

Volume 6 Section 332

The Final Advance

2nd Battalion September - November 1918

The 2nd Battalion had been rebuilding since its losses in the spring. They were based at Ecurie Wood Camp. The battalion was now ready to join the final advance. Continued from section 322.

The Trench System 9th - 19th September 1918

The Germans and the British were now occupying essentially the same trench system, built by the Germans in 1917 as their third line. This made both sides vulnerable to an attack and General Honeker decided that it was best for the British to attack first.

On the 9th September the Royal Berks relieved the 2nd East Lancs

The Royal Berks' CO, Lt Col Isaac, reported:-

On the 10th September a Conference of C.Os. was called at Brigade H.Q., when orders were received to advance our line to the trenches: Whine, Gavrelle, Cheapside, Chutney, Curry, Chestnut and Cheddar, the boundaries to be as per Support Order No 31 attached. The 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment were to attack on the right, the 2nd East Lancs Regt on the Left the 2nd Rifle Brigade to hold the Black Line. The attack was to be made under a barrage and the Division on our right was to co-operate and advance to the line of Whack trench, a combined post to be established about the E of Whine.

At 09:30 on the 15th the Germans mounted a raid on the Berkshires right hand post at the junction of Wibble and Want trenches, one man was killed, one wounded and five missing, presumed POWs

Move from Aux Rietz Camp 20th September 1918

The Germans were in retreat and the 2nd began preparations for the final advance. On the 20th three companies were already in position and C Coy moved up from Aux Rietz Camp to join them in the centre of Black Line. Now D Coy were in the outpost zone, B Coy on the right of Black Line (from Cork Support to Civil Avenue), C were in the centre with two platoons in Naval trench and two in Killeran Support trench with Battalion HQ, A Coy were on the left in Naval trench running north from Towyn Alley.

17 reinforcements arrived.

Pte Gash continued with his tales of the exploits of the

battalion scouts:

On September 20th two Scouts carried out a patrol of Gavrelle and Whine Trenches. Commencing from the junction of Want and Wibble, they reached Whine Trench, returning with valuable information regarding the trench and the forces holding it. [TX01564]

Attack and Counter-attack 21st September 1918

There was no important change of position till the 21st September when, at night, the battalion pushed forward about six hundred yards, but was partly driven back on the following morning by an attack on its right flank. The following account of operations on this and the following night is based on the report of Lieut.-Colonel A. G. F. Isaac, now commanding the battalion.

The attack by the 25th Brigade was to be made with the 2nd Royal Berkshire on the right, 2nd East Lancashire on the left, whilst the 2nd Rifle Brigade was in reserve on the line at present held. At zero (23:00) the British barrage began and the attacking troops followed it. The German barrage started four minutes later, less heavy than had been expected. No other opposition was met with till the objective was reached, after an advance of seven hundred yards, but one trench was heavily shelled as it was occupied by B Coy, the supporting company. The advance was led by A and C, D remaining behind in reserve.

About 05:00 on the 22nd "A" Company, on the right, reported that the 49th Division on its right was falling back from Square Wood, and thus exposing "A's" right flank. On the left "A" was in touch with "C" and was facing Hollow Copse, which lay N.E. of Square Wood. The consequence of this exposure of "A's" right was that the 2nd Royal Berkshire's front had to fall back as far as Gavrelle support trench.

On the 22nd orders were given for another attempt to gain the objectives of the previous night, and at midnight the attack started, covered by a barrage. On this occasion A and D companies led. The enemy showed little or no fight, and were brought out of their dugouts and marched to the rear. By 02:00 on the 23rd all objectives had been reached and consolidation commenced. There were no signs of a counter-attack, but a patrol pushed out under Sergeant Mead came upon a dozen of the enemy, of whom it killed three and captured three. Altogether two officers and forty-seven other ranks were taken, besides five machine guns and an automatic rifle.

The Berkshire casualties were:

Officers. Killed: 2nd-Lieut. F. M. Finch. *Wounded.* 2nd-

Lieut. A. A. Bryant. *Missing*: 2nd-Lieuts. G. A. N. Boston, P. H. Burch, S. H. Oswell. *Other Ranks*: *Killed* 8, *Wounded* 31, *Missing* 5.

The battalion report read:-

Order of attack

'C' Company, on the right, their objective being the whole of Whine Trench, the junction of Whine and Cheapside inclusive to this Company.

'A' Company, on the left, Objective Cheapside, Gavrelle Support & Areas to Chutney where touch was to be established with 8th East Lancs.

'B' Company to support and to occupy Gavrelle Support from its junction with Cheapside, southward, 1 section to mop up East Chink

'D' Company 2 Platoons to remain in their present position in the line, Cod Crab & Crawl and 2 platoons to provide carrying parties

Battalion H.Q. to move to Battle H.Q. at B 30 c 6. 2

Formations

'C' Company to advance with 3 platoons in front line and 1 platoon supporting, behind the left platoon, the whole in Artillery formation.

'A' Company – 1 platoon to capture Cheapside

1 platoon to capture Gravelle Support from its junction with Cheapside (inclusive) to about C 36 a 2.5..

1 platoon to capture the remainder of Gravelle Support to the Gravelle/Fresnes Road.

1 platoon to clear up the left flank and join up with 2nd East Lancs

The whole Company in section columns

Forming – Up place – The General line Crawl, Cod, Chaff, for the Assaulting Companies, South Gavrelle Trench for Supporting Company

Barrage - As per attached Barrage Map

General Account At Zero, 11.00.p.m., the barrage fell and the troops went forward. The enemy sent up a Golden Rain and his barrage came down at Zero plus 4. it was fairly heavy, but not as heavy as expected. No opposition was met with until the objective was reached but South Gravelled Trench was heavily shelled directly 'B' Company occupied it

Communication was difficult, the wire being continually cut in front of Willie Support. It was early reported that all was going well except that opposition was being met with at the corner of Cheapside and Whine but there was every hope that this would soon be cleared.

