

Volume 7 Section 323

Interlude VI

The 1st/4th Battalion (March-September 1918)

The 1st/4th Battalion had had a pleasant time in Italy away from the western front (Continued from section 303)

Holding the Line

The first spell of front line duty started on 27th February 1918 when the two halves of the Battalion were re-united and, after several days marching, they took over the reserve lines from the 2nd Queens. The move began at 08:35 on February 26th 1918 with a march to Volpago via Porcellengo, Musano and La Contea arriving 12:30. They went first into billets in some large houses and then next afternoon moved over to the Bavaria area to take over from the 2nd Queens in reserve. Here the billets were very scattered but they began to feel close to the action as enemy aeroplanes were active all night.

The next day (28th) some men were deputed to work for the Royal Engineers and each company furnished a platoon to dig trenches around their billets just in case of an enemy attack. The rest of the battalion were engaged as usual on training. The same pattern followed for the next two days.

On the 3rd March they moved up to relieve the Oxfords in the left subsector in the pouring rain. The relief was carried out as soon as it got dark but it took until 22:30 to complete. The disposition was two companies in the front line and two in support. They were holding the right bank of the River Piave at Montello but there was no action and the two support companies busied themselves in improving the bivouac shelters on the foreshore.

They swapped positions again with the Oxfords on the 7th and moved back to the reserve area. They were able to get baths on the 9th and 10th at Giavera which was the Divisional HQ. The commander of the Italian battalion that was due to take over came to see them on several occasions. They took over the front again from the Oxfords on the 11th.

While they were there scarcely a shot was fired as the Austrians who faced them were not willing to provoke the British. According to Col Whitehead:

This however was incomparable to the French Front and everybody agreed that they were having a 'soft' time. There were none of the heavy bombardments, no constant anxiety of raids from the other side and very few raids to be made against the Austrians. Ten or twenty shells per day were the most one got and even that number very seldom.

The countryside around them was quite picturesque. It was quite hilly with lots of deep dells which gave good shelter. The River Piave consisted of two main channels separated by a string of islands but while they were there the river rose considerably and what had been islands were submerged and a new channel gouged out between posts 9 and 10.

They were relieved by the 3rd Battalion of the 163 Italian regiment on the 14th March and retired to the Divisional HQ area at Giavera.

Holiday in Reserve

They left Giavera next day, 15th March moving to Pezzan di C, marching via Selva, Signoressa, Trevignano, Pinelli and Sala di Campagna with a halt for an hour for dinner, covering a distance of about 12 miles.

Another 12 mile march next day brought them to Piombino Dese. Here they encountered the Italian 48th Division and their band was called out to play the Brigade into town. In the evening they laid on a cinema show for the British.

Next morning the Italian band led them out of town as they began another 8 mile march to S Leonardo via Ronchi where the Italians stopped and played as the Brigade marched past.

For the next few days there was lots of training and route marching with an opportunity to get a bath. It was very hot by day and very cold by night. They moved their billets to St Michelle della Badesse on the 20th and finally to Arsego on the 23rd.

Arsego

23rd March to 2nd April 1918

Although the weather was very variable with cold dull days interspersed with fine warm ones their time at Arsego was quite pleasant. It was hard work with intensive training interspersed by sports with a battalion sports day on the 30th with prizes presented by Signora Pugnalin val Secchi who seemed to have some connection with the Italian Division who had just moved into the area and who gave enthusiastic support to the proceedings and loaned their band for the afternoon..

The next day the Battalion reorganised and two days later the Division moved up to the Vincenza area.

Valle 3rd to 18th April 1918

Valle was in the west of the Vicenza area on the west side of the valley with the enemy holding the opposite side. As well as the usual training there was now the opportunity to practice hill climbing.

