

Volume 7 Section 333

The Final Advance

The 1st/4th Battalion (October/November 1918)

The Italian Front was some way behind the Western Front in the timing of their final attack. It did not start until 25th October as far as the 1st/4th were concerned.

They had been holding the river Piave guarding the pass into Austria which led to Trent. The attack was launched on 25th October and by the 29th the Austrians were in headlong flight.

On the 31st a general attack on all sectors was ordered and the Austrians could not surrender fast enough as soon as they realised they were facing British forces. They were fearful of falling into Italian hands as the mutual enmity was still very bitter.

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The weekly return on the 5th listed the strength of the Battalion as 24 officers and 683 Other ranks. They had 8 riding horses, 9 heavy draft horses, 13 light draft horses, 14 mules, 25 pack animals (mostly mules), 14 large wheeled vehicles and 4 small, and 19 Lewis guns.

On the 6th Major Battcock rejoined the Battalion after serving with the 1st/5th Glosters. He had made a special request to be with his old battalion in the final days of the war. This was granted although there was no specific post available to him, however he made it plain that even though he was senior to every one else in the Battalion, except Colonel Whitehead, he was prepared to do any task assigned him. He was appointed Intelligence officer.

Granezza

1st to 8th October 1918

Captain Cruttwell's Account continues.

October brought no change except in the weather, which declined suddenly to autumn. On the hilltops, with night-frosts and continuous violent rain. The Austrians were still harassed perpetually by enormous and invariably successful raids, by bombardments and aerial bombing, to which they submitted with the patience of necessity.

The absence of any great concerted attempt to destroy them seemed almost inexplicable to our troops, as they heard of all the great works which were being performed against their enemies else-where. Already had Bulgaria fallen; the last Turkish Army had been dissolved; the German line was crumbling to pieces under the remorseless hammer of the British; and the interchange of notes with America foreshadowed the end of the war. The Italians, however, were determined to wait until the possibility of failure had been reduced to a minimum, and doubtless they were the best judges of the capacity of their own troops.

On the 1st October the British Army gave up the traditional 12 hour clock and adopted the continental 24 hour system. The time was spent improving trenches by day and with wiring parties at night. Trickle of reinforcements arrived, there were 24 on the 2nd, and 15 on the 13th. Also men were returning from hospital and officers were returning from home leave.

They relieved the 1st Bucks on front line duty on the 2nd, completing the change over at 22:00. However it seemed to make very little difference to the daily routine.



The Italian Front

Under Italian Command

9th to 24th October 1918

On the 9th the 48th Division was put under the command of Lt General G Penella who had a mixture of British, French and Italian troops under his command for the forthcoming big attack. He sent out the following message:-

dated 9th Oct 1918

Proud of having under my command, from today onwards, the 48th British Division. I offer to its commander and its fine troops my most cordial and auspicious welcome.

The brave British and Italian Troops, united under my orders against the common enemy on this plateau, that has seen the heroic deeds of the sons of Italy and of her Allies, will cement always more strongly the bonds of comradeship in combined competition of effort and tenacity, to achieve, in the near future a glorious and undoubted victory, which the Allied arms are preparing for the civilised world.

On the 12th they were relieved by the 1st/6th Glosters and retired to a newly built camp at Granezza. The move was completed at 23:00 which was a bit late to discover that the new billets were not properly completed and were not rain proof. As the weather was decidedly wet for most of October this was not pleasant. Over the next few days they did what they could to improve the billets.

The next day, the 13th, the baths were allocated to the Battalion for the morning and the Foden disinfection unit was available all day to deal with blankets.

On the 15th, the Divisional band gave a concert in the Granezza Theatre. There was a second concert on the 18th.

To get the men back to full fitness almost every morning from the 16th was taken up with a 2 hour route march. Rifle practice was available on the Rairetal Ranges on the 17th and 18th and at the Marginal Range on the 19th. There were also classes for signallers and Lewis gunners.

They were back on front line duty on the 20th when they relieved the 1st/6th Glosters.

On the 24th a raid was carried out by 144 Bde, but the 1st/4th were not affected. There had been almost continuous artillery action during October but it was quite sporadic. Nevertheless the Battalion suffered a few casualties, one on the 7th, two on the 25th and one on the 26th.

The Final Attack

25th October to 3rd November 1918

It was not until 25th October that the Allied forces blow was launched which was to prove the destruction of the Austrian Bmpire. Initially the 48th Division were not involved.