The Division reported:-

At 11.0.p.m. last night we attacked on a front of 3000 yards and advanced our line in the Oppy and Gavrelle Sections to a depth of 600 yards. This operation was carried out, in the Gavrelle Section by the 2nd R. Berks on the Right with the 2nd East Lancs on their Left, whilst the 1st Worcester Regt advanced on the Right of the Oppy Section. All Objectives were gained on the front of the attack and our troops established themselves in Whine Trench, Cheapside, Gavrelle Support, Chutney, Curry, Cheddar and Cannibal Trenches. The following are details of the advance:-

At 11.30.p.m. a report was received that our troops in the Gavrelle Section had started well and that the enemy was retiring and firing coloured light, indiscriminate shelling was opened by the enemy's artillery, mainly on the Fresnes'Gavrelle Road but, apart from this, hostile fire was not heavy, and only opened four minutes after Zero. Hostile shelling died down by midnight.

All objectives in the Centre Section were reported captured by 11.30.p.m. .

The Berkshires captured one officer and 11 other ranks

22nd September 1918

The battalion reported:-

At about 5.0.a.m. the Officer Commanding 'A' company reported the 49th Division on the right had been driven in by Square Wood and was falling back but that 'C' Company was still in touch with their left.

At about 5-15-am the O.C. 'A' Company reported that the left platoon of Yorks & Lancs had withdrawn and the enemy was getting round our Right flank and was also counter attacking at the junction of Whine & Cheapside. 'C' Company was forced to withdraw to Gravelle Support and 'A' Company were driven part way down Cheapside where they established a bombing block and this was the situation at daybreak when the line ran – Gravelle Support (1 Post about 50 yards up Cheapside) across to Chutney, touch being established on both flanks.

The Divisional report gives a bit more detail:-

At 1.19.a.m the 2nd East Lancs reported that they had captured all their objectives and that consolidation was in progress.

At 4.20. a.m. the 2nd R. Berks reported all objectives gained and that they were in touch with the Left Battalion of the Division on our Right. At 5.20.a.m. the 2nd R. Berks were reported to be holding Cheapside and Whine Trenches, and a party of the enemy in Short Trench at C 26 b 45.35. were being mopped up.

As a result of this attack we now hold Gavrelle Support in C 26 a and c with a post about 150 yards along Cheapside. Our line then runs along Chutney, Curry and Cheddar Trenches (C 19 b and d) and Cannibal Trench (C 13 c - C 19 b) to its junction with Link Trench, thence westwards along Link Trench to its junction with our original trench at Junction B 18 d 70.85.

The German counter-attack came later on the morning of the 22nd. They struck at the junction between the 8th and 49th Divisions. Whine and most of Cheapside trenches were recaptured and some of the Royal Berks posts were isolated. However the battalion report is mute on the subject.

The Divisional Report:-

At 7.0.a.m. a report was received that the enemy had counter attacked from Square Wood and the junction of Count and Whine Trenches and had forced back the Left Battalion of 49 Division, parties of the 2nd R. Berks had been taken in the rear, causing considerable casualties. As a result of this counter attack our line was forced back to the following line:-

Gavrelle Support, Chutney, Curry, Cheddar, Canibal Trenches to Link trench thence down Link Trench to

Blandford about b 18 d 70.85.

Later on the 22nd orders were received that another effort was to be made to reach the Objectives of the previous night.

The battalion order of attack was:-

'D' Company on the right, their Objective being as for 'C' Company on the night 21/22 (the whole of Whine Trench, the junction of Whine and Cheapside inclusive to this Company.)

'A' Company to push up Cheapside and make good their original Objective.

'B' Company (Which was now weak) half Company to support the Left of 'D' Company and half Company to remain in Gavrelle Support to be thrown in if necessary.

'C' Company 1 Platoon to act as escort to Machine Guns at C 26 d 8. 8. Three Platoons to hold the line Crawl, Cod and Grab.

Disposition 'D' Company to advance in Artillery Formation as follows:-

1 Platoon North of Cheapside and attack junction of Whine and Cheapside from the North. Platoon South of Cheapside to attack junction from front. 1 Platoon to enter Whine and attack junction from South. 1 Platoon to capture and consolidate Whine and establish touch with Yorks & Lancs on their right.

'A' Company – 1 Platoon to capture and consolidate remainder of Cheapside.

forming up Place - In front of Gavrelle Support

Barrage To come down on Whine and remain for 15 minutes and then lift as for previous night.

23rd September 1918

The battalion reported:-

The assaulting troops went forward as the barrage fell at midnight and were in position to jump into Whine directly the barrage lifted. 'A' Company met with no opposition at all. 'D' Company reached Whine and found the enemy down his dugouts. The enemy showed no fight and were marched back to Battalion H.Q. At about 2.0.a.m. it was reported that all objectives were reached and consolidation proceeding.

Patrols were rushed out and one patrol, under Sgt. Head, encountered a party of the enemy about 12 strong. Three of these were killed, three taken prisoner and the remainder bolted

After Stand Down, as there was no sign of an enemy Counter Attack, the half Company of 'B' Company was pulled back to Gavrelle Support.

During the operations our casualties were:

Officers – Killed Nil, Wounded 2, Missing 2,

O.Rs Killed 8, Wounded 31, Missing 5

Prisoners captured: Night 22/23 1 Officer and 36 Other Ranks

Booty captured included 5 Light Machine Guns and one Automatic Rifle [TX01062]

The Division's account was:-

At midnight on the 22nd September, two Companies of the 2nd R. Berks again attacked in the Gavrelle Section with the object of recapturing Whine trench which the enemy had occupied as a result of his counter attack on the morning of the 22nd. The operation was entirely successful and by 1.0.a.m. the 2nd R. Berks were reported to have gained all their objectives and had captured 30 prisoners of the 452nd I.R., including an Officer, Company Commander..