On the 11th the battalion split up; A Company moving to Thiene and B Company employed on working party and guard duties at Villaverla and Calvene. They returned on the 14th when orders were received for a move to Sarmego but this move never happened. In the end they set off for Cornedo via Canova and Ghisa on the 18th, taking the opportunity to march in the rain for 20 minutes wearing box respirators

Cornedo 18th to 23rd April 1918

Here at Cornedo they practiced the scheme originally scheduled for the 19th. This involved hill fighting and their performance improved greatly over the three days they were there.

For most of the time there was torrential rain with only one fine day (20th). This coincided with the battalion boxing tournament.

On the 21st they moved on to Rovere via Malo and Thiene, again in torrential rains. They had to find some barns to enable the midday meal to be cooked and eaten.

When they arrived at Rovere they found their intended accommodation was tents and Italian bivouacs but the rain had so swamped the land they were to camp on that billets had to be found in the village.

The march continued next day to Villa di Sopra via Lugo and for once it was a lovely day through some very pretty countryside.

Granezza 23rd to 29th April 1918

Their final destination was Granezza where they were to be in Brigade Reserve. This was some 4500 feet above sea level and the last stages were along steep mule tracks which were very hard work and they alternated a 20 minute march with a ten minute rest. When they finally arrived they found accommodation in Italian huts which were not very commodious. To welcome them it snowed in the evening.

At Granezza they were mainly engaged on working parties, the most important being snow clearance as it turned very cold with very heavy snow falls and lightning storms with sleet

Kaberlaba Road 29th April to 19th May

Raids and Skirmishes

12/13 May 1918

On the 12th May two platoons of D Coy under the command of 2Lt Stott set out to capture a prisoner for intelligence purposes. In a skirmish Lt Stott was slightly wounded for which he was awarded an Italian Silver medal. Most of the enemy patrol, they encountered ran away too quickly to be caught but an elderly Hungarian of the 24th Horved Regiment slipped and fell into a shell hole from which he was extracted and taken back to HQ.

The Brigade report read

Brigade Report of Raid carried out by 1/4th R. Berks on the Night of the 12th/13th May 1918 - Maps B 1 and B 2 (See Also Map D 1, Asiago)

1. Object - To obtain identification
2. Objective: Houses at S. Ave and ground 100 yards E. & W. of them
3. Strength - Raiding Force 2 Platoons of 'D' Company.
Reserve - 1 Platoon of 'D' Company.

Advance Battalion H.Q. and Company H.Q. at Pine Tree House on 'G' Spur H 690.485

4. General Plan Artillery fired on the Objective at intervals for an hour before Zero. At Zero the Artillery placed a barrage between south Ave and the trenches North of it.

At Zero the raiding party moved forward with 1 Platoon each side of the S. Sisto - Ave Road. The Reserve Platoon remained in position of readiness on 'G' Spur.

5. Narrative The bursts of Artillery before Zero looked accurate but there were no signs of their effect. At Zero the barrage was very accurate and effective.

A) Right Platoon The Right Platoon moved rapidly on to its Objectives. When about 40 yards S.E. of S. Ave the Platoon Commander saw an enemy post on the high ground on his right, silhouetted against the flash of the barrage. He swung his right front section to the right and made straight for the post. Three of the enemy could just be seen running away. A fourth apparently tripped or took refuge in a shell hole: He was made prisoner.

The objective of the raid being thus achieved, the O.C. Right Platoon blew his whistle for the withdrawal.

He remained with a Section as covering party and then withdrew covered by the Lewis Gun.

B) Left Platoon. The Left Platoon reached S. Ave and the Platoon Commander and 3 men searched all the buildings. In none was there any trace of dug-out or O.P. The Western-most house was in good preservation, the others blocked with bricks and rubbish.

The search was just completed when the whistle was heard from the Right Platoon. The Left Platoon accordingly withdrew, covered by its Lewis Gun

6. Opposition Opposition was slight: not more than a dozen shots were fired by the enemy. They appeared to come from the left. Very few Very Lights were sent up and these were mostly "duds". As late as 2.25.a.m. the enemy threw bombs into his own wire. At the same time a great deal of shouting could be heard in Ave.

