires had fought that they made so effective a show.

The day was quiet till 5.30 pm when an intense barrage of shells of all calibres opened on the whole front and at 6 pm a heavy attack was launched on the 55th Brigade front, their outpost being driven in.

Later the 5th Berks came under the orders of the 35th Brigade as the battalion in reserve and was disposed in some old British trenches. Its strength had now been reduced to about 250.

The casualties in these early days of April were:

*Officers.* (Killed: none.) *Wounded.* Capts. L. Fenton, D. E. Ward, MC, J. R. West MC (thigh wound), Lieut. A. C. Punnett. 2nd-Lieuts. C. A. Nott (since died of wounds), H. S. Handley, J.F.M. Shedell. *Missing:* 2nd-Lieuts. H. E. Palmer, A. Waite, W. Barker, B. Miles (later reported POW), C. Wilmshurst (later reported POW) J Cowling (shell shock). *Other Ranks:* Killed 243; *Wounded, and Missing* (no details given).

The Germans reported that the 5th Royal Berks had been annihilated. The Reading Mercury on 11/5/1918 was quick to correct the impression:-

A message from the British Front corrects the exaggeration of the German claims, Killed, Wounded and Prisoner during the early days of their offensive<sup>1</sup> the 5th Royal Berks were said to have been annihilated. The actual total losses were 15 Officers and 300 men.

*Reading Mercury 21/12/1918*

The 5th Berks had lost every Commander and second in command of its Companies. 243 Other Ranks were killed, wounded or missing. Temp Captain J R West was suffering from a wound in the right thigh. He was wounded in the same place when serving with the Yeomanry in Gallipoli.

### 7th April to 23rd May 1918

The battalion was returned to the 36th Brigade on the 7th April, and retired to billets in Henecourt. For next fortnight they were recuperating in the rear.

Reading Mercury:-

On April 7th and 8th the battalion occupied billets in cellars at Henencourt and they were in this sector till May 25th.

On the 12th they were on the move again. They left Warloy arriving at Rubempre and then marching to Mirvaux on the 17th.

They moved up to Harponville on the 19th and into the line in the Beaumont Hamel sector on the 23rd. in relief of a New Zealand Brigade.

Berks Chronicle 16/5/1919, referring to events of the 25th April:

In Hennecourt Wood was a Casualty Clearing Station, and the battalion had the melancholy interest of seeing many of the 2nd Royal Berks, who were in the same sector, brought in after their severe engagement.

In the night of the 29th-30th an enemy raid on the right of the Royal Berkshire was driven off, one dead German being left behind.

On the 1st May the 12th Division was rearranged on a three-brigade front, 36th on the right, 37th centre, 35th left. Each had one battalion in front, one in support, and one in reserve at Acheux. The 5th Royal Berkshire was at first in the support line of the 36th Brigade.

In the night of the 11-12th May, when the battalion was in front line, two enemy patrols got into the trench held by the Royal Berks. In hand-to-hand fighting they were very roughly handled there and driven out, leaving one wounded officer behind. Sgt Varney led the bombers who ejected the Germans from the trench. For their conduct on this occasion Sergeant Varney received the D.C.M. and Private Bushell the M.M. Both of them proceeded, after the repulse of the enemy, into No-Man's Land and brought back a wounded German officer, whose capture was useful for identification.

They were relieved on the 13th May and moved to Acheux to prepare for their next engagement.

## Attack on Hamel

24th May 1918

On the 24th an important raid was carried out by the 5th in conjunction with the Anson Battalion of the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division.

Assembly posts were beyond what was known as the purple line. The battalion was divided into a right (A and B Companies) under Capt JN Gregory and a left (C and D) column under Capt G E Collins. The leading company of each was to go as far forward as the German front trench to consolidate and cover the final withdrawal. The rear companies (B and D) would then leapfrog it and get as far as the Amiens-Arras railway. Their job was to thoroughly search the German support trenches.

The advance progressed satisfactorily for the first stage, and then the left supporting company passed through, b o n t w y a p k r t y . O n the right the supporting company, with a number of men of the Anson Battalion, lost direction, and never succeeded in getting beyond the German front line.