This represents an advance of 1000 yards from our original front line, on a front of 700 yards.

By 2.00.a.m. the 2nd R. Berks had gained touch with the left battalion of 49th Division on our Right and, later, posts were established all along the objective, with 3 good posts in Cheapside and a block 50 yards up Wind Trench. [TX01081B]

Respite

24th September - 4th October 1918

The battalion left the front line on the 24th September into reserve at Ecurie Wood Camp to which they travelled by lorry. on the 24th.

The 25th was spent scrubbing and cleaning and bathing. They were engaged in training till the 1st October.

There was an inspection by the Divisional commander on the 30th September, and a presentation of medals.

On the 2nd October the 2nd Royal Berkshire returned to the front line in the left sector of the brigade front. They relieved the 2nd East Lancs Regiment.

The enemy was believed to be still retiring, but a patrol on the 3rd found this was not correct.

Pte Gash:-

On October 3rd Sergt. Marsden and Pte. Evans made a daylight reconnaissance of Wind Trench. About five hundred yards from the junction of Wind and Whine they located an enemy's machine gun post.

At night a second patrol reached a point one hundred yards north of the north-east corner of Hollow Copse and were fired on from machine guns from about two hundred yards to their right and from the position previously located in Wind Trench. Whilst retiring they were gas shelled.

On the following night a patrol reconnoitred the Gavrelle Trench road as far as the wire in front of Chin Trench, which they found to be very strong and in good condition, with no gaps in the vicinity of the road. No enemy's wire was encountered between this point and Whine Trench, but they were subjected to heavy machine gun fire on reaching the wire at Chin. Then they crossed the Wind Trench and followed it back to Whine, finding that the enemy's post formerly in Whine had been withdrawn. Wind Trench was in very bad condition, waterlogged, with several barricades and blown in at many points.

While the Berkshires were resting in reserve, the 8th Division was pressing on. An attack mounted on the night of the 26/27th September to shorten the Divisional line was successful, but overall the new British line on the St Quentin to Cambrai front was dangerously

exposed on its northern flank. On the 3rd October divisional boundaries were adjusted and 8th Division took on two more sectors at Greenland Hill and Plouvain so that its right now extended down to the Scarpe river. The Division was now faced with the task of attacking the Rouvray to Fresnes line which was the German's key line of defence.

Hollow Copse

5th-6th October 1918

The 2nd Rifle Brigade and the 2nd Royal Berks had been advancing eastward from the direction of Count Avenue. The Rifle Brigade reached the line, joined up with 23rd Brigade and moved on to Railway Copse. The Berkshires were facing Hollow Copse, a series of dug outs which had been heavily bombarded by the British artillery.

On the night of the 5th/6th October C Company attacked Hollow Copse, with a view to clearing it of the enemy and consolidating a position on its eastern side. The copse was just beyond the trenches captured on the night of the 22nd/23rd September. The attack commenced at 21:30 behind a rather weak barrage.

C Company was chiefly engaged against the western edge of the copse, with one platoon under Lieutenant Gosling pushing out to the right on the S.E. corner. This platoon reached a point within twenty-five yards of the S.E. corner, whilst two others found themselves obliged to dig in eighty yards short of the west side. Lieutenant Gosling was thus somewhat isolated, and had to be extricated from his position by the fourth platoon.

The attack made no further progress in the face of a strong machine-gun defence in the copse, and about 02:00 the troops were ordered back to their starting point. The casualties had been slight: three men killed, and four wounded.

The Division Reported

5-10-1918 Attack on Fresnes-Rouvroy Line entrenchment, which lie between the Scarpe and Fresnes-les-Montauban. A successful attack on the south would make it an easy matter to turn the northern portion of these entrenchments from the flank: this seemed a better way of taking this position than making a frontal attack on it from the west.

The objective was from the canal about 12 central along the line of the road through the station at l 5 c 9.1. to about C 28 d 2.0. then westwards to Woe Trench and to the Railway Copse. The scheme for the taking of the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line north of Railway Copse was as follows:- The line was to be entered at two places: one on the south where Count Avenue enters the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line: the other on the north where Coke enters the enemy's Line. [TX01081C]

Pte Gash:-

On October 5th an attack was launched against Hollow Copse. This attack failed in its object, as the barrage was

not sufficient and the Company was somewhat scattered, the platoons and Company Headquarters occupying isolated shell holes. At this time the situation seemed critical owing to lack of communication, but the Scouts sent out and succeeded in establishing connection between platoons, Company Headquarters and the report centre. This Company was afterwards withdrawn and in the early morning of October 6th " D " Company took Hollow Copse and passed right on to the Tresnay-Ronvroy Line establishing a front line there.

In the afternoon "C" and " D " Companies bombed the enemy from Constable and Crane Trenches, and by night, posts were pushed forward some distance in front of these trenches.

During the afternoon and evening of the following day the Scouts were out in front of the Battalion and at an early hour of the next morning l/ieut. Strange and Pte. Headley had been within a very short distance of the village of Izel les- Esquerchin.

"A " Company were led to positions almost a mile in front of the Fresnes Line, four Scouts having " captured " a German strong point with five rounds of ammunition between them. This position was taken over by 4 Platoon, and a line of gun pits about five hundred yards to the left was held by 2 and 3 Platoons. At this time the Scouts had had no sleep for over twenty four hours and were sent back by the Commanding Officer for rest. [TX01564]

On October 11th a general advance commenced all along the front. " A " Company captured the Dracourt Line and support trenches and " D " Company led by the Scout Section, passed through and advanced for over four miles. The Company then held a line, roughly from Lauvin-Plangue to west of the prison in Cuincy.

Ptes. Harris and Evans then pushed on and reached the outskirts of Douai, penetrating far into the German lines, and found that they were preparing to evacuate Douai within a short time.