7. Duration Zero was at 12.30.a.m. and the Raiding Party were back at their starting point by 12.38.a.m.

8. Casualties. 1 Officer wounded slightly at duty

9. Prisoners. 1 Prisoner, 24th Honved Regt (Infantry) [TX01272]

15/16 June 1918

On the 22nd May the battalion returned to Cornedo to plan for an attack scheduled for 16th June. They were pre-empted when the Austrians attacked them on 15th June. Four Austrian Divisions had been told they were facing Italians and so they were quite happy to attack. If they had realised they were facing two British Divisions, the 23rd and 48th, chances are they would have refused.

At this time the 1st/4th was in reserve with their brigade in the Boscon sector and were called upon to retake the line from the Austrians who had penetrated about 100 yards but by the 16th all lost ground had been recaptured by the British and the Austrians were surrendering in small groups although in total the numbers were large. The 1st/4th lost only 5 men killed (including Captain Buck) and 13 wounded in the action which had been won decisively.

Battalion Report on Operations 15/16th June 1918 - Maps C 1 & C 2 (See also Map D 1 Asiago)

1. The night June 14th/15th . Battalion in Reserve at Carriola Camp.

2. About 3.0a.m. shelling began round the neighbourhood of the camp. Shells fell on the South side of the valley and towards Div. H.Q. but none came near our billets.

3. At about 3.15.a.m. we received the order to 'Stand to' in billets.

4. Shelling continued for 3 hours, after which there was a lull. No news had been received.

5. 8.25.a.m. Order received to take up Battle Positions. Battalion moved off at 8.40.a.m. Men returning from the front area spoke of the enemy as being close behind them. At one time he was even stated to be holding Handley Cross.

6. Major Aldworth who had gone to Brigade H.Q. for orders met the Battalion and directed them to their positions. These were:-

A on the Right, B on Left - Both in Oxford Trench

Battalion H.Q., C & D Companies - On Southern slope of Lemerle beneath Brigade H.Q.

7. The Oxfords being evidently hard pressed, Brigade H.Q. ordered D Company up as reinforcement. This Company reported to Oxford H.Q. at mid-day. Its subsequent movements are dealt with later.

8. About 1.30.p.m. 'C' Company was ordered up to close the gap then existing between the left of the Oxfords (On left of Prince's Road, 200 yards, N. of their H.Q.) and the Right of 1/5th Glosters (Between Railway and Lemerle Switch)

This Company debouched from the junction of Lemerle Switch and the Prince's Road and then spread out fan-wise on the W. of Prince's Road.

Touch was quickly obtained with 1/4th Oxfords, but the junction with 1/5th Glosters was not made till 5.30.p.m.

9. At 5.15. p.m a platoon of 'A' Company was sent off as further reinforcement for the 1/4th Oxfords.

10. During the night 15th/16th a carrying party of 70 men from 'A' & 'B' carried up Stokes Mortar ammunition to the Oxford H.Q.

11. Reverting now to the movements of 'D' Company (see Para 7). The first task was a counter attack on an enemy M.G. situated on Hill 1031. The attack was begun over the open but the enemy caught our men forming up and the O.C. 'D' Company was killed. It was evident that the attack could not cross the intervening ground and it was given up. This was about 3.0.p.m

12.. 'D' Company remained in Reserve to Oxfords during the night. At 4.30.a.m. on the 16th the 8th Worcesters were to launch a counter attack towards the old Front Line. To co-operate with this, O.C. Oxfords ordered my 'D' Company to advance on the Right of the attack, covered by a barrage of Stokes Mortar Bombs.

13. At Zero Hour the advance began and continued without serious opposition till the old front line was reached, when posts were placed and organizations begun. About 30 Prisoners were taken.

14. O.C. 'D' Company found that 8th Worcesters had not arrived by Zero Hour: He accordingly got in touch with 'C' Company and arranged that they should cover his flank. Thus 'C' Company also moved forward and reached the old front line. They also got about 30 prisoners practically without fighting.