Captain Cruttwell's account continues:-

The attack was started first on the Piave and the Brenta.; and operations further west were contingent on success in those areas. Accordingly, its effects did not become apparent on our front until 29th October, when the Austrians were already in headlong flight towards the Tagliamento. At that date we were holding the extreme right of the the Divisional Area.

Orders

From the War Diary of 30th October:-

Orders were received to detail reserve coy to patrol towards M.CATZ and if possible to push through the Winterstellung there. The 144 Bde on left was to act in the same manner their patrols pushing forward to M.Rasta.. Signallers were to accompany the advanced coy and keep in touch with Bn HQ. The remainder of the bn was to be held in readiness to move forward to join the advanced coy if they got through the Winterstellung. The advanced party were ordered to pass through line Capitello-Mulche-Camporovere at 0400

C Company - 29th October

On that mornmg, at 05:45, C Company sent out a patrol, which found that the Austrians had abandoned their front lines - a retirement which deserters had foreshadowed for some days past. They pushed on at 12:30 and entered Asiago a silent village; thence exploring more boldly, they wandered right across the valley as far as Ebene, close to its northernmost limits, which they reached at 15:00. There they saw the French patrols similarly engaged in searching the houses. Then the enemy gave the first sign of his continued existence, firing with two machine guns from a little knoll, which commanded the village 500 or 600 yards away. The Bucks, who were out on the left, brought back similar word, and it was apparent that a general retirement had been carried out to their Winterstellung, or Winter Lines, which ran along the northern slopes and barred ingress into the side valleys which led up to the railway of the Val Sugana. The patrol withdrew and re-entered the British piquet lines at 18:00 without casualties.

B Company - 29th October

It now became necessary to discover whether the enemy was standing strongly in this main line of defence, or whether it could be overrun by a coup-de-main; During the night of the 29th-30th, therefore, B Company was sent forward to feel its way and report on the resistance encountered. Captain Winslow now established his Headquarters in the Military Barracks at Asiago, keeping one platoon at hand. The remaining three spread widely over the plain and moved forward. They occupied the villages lying at the foot of the mountains, but it was evident that the enemy was still in strength before them. Here and there they extracted Austrians who had been left behind in houses and dugouts. The left platoon, in particular, discovered 17 in Bosco, including an officer; as they drove this party before

them towards Asiago, while it was still light, machine-gun fire was directed upon them from the ridges of Monte Catz, causing several casualties. The prisoners, headed by their officer, were foolish enough to refuse to continue their journey, and their mutiny cost them dear, as, with one exception, they were all killed.

The War Diary recorded:-

B Coy being reserve coy passed through our piquet line about 0130 and reached military barracks Asiago at 0345 where Capt F Winsloe the company commander established his HQ. From there three platoons were sent out on patrol. The right platoon under Lt LG Prince the centre platoon under Lt F L Plumer and the left platoon under 2Lt B H T Wevill MC. The right platoon moved off through Rendela-Ebene- to Costa at the foot of M.Catz. From there the platoon commander tried to get in touch with the centre platoon with the idea of doing a combined attack on M Catz. Failing in this he remained in Costa until after dark when he withdrew to coy HQ

The centre platoon moved off through Cinque to Rodighiera. When they arrived there they saw the left platoon engaged in collecting about 17 prisoners. The centre platoon moved forward to Hattala but could not move from there owing to hostile MG fire They withdrew to Coy HQ at dusk.

The left platoon advanced to Bosco where they found an enemy coming out of a dug out Going up to the dugout they extracted 16 more including one officer. The patrol was then heavily fired on by machine guns from the direction of M Catz

They drove the prisoners over the open towards our lines and withdrew with them to the vicinity of Hattala bringing with them two enemy MGs Some of the prisoners were hit by MG fire and some including the officer refused to go any further. These were dealt with and eventually one prisoner and one MG was brought in This platoon had 7 casualties all wounded.

Owing to the Winterstellung being occupied by the enemy the remainder of the battalion did not move forward The advanced Coy were ordered to take up the line Capitello-Mulche-Randela which they were to hold with three platoons. The remaining platoon being at Coy HQ at Asiago

After dark A Coy moved forward to relieve B Coy as advanced Coy. On relief B Coy returned to their billets in Support Company area

Fine hot day - very cold night.