7th October 1918

The attack on Hollow Copse was renewed in the early morning of the 7th October. "D" Company led in the attack on this occasion, starting at 05:05. Ten minutes later one platoon had worked up the north side of the copse, and established itself on the eastern edge.

By 05.45 the whole copse, up to its eastern edge, had been carried, a few prisoners had been made, and the rest of the defenders driven out. Some further advance was made by "D" Company before it was relieved at 15:00, by the 2nd Rifle Brigade, and sent back to support.

The attack was continued by "A" and "C" Companies, but it would be impossible to explain all the details of fighting given in the report with-out an elaborate trench map. The report summarizes the day thus:

As a result of the day's operations, Hollow Copse was captured. The total length of approximately 3,500 yards of hostile trench was cleared of the enemy. Two officers and forty-four other ranks were captured, and three heavy machine guns taken. Our approximate casualties amount to one officer and three other ranks killed, and

fourteen other ranks wounded.

The officer killed was 2nd Lt Maurice of D Coy who was hit by a sniper in the Fresnes-Rouvray trenches.

The battalion report read:-

Battalion Narrative of Attack on Hollow Copse at 5.0.a.m. Morning 7th October 1918

In accordance with plan, 'D' Company, 2nd R. Berks Regt left their forming up places in front of Whime Trench at 5.00.a.m. at the same hour the barrage opened.

At 5.05.am. A message was received from Captain Richardson, O.C. 'D' Company from the junction Whime and Count, that the Company had gone over.

At 5.15.a.m. O.C. 'D' Company reported that No. 16 platoon had worked up the North side of Copse and had established themselves on the east side.

At 5.25.a.m. it was reported that 'D' Company had reached their Objective and that 4 prisoners from 83rd Regiment had been captured.

At 5.45.a.m. the dugouts at the East side of the Copse were reported clear and one more prisoner captured.

At 5.46.am. O.C 'D' Company reported two Lewis Guns established at N.E. & N.W. corners of Copse.

At 5.50.a.m. the total captures were 5 men and 1 machine Gun. About 40 men who ran from the N.E. Corner of the wood were engaged by Lewis Gun fire.

The dispositions at this hour were as follows:

2 Platoons of 'D' Company East of the Copse, 1 Platoon in Count and 1 platoon in Whime. Post of 'C' Company at C.27 a 3. 4.

The dugouts at the east end of the copse were reported to be in a bad state of repair and the trench running North from Count Avenue at east end of the Copse very shallow.

Our Casualties up to 5.15.am. Were – 1 killed, 3 Wounded.

At 6.3.a.m. O.C. 'C' Company received instructions from battalion H.Q. to work down Wind and bomb towards Fresnes Rouvroy Line, and O.C. 'D' Company to work along Count.

At 6.9.a.m. O.C. 'C' Company reported that the enemy were working down Wind.

The Artillery were requested to cut them off by concentrating on Wind at C 27 b. 15.65 and working eastwards.

At 6.35.a.m. orders were received from 25th Infantry Brigade to push on to the Fresnes Rouvroy Line.

At 7.40. a.m. a Report was received that a patrol from 'C' Company had reached Point C 27 a 4. 4. and were bombing an enemy strong point at C 27 a 3. 5.

'D' Company's patrol had worked along Count, reached a point 200 yards East of the Copse and were pushing on. Further casualties of 1 Sergeant wounded and 1 O.R. killed of 'D' Company were reported and several of the enemy were killed in Count.

At 8.40.a.m. a message was received from O.C. 'D' Company that his patrol had reached the junction of Count and Fresnes Rouvroy Line and was working Northwards.

At 9.10.a.m. connection was established with the 2nd

Rifle Brigade at C 27 d 3.9.

A Bombing Party from the enemy worked down the Fresnes Rouvroy Line from the North and pushed our party back to the junction of Count. 2nd Lt Maurice, 'D' Company was killed here by an enemy sniper.

At 8.20.a.m. O.C. 'C' Company reported that the enemy Post at C 27 a 3. 5. had been cleared and that he was pushing on up Wind. At 10.50.a.m. a Report was received that 'C' Company had reached the junction of Wind and Fresnes and Fresnes Rouvroy Line and were bombing down Southwards towards Count to gain touch with 'D' Company. Enemy were reported running away from part of the Fresnes Rouvroy Line. 1 Sergeant was reported wounded.

At 11.15.a.m. Enemy seen running away from about C 21 c 80. 55. towards Chalk Trench.

At 11.40. a.m. O.C. 'C' Company reported that he had cleared the Rouvroy Line between Wind and Count gaining touch with 'D' Company and capturing 1 officer and 21 O.Rs and 2 Machine Guns.

Captures by 'D' Company 1 Officer & 15 O.Rs.

At 12.10. pm. O.C. 'D' Company received instructions from Battalion H.Q. to push along the Rouvroy Line, Northwards from Wind and establish Platoon Posts at the junctions of Gavrelle Road, Chow, Chalk, Corn and a post at C 15.c 9.1.

'B' Company were given instructions to move and take over the following positions:- 2 Platoons along Wind, 1 Platoon along Cheapside and 1 platoon along Chutney and Currey.

Estimated enemy casualties to 2.0.p.m – 30 Killed, 80 Wounded. Prisoners – 2 Officers and 41 O.Rs. Booty – 3 Heavy Machine Guns.

At 2.40.p.m. O.C. 'C' Company reported that he had reached a point just short of the junction of Rouvroy Line and Chalk and was pushing on towards the junction of Corn.

At 3.35.p.m. a Report was received from 'B' Company that they were in position.

At 5.45.p.m. information from Brigade was received that the Unit on our Left was meeting with considerable opposition in front of OPPY.

At 6.0.p.m. Orders were received from Brigade that 2 Companies of the 2nd East Lancs Regt were to work their way up Corn and thence along Crane to the North and South as far as C 15 c 95 70 and the Crucifix respectively.