15. The 2 Companies, 'C' & 'D' held the front line within about the the limits of the old Right Front Battalion. They were relieved by the 8th Worcesters about 2.0.p.m. and returned to 8th Worcesters H.Q. remaining under their orders.

16. At 10.p.m. all Companies 'Stood To' in consequence of the alarm on 23rd Div Front.

17. The whole Battalion was withdrawn on the 17th and proceeded to Camp at Serano, leaving Hadley Cross, between 3 and 4.p.m.

18 Casualties:- Killed Capt. C Buck & 4 O.Rs. Wounded 2nd Lt W A Wetherill & 10 O.R (of which 2 at duty) Missing - Nil

18-6-1918 - Signed A B Lloyd Baker, Lt. Col., Commanding 1/4th R. Berks. [TX01273]

The 48th Division report read

48 Division Report on "The Ghelpac Battle - 15th to 16th June 1918

On the afternoon of the 14th June, a Divisional Conference was held, at which the imminence of the Austrian

Offensive was discussed and the following points mentioned:

A) The attack was not expected to extend further West than the French Front on the Right of the 23rd Division, but a heavy bombardment of our Front, probably with gas combined, was to be expected, and possibly the bombardment would be followed by an Infantry attack.

B) The existing Defence Scheme would hold good as regards the Outposts withdrawing etc in spite of the fact that in doing so we should have to abandon the dumps etc established for our own projected offensive.

C) The 15th June was the day the Austrian attack had always been fixed for. He was expected to attack on the 15th, or any day when weather was good before the 20th. The weather was now fine, and so the bombardment might well commence that night (14/15th) and the attack next morning.

2) On the night of the 14/15th June, the Division front was held as usual by 3 Battalions, each on a 2 Company front - 1/4th Oxford and Bucks L.I., on the right, 1/5th Gloucestershire Regt in the centre, 1/5th R. Warwickshire Regt on the Left.

Owing to the imminence of an Offensive on our part, the Outposts were strong to cover the work which was going on in connection with the offensive in front of our front line, including the forming of dumps, making machine gun positions, and forward artillery preparations.

The 145 Infantry Brigade (Commander - Lt. Col. Reynolds) holding the Right Sector, had the Bucks Btn, Oxford and Bucks L.I. in Reserve about Lemerle, and the 1/4th R. Berks at Carriola.

The fighting strength of these battalions, after deducting Administrative Btn H.Q., Transport etc, did not exceed:-

1/5th Glouc R. (Commander - Major N H Waller) - 466

1/4th Oxf. & Bucks L.I. (Commander - Lt Col., A J N Bartlett) - 552

1/4th R. Berks R. (Commander - Lt Col. A B Lloyd-Baker) - 497

1/Bucks. Btn, Oxf & Bucks L.(Comdr -Maj P A Ball) - 566

The 143rd Inf Bde (Commander Br.Gen G C Sladen) holding the Left Sector had one Company of the 1/8th R. Warwickshire Regt., holding the Cesuna Switch, with an advanced post at Perghele, and a platoon at the north end of the cesuna Switch about C. Traverso and the remainder of the 1/8th R.War.R. ready to reinforce this Company.

1 Battalion in Brigade Reserve at M. Pau

1 Battalion in Divisional Reserve at Magnaboschi.

The 1/5th R. War. R. holding the line had its headquarters under some rocks N.W. of Perghele House and close behind the junction of its two Front Companies, which were just west of the Canove Road.