A Company - 30th October

Next day A Company took on the patrolling work, and found the lines still occupied, while the Austrians denied them access to Costa, which had been examined on the previous day. Reports from either flank gave similar information; there was nothing, therefore, to suggest the speedy and dramatic overthrow which was to follow.

War Diary:-

A Coy held the line Capitello-Mulche—Cingue-Randela during the night and sent out patrol in the early morning to reconnoitre Costa and to find out if the Winterstellung was

occupied by the enemy. Patrols reached the southern houses of Costa and heard enemy movement. They withdrew to Asiago before dawn. At dusk D Coy in the outpost line of resistance. On relief A Coy moved back to support Coy billets.

Attack at Dawn - 31st to 1st November

During the night of the 31st October-1st November, the Corps decided to make a general attack at dawn, the orders being verbally delivered to Colonel Whitehead by the Brigade-Major at 02:00 to attack M Catz and Mt Mosciagh at 05:30. There was thus very little time to make preparations. Fortunately Major Battcock was acting as intelligence officer, and set to work with all his characteristic energy and method. He was living in advanced Headquarters at Asiago School, and succeeded in getting everyone in position by 03.30.

Meanwhile D Company, whose duty it was that night to patrol in front; reported that Monte Catz was still strongly held. This long bare shoulder, which projected southward from the main ridge into the valley, was the objective of the Battalion. It was the key of the whole of this section of the Winterstellung, as it overlooked the trenches on either side.

At 05.35 the attack was launched; C and D Companies, from right to left, were charged with the assault; they advanced close behind a barrage. Each had a section widely extended in advance as skirmishers, the main body advancing in two lines.

C Company met with immediate and splendid success. Brushing aside opposition at Costa and on the slopes of the hill, they stood upon the summit at 07.30; they had already taken 65 prisoners and had completely cleared their area.

D Company had met with a tougher resistance, and being assailed by cross-fire from both right and left, were held up in the Plain until B Company came into the gap, and seized the machine-gun nests on the south-west slopes of Monte Catz about 07:30.

Thus our position was satisfactory beyond expectation.

War Diary:-

Bn HQ moved to Asiago about 0900 from S Sisto. At 1400 Bn HQ was established on M Catz. Companies were engaged in consolidating positions won in days fighting

The 144th Brigade, however, on the left, were in a less happy condition. Their assault on the lower slopes of M. Interrotto had not been successful. The enemy had even passed to a counter-offensive, and had thrown them back beyond the uttermost villages of the Plain, Camporovere azid Bosco. The evacuation of the latter imperilled all our dispositions, and Colonel Whitehead wisely kept A Company at Asiago in case the enemy should drive a wedge between the two Brigades. It was the more unfortunate that O.C of D Company, acting on one of

those vague orders which often circulate during battle, whose source it is impossible to trace with certainty, had withdrawn his company somewhat from the slopes, believing himself to be conforming to the desires of the 144th Brigade. Monte Catz was therefore left in a dangerously salient position on the west, but, as the Bucks, and beyond them the French on the east, had been completely successful, it was thought well to take the risk of exploiting the success which the 145th Brigade had already won.

C Company - 1st November 1918

The indefatigable C Company, therefore, pushed on up the hill, seized and passed the Sichelstal Trench (the last organised defence in that area); the Bucks securely protected their right flank; on the left B Company held a line slanting backwards to the Plain, where D continued the line on the outskirts of Bosco, still untaken. All this was accomplished by about 15:00.

The blow of the Battalion had been decisive, as Lord Cavan mentions in his despatch. They had taken that day 480 prisoners, more than 30 guns, and had destroyed many more.

The Rout - 2nd November 1918

Next morning the 144th Brigade seized all their objectives with little difficulty; the Winterstellung existed no longer. The Division held the entrance and both sides of the Val d'Assa, and began to march up it towards their final objective, the Val Sugana, one of the main nerves of the enemy system.

The Austrian's fell into a rout which has a few parallels in military history. Famished and without hope in the world, faced at the same moment with military disaster and political collapse, they fled headlong into the mountains, or swarmed down in enormous numbers to surrender to our advancing troops; almost the last remnant of self-respect which they retained was their determination not to become the prisoners of the Italians. The rough mountain tracks were blocked with their debris and the words a r m e m b a r r a s s e d our advance-guards and checked their progress.

Generals and superior officers came down to meet us, sometimes at the head of troops, sometimes as solitary stragglers. A Corps Commander and three Divisional Generals were among the spoil of the Division.