At 3.0.p.m. The 2nd Rifle Brigade took over the portion of the Fresnes Rouvroy Line between Wind and Count Avenue held by 'D' Company and at 5.0.p.m. the Hollow Copse Defences were taken over by the 2nd Rifle Brigade from 'D' Company. 'D' Company moved back to Kilkerran Support to Rest.

At 4.0.p.m. 'A' Company moved up from Kilkerran Support and took up the following positions:- 1 Platoon Chico Support, 1 Platoon at junction of Willie Support and Towy Alley with Company H.Q. at B 30 a 3.3.

Determined efforts were made by 'C' Company to reach their final Objective by securing the junction of Chalk and Corn and to get in touch with the Unit of Left at C 15 c 9.1. Great difficulty was experienced owing to the enemy strong post at junction of Chalk and also to the fact that

the troops were attacking uphill over new and unreconnoitered ground and were further handicapped by the darkness of the night.

The Strong Post was attacked over ground. Lewis Guns opened fire from the flanks and simultaneously the Post was rushed by Bombing Parties. Many of the enemy escaped over ground, some were killed and 1 wounded prisoner remained in our hands, bringing the total prisoners to 2 Officers 7 42 O.Rs. [TX01081]

On the 7th the 8th Division added:-

7-10-1918 The 2nd Middlesex and 2nd West Yorkshire Regiments attacked Rouvroy-Fresnes Line in the 23rd Brigade Sector. The 2nd Rifle Brigade and the 2nd R. Berks co-operated in the 25th Brigade Sector. By 8.0.a.m the 23rd Brigade reported that all objectives had been gained and that patrols were being pushed forward. A combined post between the 25th and 23rd Brigades was established at C 27 d 5.2, on the Fresnes/Gavrelle Line.

Meanwhile the 2nd R. Berks had advanced up Count Avenue and had established a post at the junction with the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line, from where they proceeded to work south down the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line in order to join up with the combined post. Strong enemy opposition was encountered at the junction of Wind and Chin Trenches, where severe bombing encounters were in progress, during the morning. By noon this opposition had been overcome and the whole of the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line as far north as the Gavrelle/Fresnes Road was cleared of the enemy. As a result of this attack, on a front of approx 3000 yards we advanced to a depth of 3000 yards.

On the approach of our troops the enemy fled out of Hollow Copse. Further south the enemy did not offer strong resistance.

On the 7th the 2nd R. Berks, having joined up with the 23rd Brigade, south west of Railway Copse and having cleared the Rouvroy-Fresnes line south of the Gavrelle/Fresnes Road continued their operations in a northerly direction in face of strong opposition up to C 21 b 1.8., where they joined hands with the 1st Worcester Regt. They had thus, during the day, cleared some 2,400 yards of trenches, had killed many of the enemy and had captured 40 prisoners and 2 machine guns. [TX01081]

2nd Lt. Gilbert Lionel Gosling, was awarded the MC for his efforts. His citation read:

During an attack on October 7th 1918 against the Fresnes-Rouvroy line he took command of two platoons and pushed on down Wind trench, driving out two strong points on the way, with rifle grenades and bombs and right into the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line. Pressing onwards he captured two heavy machine guns and one light machine gun, with 30 prisoners. Having received reinforcements he gained touch with the unit on the left and cleared over 1500 yards of enemy trenches after which he reorganized the line. Throughout these operations he displayed the greatest courage and resource. [TX01208]

8th October 1918

The COs report continued:

At 5.30. a.m. the junction of Chalk and Corn were reported taken and at 7.20.a.m. a message was received that point C 15 c 9.1. had been reached and that we were in touch with the 1st Worcesters on our left

at C 15 c 9.1. and with the 2nd Rifle Brigade on our Right at C 21 d 75.20. The four Platoon Posts, already mentioned were consolidated and Liaison Posts established on either flank.

2 Companies of the 2nd East Lancs Regt moved up at 5.0.a.m. to perform the duties already mentioned.

At 7.00. a.m. O.C. 'A' Company Reported that the 2 Platoons detailed to clear Wind had removed all blocks during the night and the trench was passable and that his remaining 2 Platoons had delivered rations to our troops in the Fresnes Rouvroy Line.

At 7.30. .am. orders were issued for the redistribution of the Battalion in depth from the Fresnes Rouvroy Line to Kilkerran Support, both inclusive, with the object of resting the troops as much as possible.

As a result of the days operations Hollow Copse was captured. The total length of approximately 3500 yards of hostile trench cleared of the enemy.

Officers and 44 O.Rs. captured and 3 Heavy Machine Guns taken.

Our approximate Casualties amount to 1 Officer & 3 O.Rs .killed and 1 O.R. wounded.

8th October 1918 Signed Lt. Col. Commanding 2nd Royal Berkshire Regiment. [TX01076]

9th October 1918

Having taken Hollow Copse and reached the Fresnes to Vouvray line, the Royal Berks turned north to consolidate and fully clear the German trenches. This was dangerous work as the Germans had left many booby traps.

2nd Lt. Frank Allan Strange won the MC on the 9th. His citation, gazetted on 30/7/1919 read:-

At Fresnes on October 9th 1918 he led forward the eight battalion scouts, most gallantly and, despite heavy fire from snipers in the houses of Izel and concealed machine guns, he kept in close touch with the enemy, handling his scouts with such excellent skill that the outpost Company Commander was enabled to move forward in such a manner that positions were quickly occupied with but few casualties.

The 8th Division report concluded:-

By the morning of the 9th October a line had been established from C 24 a through C 17 central and c 10 to the high ground west of Core Trench in C 2.

An Aviator's report that the enemy was holding the Queant Line was confirmed by patrols. [TX01081D]

Sgt Bestley who was signalling sergeant with the HQ company wrote in the China Dragon of how communications were established:-

After having taken the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line and established our Headquarters there our next object was to get into telephonic communication with the Outpost and other companies. The difficulty here was in obtaining sufficient cable so we at once commenced to salvage German wire and the writer was fortunate in finding two new drums of single line which gave us one mile. While this was being done "A" Company had run a line to " B " Company Headquarters which lay about 500 yards in front of the

Fresnes-Rouvroy line, a most unhealthy spot indeed, so orders were given that there was not to be any movement by day.