The fighting strengths of the battalions did not exceed, exclusive of Administrative H.Q., Transport etc:-

1/5th R. War. R (Commander Maj. E A M Bindloss 436

1/6th R War R (Commander Lt. Col. W M Pryor) 379

1/7th R. War. R (Commander Lt Col. J M Knox

380

1/8th R War. R (Commander Maj. P H Whitehouse) 450

The 144 Infantry Brigade (Commander Lt. Col. F M Tomkinson) in Divisional Reserve, had :-

1/6th Glouc R. (Commander Lt. Col. H St.G Schomburg538

1/4th Glouc R. (Commander - Maj. E Shellard)466

1/7th Worc. R (Commander Maj. J P Bate)548

1/8th Worc. R (Commander Lt. Col H T Clarke)617

These strengths were still further reduced by the men affected by Hill Fever, which was running high in the Division, who were still with their units

3) At 3.0.a.m.the enemy bombardment began. Outposts were ordered to be withdrawn by 5.0a.m. and counter preparation by the Artillery to begin beyond the Outpost line. Communication by wire and telephone were quickly much broken. And messages came by wireless and Visual. Visual signaling was much delayed and frequently interrupted by cloud, mist and smoke.

Reports "all well" were received at Brigades from both the Right and Left Battalions. The Centre Battalion did not communicate.

At 8.10. a.m. the first news of enemy infantry attack was received by Div. H.Q. Counter preparations by the Artillery were commenced at 3.0.a.m. and continued on our front. I had directed that barrage on S.O.S. lines should not be brought down unless an enemy attack was actually seen, as, for the reason given in Para 1. I considered it was not at all certain that the enemy would attack and a premature S.O.S. barrage would be a great mistake using up our own ammunition and energy Uselessly and encouraging the enemy by making him think he had diverted our artillery from the real attack.

At 8.11.a.m. fire on S.O.S. lines was ordered in front of the Right of the Left Brigade, and in front of the Right Brigade.

The infantry of the enemy had come in contact with our front infantry between 6.45.a.m. and 7.30.a.m.

The information reached Right Battalion at 7.30.a.m and Brigade H.Q. from both front Battalions at 9.30.a.m.

The S.O.S. signals were not seen owing to the mist, smoke and trees.

4) This was the first big defensive battle in which the Division has been engaged. It must be historical as well as of temporary interest as being our first big battle with the Austrians.

It brought out the cordial relations which exist between our allies on our left and ourselves.

The following are the chief episodes of the fight:-

A) The fighting throughout of the Right Front Battalion (1/4th Oxford & Bucks L.I.) its many local counter attacks and its defence of its position about Battalion H.Q.

An Orderly Room clerk was actually killed fighting in the position.

B) The defence of the Left Battalion H.Q. by the Battalion H.Q. details of the 1/5th R. Warwicks R carried on by Sergt - Major Townley after the Commanding Officer (Major Bindloss) had been killed actually using a rifle, and the 2nd in command (Major Watson) wounded leading a local counter attack to retake the Visual Signalling

Station.

C) The defence of the Cesuna Switch with the back machine guns of the Left Brigade and the prompt action of Capt Bridge, 1/8th R.War.R on reinforcing the initial garrison

D) The successive counter attacks by the 1/7th R. War R. under Lt. Col Knox DSO, who commanded the Battalion in Divisional Reserve, stationed at Magnaboschi. His battalion had previously rehearsed the very situation with which it was confronted in battle. This commenced with the re-capture of Guardino, in which the guns of the 12th Battery under Major Jardine, R.A. parties fighting with their rifles under Lt Pritchard, and details of 35th Brigade R.F.A. Headquarters under Lt. Col. Oldham played a very prominent part.

E) The counter attack by one company of the 1/6th R.War. R. under Capt Linfoot, relieving the left Btn H.Q. and helping to clear that area.

F) The final general counter attack by the Battalions (1/6th Glouc. R. and 1/7th Worc R.) of 144th Inf. Bde. in Centre, R. Warwicks on the left, and Oxfords on the right, which commenced on the evening of the 15th, and was suspended during the night, and renewed again at daylight on the 16th, not only cleared all our own line, but led to the capture of many prisoners and much material in No mans Land.

G) As regards the fighting in the front line in the Centre and Left of the Division, when the enemy infantry first advance, information is wanting owing to the garrisons being killed, wounded or missing; but the counter attacking troops report that they think these must have put up a good fight owing to the enemy dead in the line our men found on arrival. The mist and trees no doubt prevented any S.O.S. signals which were put up being seen.