An enemy barrage on No-Man's Land and British trenches two minutes after zero caused heavy losses and considerable confusion and more or less disorganized tr a i d e r a t i t y a c k . O n the whole, however, the raid was very successful.

The two leading companies advanced according to plan and captured all their objectives. However at this point the right support company lost direction and failed to

maintain contact with Anson Battalion.

The Germans had been occupying former British trenches, but of course the entrances faced the wrong way. They had not been able to defend them with wire and the only real defence was a few machine gun posts. A few bombs were used but on the whole the Germans put up very little resistance, not even fixing their bayonets.

Eventually two separate platoons reached the trenches close to the final objective they were aiming for, but as they were neither in touch with other, nor with 'Anson' they stayed put and were recalled after it was learned that all the Ansons had been back in their trenches for some time.

Throughout the engagement communications were bad. From battalion HQ forward only runners could be used and it took over an hour to get a message from 'Anson'

Enemy artillery was pretty heavy throughout but on the whole machine gun fire was only light and the German troops showed little fight, responding only with automatic pistols.

One German put his hands up and when a Royal Berkshireman went to take him he was attacked with a dagger he was concealing. Needless to say he was dealt with swiftly. A few other prisoners showed fight and were similarly despatched.

21 prisoners and 5 machine guns were captured. One machine gun had been handed to an officer in the Ansons who had informed the Berkshires he was on his way back and tried to take the Berkshires platoon with him.

It resulted in the capture by the battalion of twenty-four prisoners and six machine guns. Some of the prisoners appear to have escaped after passing the advanced collecting station. There were originally twenty-four, but only ten were eventually counted at Battalion Headquarters. It was estimated that fifty casualties had been inflicted on the enemy.

The losses in this raid were unduly heavy, and the Battalion Diary attributes the comparative failure to want of training for the young recruits who now formed so large a proportion of the men.

*Officers. Wounded:* 2nd-Lieuts. T. H. Eayrs, D. H. Betts, T. A. Baird, M.C., E. G. Joseph. *Other Ranks: Killed 12; Died of Wounds 2; Wounded 73 ; Missing 19.*

The captures of the battalion were twenty-one prisoners and six machine guns.

In the operation report a number of lessons were noted by Lt Col HJ Goodland:-

- 1 The difficulty to keep touch at night especially when there are many objectives.
- 2 The difficulty of using a compass owing

to steel helmet, box respirator, rifles and wire.

3 Men must be led. Several instances of men hanging back a bit, but when well led, went on at once and did good work.

4 Nothing but buried cable is reliable

5 Routes for orderlies from front line should if possible be taped as trenches are generally out of the way and barraged.

6 Arrangement of re-call was not satisfactory as the men might be kept out for an hour or so after their work was completed, owing to faulty communication. I think that a bugle with the leading party would be more satisfactory.

7 There was not sufficient time for reconnaissance before the operation.

8 The Germans now put down their SOS in no-mans-land so it is more important than ever to keep with barrage and all waves should start close behind one another.

9 The importance of every man knowing what to do was brought out as several commanders were knocked out at the start.

10 Liaison posts were not satisfactory and took men from sections where they would have been more usefully employed.

11 In the short time we had we were unable to form a strong enough liaison with the battalion on our right.

12 That the Germans are poor fighters when tackled with dash and the men, many who had never been in action before, realise it.

13 That our front trench is a very bad place to stay in.

14 P-bombs are most satisfactory for destroying dug outs.

15 That the men appreciate the value of the Lewis gun as all were taken over and none were lost although several were badly damaged and one team knocked out.

16 Most wounds from unaimed fire were slight.

17 A wet night with a full moon is light enough to see fairly distinctly

18 When troops have to leap frog, a pause say of an extra 4 minutes is required in the creeping barrage.

19 German SOS - red light.

## Sources

Petre pp 232-238

*History of the 12th Division* (Scott and Brumwell)

Reading Mercury 20/4/1918, 30/11/18 and 21/12/18

*Continued in section 325*