The Battalion linesmen's next job was to run out a cable from " A " Company Headquarters to the Outpost Company, which was situated in some German gun pits. To reach these pits open country had to be crossed as there was no trenches but the line was eventually completed and communication established. A lamp station was also fixed up here in case the line was broken a

The Battalion linesmen now returned to Headquarters, no one having been hit. All these linesmen who had had a most trying day should now have been resting, but the rations had just arrived and it meant every man on Headquarters lending a hand and bringing it in. However the rations had been dumped only a short distance away, thanks to our Transport Officer—a most excellent officer indeed—who never once missed bringing our food up. While these rations were being carried from this improvised dump to Battalion Headquarters the Bosche threw over a large number of gas shells which necessitated every one wearing their box respirator but owing to the fact that everyone was well trained as regards gas no one was affected by it. Several journeys had to be made and it was nearly midnight before we could lie down and rest. [TX01565]

10th October 1918

Sgt Bestley:

Battalion Headquarters here was situated in a large German dugout, which had been used by them as a first aid dressing station and which was in a most filthy condition. One had to be careful as the Germans set so many booby traps and in every dugout he had placed a large shell with a time fuse attached.

Before we were allowed to enter these dugouts, experts in this class of work had to go round and ensure that all was quite safe before we went in. When we had settled down rum was issued, and those not on duty turned in for the night: [TX01565]

Pursuit

11th October 1918

Despite the aviator's report that the Germans were trying to hold on to the Queant line, they were now in full retreat towards Douai, and the pursuit continued during the days following without serious fighting on the part of the Royal Berks.

The area around Biache was extensively flooded which hampered the artillery in their support of the advance. From captured prisoners it was learnt that the Germans had in fact started their withdrawal from the Queant-Drocourt. line at 03:00. 25th Brigade was pushing forward and once the German rear guard was overcome the withdrawal changed from 'orderly' to 'disorganised'. By 09:30 the whole of the line including the villages of Izel les Esquerchin and Vitry en Artois were in British hands.

The Royal Berks were pushing forward vigorously in the centre - they had patrols out in front and as they

encountered little or no opposition the main force marched four abreast along the Quiery la Motte to Esquerchin road and by 22:00 were occupying both Cuinchy and Petit Cuinchy.

The Division reported:-

During the period 9/10 October a patrol from the 2nd R. Berks proceeded from C 10 d 9.3., along the road on the southern side of Izel at C 6 c & d as far as the wire in the Drocourt-Queant Line, reported the wire strong, and in good condition with no gaps. Very Lights were fired by the enemy and the patrol was sniped at from the village. A strong post was established at C 11 central. The troops of the 25th Infantry Brigade occupied the ground in the vicinity of C 18 central. [TX01018]

Sgt Bestley's account continues

Next morning about 6.30 orders came round to get a cable out to the Queant-Drocourt Line. The great and final advance had commenced.. Little did I think when I left that morning that I should not see that place again. When the order came I collected the Linesmen together with all the cable and away we went to the Gun Pits where we had laid the line the previous afternoon. Here we joined up our line and made our way down a sunken road towards the village of Izel; we were well along the main road when up went the first mine and then the Germans commenced to bombard the road and gave us a warm time. _We were unable to push along here so, we had to withdraw to the cross-roads.

We ran out of cable at this point and I had to send back three of the linesmen to bring more up. As time was all precious I decided to use the German lines which were rather plentiful here but we had to be very careful as only an hour earlier the Bosche was using the same lines himself. Now the safest way to go from these cross roads was along the road to our right for about three hundred yards and then to cut across country. This we did and got into the Queant-Drocourt line just as our other cable arrived. Here I met the Commanding Officer, who complimented us on getting forward so quickly. The Battalion had got the Germans on the run now but in front of us was a big railway embankment where the enemy could have held us with ease for quite a long time; but ho, we watched them go right over, our fellows hard on their heels.

During all this time we had always been in telephonic communication and the O.C. Phoned to Brigade (who had now come up to our old position) and informed them of his next move. The Commanding Officer now called me on one side and pointed out on the map the position of his next headquarters which he proposed to make and which were to be just on the far side of Quiery-la Motte, and as soon as the first Company had taken the Railway we started off again leaving in the Queant-Drocourt Line sufficient operators and linesmen to form a station and whose duty it was to see that communication forward and to the rear where Brigade were was kept intact.[TX01565]

In the night of the 11th/12th the battalion was at Esquerchin and Petit Cuiney close to Douai, which was in flames. The enemy shelled Esquerchin heavily that night.

The Divisional report:-

By midnight 11/12th October 1918 the line ran as follows:

23rd Brigade had established a line from the Scarpe River at D 28 a central to D 22 central to d 16 d central to D 11 c central. The 2nd East Lancashire Regiment (25 Brigade) prolonged the line to D 5 central to D 30 d central. Then came the 2nd R. Berks who had pushed patrols out with the greatest boldness and followed them up well. The main body of the battalion marching along the Quiery-la-Motte / Esquerchin Road, in fours. This battalion was holding the whole of Cuincy and was in touch with the 2nd East Lancashire Regt on its Right and with the 2nd Northampton Regt, on 24th Brigade, on its Left. The Line from Cuincy ran westwards through D 16 central to the northern boundary of the Division at D 8 central. It was a fine advance of from 4000 yards deep on the flanks to one of 8000 yards by the 2nd R. Berks in the centre. Although the enemy meant to retire he desired to do so in his own time and he endeavoured to hold our battalions up by machine gun and also by artillery fire from many places and especially along the Railway. [TX010181E]

12th October 1918

On the 12th the Battalion occupied Planque close to the banks of the canal, the banks having been cut to flood the area. The 2nd Lincs captured Douai prison which had been holding POWs. The canal was a formidable obstacle which was well defended by thick wire

Sgt Bestley

We were now advancing so quickly that Brigade could not get the cable up to us so that this meant that every available signaller had to salvage wire and the linesmen were being very hard worked but the Companies were still going forward and it was essential to keep in communication with them. The excitement kept us up and we had no time to think of the shelling.