6 In spite of the difficulty of observation, the Artillery and Trench Mortars were very effective in many places of the fighting, and the more distant counter battery and destructive fire of the Heavy Artillery on the enemy's guns and parties, advancing and retiring, played at all times a very large part in defeating and demoralizing the enemy

7) The casualties of the Division up to 19th inst are:

Officers - Killed 16, Wounded 45, Missing 9

Men - Killed 135, Wounded 478. Missing 237

8) Enemy loss:

Prisoners, unwounded - Over 500 , Prisoners wounded - 9 Officers and 179 other ranks

Guns captured - 5, Machine Guns captured - 48
Flammenwerfer - 5.

Signed R Fanshaw, Major - General, 21st June 1918.
[TX01274]

May - August 1918

After this counter-offensive the battalion was withdrawn from the line for a month's rest. June was marked by a great flu epidemic which caused 112 men to be evacuated although none died. On the 12th July they won the Divisional Signalling competition.

They returned to Marziale on 30th July where they stayed 10 days and then on the 10th August they took over a line from the 6th Gloucesters.

On both the 15th and 16th August they organised offensive patrols and then retired to Grenezza.

26/27 August 1918

The Battalion report read:-

Battalion Report on raid on enemy positions carried out on the night of 26/27th August 1918 - Map D 2

1. Object - To kill or capture the Austrian Garrison

2. Objective -

3. Plan - Generally speaking the nearer objectives were allotted to two Companies in line. A third Company pushed through further north and a fourth passed through them in turn and captured the most northerly Objectives

4. Zero hour was at 10.40. p.m on the night of August 26/27th

5. Forming Up - At 9.0. p.m. the Battalion left our outpost Line of resistance by the Poslen Gap about H 65.42. and proceeded in single file to the Guardinalti Ridge whence they moved forward to forming up positions in the valley from H.718.502 to J.670.505. 'B' Company was on the east of the road, with 'A' Company in the rear of it. 'D' & 'C' Companies were on the West of the road. 'D' Company on the Right, 'C' Company on the left. All Companies were in lines of platoons in file. During the last half hour before Zero the enemy seemed very nervous. . Enemy lights were sent up, some Rifle Grenades fired, of which a few fell among 'C' Company. A few shells were fired into the valley south of Guardinalti, but no M.G. fire was opened.

6 Covering Party- Two platoons of 'D' Company covered the forming up, they occupied the high ground North East of Ave South and withdrew at Zero minus 5 minutes to enable the barrage to come down.

7. At Zero hour the barrage opened on a line 100 yards south of the enemy front line, moving onwards at Zero plus 1 to their front line, from which it lifted again at Zero plus 5 when it moved to objectives 150 to 200 yards further back. At Zero plus 9 it lifted on to the last objective where it remained till zero plus 32, when a Box Barrage was formed round the raided area. This Box Barrage continued till Zero plus 92.

8. 'B' Company - The two leading platoons entered the Front line at about 720.541. and 700.540 respectively. The Right platoon had several minutes fighting to get in, but the left platoon experienced no difficulty. The Third platoon was detailed to capture the Red Redoubt 693.540., they experienced no difficulty, the Redoubt apparently containing only 6 men. The 4th platoon was detailed for the Quarry at 685.547: this was visited, and appeared to be uninhabited: the dug-outs were bombed, but no signs were found of the enemy either alive or dead. The investigation of this locality was much hampered by shelling. This Company destroyed 4. M.Gs. One of which was carried away had to be left in 'No Man's Land' on account of shelling. The trenches in this area were shallow and very much damaged.

8 'C' Company - The leading platoon took the enemy front line west of San Sisto-Asiago Road without difficulty. The 2nd platoon cleared the trenches North-West as far as 670.542, in so doing they captured 20 prisoners. The 2 remaining platoons had, as their objective the M.G. dug-outs and emplacements about 680.550. The emplacements were bombed and party proceeded to find the Dug-Out entrances. 2 Rows of Dug-Outs were found on