The Battalion re-organised at Campoverere and later moved through the Val d'Assa to the Valle du Portule where they rested for the night.

3rd November 1918

Here and there during the 2nd and the early morning of the 3rd, little bodies of devoted men still resisted; as at Mount Meatta, where a Company of 4th Oxforas put 100

Austrians to flight after a sharp combat. It was noted also that when the red-capped Bosnian Regiment surrendered to our Battalion, the men obeyed their officers smartly, and laid down their arms and equipment neatly at the word of command.

It was curious that these Mahommedans, from the latest acquired of all the Austrian possessions, should have been the most faithful to their military oath. During the 3rd the confusion among the Austrians was, if possible, increased by their mistaken belief that the Armistice had come into force; they ceased even the isolated semblance of resistance, and were herded in the valleys like sheep.

Meanwhile the Division advanced inexorably by the Val d'Assa and the subsidiary Val Portule; they crossed the enemy's frontier at 8.30 on that morning, first of all the armies of the West (except for that portion of Alsace which had remained in French hands since 1914). That evening the Battalion arrived in Caldonazza, just south of the Val Sugana, at 16:00 and a halt was made for the night. Here the enemy had abandoned a vast ordnance park and more than 200 guns.

The Advanced Guards were already in Levico, that pleasant little spa in the valley, with its baths and springs, only 20 miles from Trent.

4th October 1918

Next morning the news came that the Armistice was signed and was to come into force at 15:00.

The weary troops continued their march up the valley until that hour, taking still vast quantities of prisoners; then they halted. For our Battalion the war ended at the village of Vigalzano which was reached at 16:00. They had covered 35 miles in two and a half days over rough paths in the mountains. Not a single man had fallen out.

Their casualties in this last glorious battle amounted to 17 killed and 23 wounded. Their individual captures cannot be recorded, but the booty of the Division was unprecedented, and reached 22,000 prisoners and at least 600 guns.

Sgt White gave his recollections of the final days in the Berkshire Chronicle of 13/12/18:-

We have been very busy lately but thank God it is all over now. We had rather a stiff fight at the finish. We had to take a high mountain but we managed it all right and the boys did splendid work. I expect you have seen by now the good work and the amount of prisoners taken by the old 48th – the most of any division. We went a good way into Austria after them. It was funny to see them give themselves up when they saw the British boys coming. We only had to go at them and they soon packed up. By the time we finished we had thousands and guns galore. The part where we were belonged to Italy many years ago and we had a good reception from the inhabitants who were glad to be liberated and thought a lot of the British boys

Col Whitehouse's Account

Continued in section 343

Col Whitehead in his interview to the Reading Mercury of 5/4/19 gave a good summary of the position:

It was at the beginning of November that the Battalion so highly distinguished themselves in the attack and capture of a height known as Monte Catz, which was of considerable importance as a strategic position in the offensive then taking place. The Bucks carried out a raid on October 28th and 29th and from the success of this it was estimated that the line of the enemy was only held by a light screen, and that their main line on which this screen was to fall back on was at the foothills - Winterstellung.

The Berks at the time were holding the line between Capitello, Mellche and Bendella and, on the 29th, pushed out a strong patrol which occupied Asiago. The enemy were driven back to Winterstellung by patrols: prisoners and machine guns were being picked up every night.

On November 1st orders were received to attack at 2 am. This was done by a two company front and considerable resistance was met at Winterstellung and Rodighieri. Despite this however, they pushed through Boscon and reached the summit of Monte Catz by 10 am. The final objective was Monte Moseiagh. This was attacked, along with the Bucks and was reached by mid-day.

Whilst this offensive was ensuing the brigade on the left was held up at Monte Interotto, but on the following morning the enemy were forced to retire and were driven out. The Royal Berks advanced up a big salient and the Warwicks followed them up, went through them and carried on further. The Berks Regiment's captures included 480 prisoners, 8 trench mortars, 8 machine guns and over 30 cannon. There was however no time to collect souvenirs as the Battalion had to go forward still further.

Re-organisation took place at Campronere and the Battalion went forward on November 3rd, crossed the Austrian frontier, capturing hundreds of prisoners (the retirement developed into a rout) until they reached Caldonazzo.

Col Whitehead remarked afterwards

"I got the Croix de Guerre for that stunt"

One member of the 1st/4th described it all as:

Our fellows looked upon it as a holiday. We were simply following up and taking prisoners by thousands

Sources

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