We eventually reached the embankment and on the eastern side was a large camp and to right of this a large Prisoners of War Camp. The Bosche evidently did not expect us to get there so quickly as on going into one of the huts we discovered potatoes already peeled for dinner and the breakfast things not cleared away and if we had been staying there we could have had quite a good time.

The next orders were to push ahead as quickly as possible and get to the cemetery on the left of Esquerchin : here we were a little more fortunate for a single cable on poles ran as far as we could see and another one at an angle of 4.5 degrees away from it so "what we had to do was to get this wire down and fastened up beside the first one. This did not take too long and when we fixed it up it brought us within 800 yards of our destination. More wire had now to be salvaged and when we had obtained enough it "was getting dark but we stuck to our work and got to a barn on the right side of the road which was to be our Headquarters for the night.

We had now covered eight miles and had come six miles on German wire— not a bad effort. We had not had anything to eat or drink since we had our rum issue the night before and to light a fire was impossible but we ate what we could get hold of—a turnip goes down very sweetly at these times. At this time it began to rain and after being here about an hour old Fritz began to let us have it with his heavies. We took shelter under a bank at the side of the road but he made it too hot for us. In the

meantime I had sent to Brigade to send more cable up at once. Battalion Headquarters received orders to push through Esquerchin to some huts which had been reported to be at the rear of the Chateau just beyond. To get there a stream had to be crossed and the bridge had been blown up but a search being made we discovered a small bridge in the Chateau grounds which the Germans must have overlooked.

Coming back to the Signal Station I found the cable had arrived from Brigade so we moved our Station to the huts about three quarters of a mile away.

The Companies had now gone through Petit-Cuincy to Cuincy, and I think we could have taken Douai that night but we were nearly two miles in front of the Battalions on our right and left and couldn't go any further in case we got cut off so we had .to sit down and wait for these Battalions to come up. [TX01565]

13th October 1918

For the next few days not much progress was made. The 1st Worcesters attempted to cross on the evening of the 13th but were bogged down in the flooding and wire.

Sgt Bestley:

Next day all the linesmen were out early salvaging as much cable as they could to enable us to reach the Out-post Company, whose Headquarters were in a cellar in a large Chateau (which at this time was still burning) at the end of Cuincy and after breakfast—and this was the first cup of tea for 36 hours—we decided to go as far as we could on the existing telegraph wires, leaving behind a party to finish reeling on to drums the cable already salvaged.

Using these telegraph wires we found rather difficult as of course we couldn't carry ladders about with us and we had no foot irons. We had to climb them as best we could and most poles had to be climbed as so many wires were broken and lying all over the place. When we got to the end of Petit Cuincy we discovered that here all the poles were cut down. We had still with us about a quarter of a mile of cable so we tied on with that and carried on.

This was sufficient to take us to the beginning of Cuincy and while we were fixing it up to a house where there were some insulators a shell struck the next house and heavy shelling had started again. I think Fritz must have got his guns back to another shell dump for he let drive about here all the rest of the day. We had to wait here until more cable came up so we ran the end of the cable into a cellar so that we might have a little shelter and then tested the line we had just finished. We couldn't get through so two of us went back to Petit-Cuincy, where " D " Company were in reserve. Shells were bursting.all around here but we had to climb one pole quite 30 feet high and fix up a tee here to run to a cellar where the signallers of " D " Company were. Testing from here we found that we could get the forward station which we had left but could not get any answer further west so off we went again to find the break and discovered it at the cross roads where the line was smashed all to pieces ; the only remedy was to put in an entirely new piece of cable, and after about half an hour's work communication was re-established.

This completed the line laying for the day but that a course does not mean that we had finished for as soon as a line gets broken out go our linesmen again and

repair it once more.

This is now where the operators part of the work comes in. Besides doing operating work generally operators have to let their linesmen know at once when a line goes " Dis," and to do this they test (if the line is not being used frequently) each line every few minutes and here I must remark that I had splendid operators. [TX01565]

14th October 1918

During the night of the 13th/14th much patrolling was done to gain information as to the enemy's withdrawal. The patrol of "C" Company under Second-Lieutenant AJ Eastman was unfortunately surrounded by the enemy, and Eastman and four other ranks were reported missing.

On the 14th the enemy's resistance appeared to be stiffening, and there was much shelling, including gas shells. The forward area held by the battalion received much of this from 15:00 to 19:00 The shelling was less heavy during the ensuing night. Next night the battalion was relieved by the 2nd Rifle Brigade.

The casualty list shows that there was no serious fighting between the 9th and the 15th October. One officer (2nd-Lieut. Eastman) was missing, 3 other ranks were killed, and 13 wounded.

Sgt Bestley:

Five o'clock next morning we started off to complete the line to the-Chateau-Quincy; we got this finished before breakfast and here we left one linesman to look after the line so that in the event of a break the repair could be quickly done and we should not be out of communication too long. This linesman was what we called one of the " lucky ones " for less than two hours later he was wounded, the only one wounded during the whole advance.

Having got as far as we could with our line we spent the rest of the day salvaging cable and getting it ready for the next move. We managed to secure about 5 miles, insulated it and wound it on drums.

That night we took over the front from the East Lancashire Regt., which extended to beyond the Prison in front of Douai. The 2nd Royal Berkshire Regt. Were now responsible for the whole of the Brigade front.

On taking over we found they had no telephone cables laid so it was necessary for us to link up the new front. This was found difficult as the ground near the prison was swept by hostile machine guns, but we eventually got this completed .

15th October 1918

Sgt Bestley:-

On the following morning we were told we were going forward again and that a line had to be run to Plonque where a station was to be made and operators left. I was then to carry on to Wagonville fix up a station there and then go on to Dorignies.

Directly after dinner we got to work, starting off with ii drums of cable, all salvaged and making for Chateau Quincy, our starting point. Here we joined up our line and set out for Planque. Here it was all open country and

exposed to machine gun fire from Douai and while getting our cable underneath the Railway line here we discovered part of our leading company digging in along a hedge on the opposite side of the road, when an officer beckoned to us to hurry in ; this was Planque, so we ran the line across to the hedge, having to put an overhead crossing up over the road to enable traffic to clear. We then took the line along the hedge and into a house on our left which we made into a signal office and where we left operators.

We then pushed on to Wagonville, then getting into the main road we caught up the remainder of the Company who were having a very hot time and couldn't get any further so I took the line into one of the houses and fixed up the, telephone. This enabled the Company Officer to speak to his Commanding Officer and explain the position to him. Had it not been for the telephone here I think this Company must have been wiped out before a runner could have got to Battalion Headquarters and back again. The Outpost Company now received orders to retire to their line on Planque which we of course held.

The Signalling Section had done most excellent work and the Signalling Sergeant received the Military Medal. We could not all have the honour but each man that day was deserving of this decoration.

Having to withdraw from Wagonville we left the line where it was in case we should advance again and it was not safe to stay and reel in. Of course when we got back to Planque we cut the wire here so that the Germans could not pick up any of our signals.

We now made our way back to Battalion Headquarters. By this time the men were nearly done up so I sent them to get as much rest as they could, and I must say that all lines stood well that night. We had only one break which was repaired by the Company linesmen.

Our line to Quincy was still on the telegraph poles along the main road and as the Bosche was shelling this continuously we decided to take another line this time through a wood so that we would have two routes in case one went and was not readily repairable. This was done the next day and communication was very rarely interrupted afterwards.

Later in the day we heard that we were being relieved by the 2nd Rifle Brigade as soon as it was dark, so imagine our delight after being hard on the advance for four days for just where we were was a proper " hot shop " for our guns were back, front and all round us now. [TX01565]

On the night of the 15th the battalion was relieved by the 2nd Rifle Brigade and moved back to Brigade reserve on the line of a railway.

After the 15th October the advance along the River Scarpe progressed steadily without fighting.

Pte Gash:-

On October 15th the Battalion was relieved and the active service of the Scouts ended.

From this time on their work consisted of road patrolling, by no means a light task, as practically every bridge and cross roads had been mined by the retreating enemy.

So well did they carry out this work that from the 19th October until the Division left the Mons area the Battalion traversed over fifty miles of country and on no occasion were they held up by destroyed roads or bridges, nor at

any time did they lose their way. [TX01564]

The End of the Road

16th - 17th October 1918

Patrols of the 2nd Rifle Brigade entered Douai at 14:00 on the 16th and the 2nd Middlesex moved in to occupy the town which was deserted. The buildings were mainly intact and mines which had been set remained undetonated. However the Germans had indulged themselves in a spree of wanton destruction before moving out.

Sgt Bestley:

Little did we think that this was the last of the War for us, at any rate, as we went back to Quiery4e-Motte for a three days' rest. While here we received the news that our Division had taken Douai so once more we started. [TX01565]

18th - 21st October 1918

They moved on by march to Roose Warenden on the 18th and to Marchiennes on the 19th.

Sgt Bestley

We marched from Quiery-le-Motte to Roost Warendin the first day, to Marchiennes the second day and thence to Tilloy where we stayed for nearly three weeks as our Brigade had been pushed out of the line owing to the line getting shorter. [TX01565]

Tilloy 21st October 1918

After a short pause in billets they were off again to Tilloy on the 21st. D Coy were requisitioned to repair some of the roads in the town. They remained in Tilloy training.

Meanwhile the rest of 8th Division had been busy chasing the Germans. Measured in a straight line the 8th Division advanced 30 miles from the 7th to the 25th October 1918, and had captured 35 towns, including Douai, Marchiennes and St Amand and also a large number of villages, freeing many thousands of civilians.

3rd November 1918

At Tilloy on Sunday the 3rd November the battalion gave an entertainment to the children of the village, which was followed by a speech by the Mayor to the children and the battalion.

4th November 1918

The next day they were off again this time to the brickworks at Bouvignes where they paused again for training.

5th November 1918

On the 5th November 1918 command of the Divisional Front passed to the 52nd Division. Effectively 8th

Division's war had ended. In his closing comment Major General W C G Heneker C.B., D.S.O., Commanding 8th Division 20-11-1918:said-

" I have come out of the war with one conviction, at all events, and this is that the finest man on God's Earth is the British Private Soldier". [TX01081G]

9th November 1918

On the 9th they marched to St Amand which had been taken on October 20th and which had accommodated many of the refugees from Douai

10th November 1918

On the 10th it was on to Pommereul and on the 12th on to Bouvrain. The battalion diary gives not the slightest indication of the Armistice.

Sgt Bestley concludes his account

Our next move was to St. Amand and then on to Pommereuil.

The day after we arrived here the Armistice was signed. From that time no signalling has been done under war conditions and communication as formerly practiced virtually came to an end. [TX01565]

The casualties between the 7th October and 11th November had been:

Officers. Killed: Lieut. JC. Maurice (7th October).
Wounded: 2nd-Lieut. J. W. Cusden (7th October).
Missing: 2nd-Lieut. AJ Eastman (14th October).
Other Ranks: Killed 8; Wounded 29; Missing 4.

Sources

Petre pp 108-112

War Diaries 2nd Bn, 25th Bde, 8th Division

China Dragon

History of the 8th Division.

London Gazette

Continued in section 342