

Volume 11 Section 337

The Final Advance

7th Battalion July - November 1918

The 7th Battalion were at Smoll Hill when on three fronts the Allies began their final push for victory (continued from section 327)

The front held from the 2nd July was in "L" sector, to the right of "M." Here reconnaissance showed that the ground in front of the British trenches to the right of Grand Piton, a hill in No-Man's Land, as far as Border Ravine was swampy. A plan for a raid in the night of the 29th-30th July was abandoned, as the enemy had filled up the gaps in his wire through which it was proposed to operate.

Raid at Pitons 24-25th August 1918

The next raid was in "M" sector in the night of the 24th-25th August. Three strong patrols went out to raid the enemy outpost line from the Piton des Quatre Arbres to the point of junction of Macukovo Ravine with the orchard north of Macukovo Village.

A Company

The patrol of "A" Company, under Second-Lieutenant G. I. Berry consisted of twenty-six other ranks, with eight battalion scouts, and one Lewis gun. This pushed through Macukovo Village to the south of the orchard, keeping a flanking party under Lance-Corporal Denton to guard its right flank. This party encountered no opposition, but found it impossible to get through the uncut wire in front. After skirting the south-east edge of the orchard, it returned by the Piton de l'Eglise when the signal for the retirement of the other two patrols was given.

Lance-Corporal Denton with the right flanking party, meanwhile, had heard a strong enemy patrol in Bangor Ravine. At this he threw a bomb, and his party, which was now in touch with another flanking party in Cardiff Ravine, held up the Bulgar patrol with rifle and Lewis-gun fire. They were unable to come to close quarters with the enemy, owing to a trench-mortar barrage. Denton returned by Macukovo Church when he heard the signal for retirement of the raiders.

C Company

The patrol of "C" Company under Second-Lieutenant

Worden, M.C consisting of twenty men and a Lewis gun, moved to the sunken track south of the Piton des Quatre Arbres on Berry's left, and sent a small detachment along the bank of the Vardar, in order to get round the west side of the hill

At 21:00 Worden and twelve men crept up the front of the hill and charge over the crest. As they passed this point they were met by machine-gun fire and a shower of bombs, which wounded half of them at once. An attempt to get round the enemy's left flank failed, and Worden and his men were compelled to fall back, covering the removal of the wounded by throwing bombs.

The detachment near the Vardar on the left had also been driven back by bombs thrown from the slope of the hill above them on their right.

B Company

The third patrol was of "B" Company under Second-Lieutenant R. Childs, and was of similar strength to Worden's. Hearing the attack on Worden's party, Childs moved north-westward to help it. As he did so, his party was heavily fired on from a sunken road one hundred and fifty yards to its right. Childs at once changed direction to the right and charged, disregarding cries of "Friend Cease fire" which were raised by the enemy.

This trick having failed, the Bulgars threw a shower of bombs and fled back into the shelter of a wood. The British party pursued as far as the road whence the fire had come, but were there forced to retire by the barrage put down on it by the enemy.

Casualties and Commendations

The casualties of the three patrols in this affair were one man killed and nine wounded. The report on it highly praises the conduct of Lance-Corporal Denton in getting into touch with the other flanking party and then holding up the enemy, who were endeavouring to cut off the British parties as they retired. Corporal Hiscock is also mentioned as acting with Denton. Though both were wounded, they continued firing, and eventually retired by the Piton de l'Eglise when the signal was heard.

Later in the same night, some of the enemy crawled under the outpost wire, got in rear of a post and surprised it at 07:00. Of the five men in it, two were

soon as information of this was received by telephone, Second-Lieutenant S. Kerman and six other ranks went out to the post, where they found the two wounded men lying unconscious. The enemy had left, apparently by the Macukovo Ravine, carrying the three prisoners with them.

Covering an Attack 30th - 31st July 1918

In the night of the 30th-31st Second-Lieutenant Shillcock and the battalion scouts went out at 21:00. to cover an attack by the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. They were fired on from Prong Ravine, which was a tributary of the left bank of the Macukovo Ravine, before they had even gone clear of the British wire.

When they reached Prong Ravine they found it had been evacuated. They then pushed on to the Piton de l'Eglise, but were fired on from houses in Macukovo. The enemy, however, were found to have disappeared from these houses when the party arrived.

Presently, as they were advancing on the western slope of Piton de l'Eglise, they were saluted by rifle fire from the top of that hill. They charged up it, but were fired into from their rear, and had one man wounded when they had nearly reached the top.

They then took position, expecting an attack which did not materialize. After ten minutes, they moved again north-westwards when they saw six Bulgars leave a small trench.

They then halted about 22:30 when they began to receive machine-gun fire from the Pitons des Mitrail-leuses and des Quatre Arbres. Seeing a large body of the enemy extended, Lewis-gun fire was opened on it, with the result that it melted away towards the Vardar.

As the patrol retired, it was fired on from various points, including the village. In one case a Bulgar rushed up crying, "Friend! Don't shoot," and fired at Lance-Corporal Reid who shot him down, but was himself wounded by a bomb thrown by another of the enemy. Shillcock's men again charged, and the Bulgars sought refuge in the village.

Raid 13th September 1918

The battalion was still in "M" sector when, on the 13th September, a party of seventy men, under Lieutenant Weaver and Second-Lieutenants Shillcock and Berry, went out to raid the enemy outposts from the Piton des Quatre Arbres to Macukovo.

Lieutenant Weaver, with forty men, took up a position south of the Piton des Quatre Arbres, whilst Second-Lieutenant Shillcock with the rest formed the attacking

party to the right.

At 02.10 on the 13th September, Weaver's party opened fire and moved up the slope of the Piton des Quatre Arbres. At the same time, Shillcock advanced to take the enemy outpost in rear. He was fired at from another post on the hill, but went on, and on reaching it found its garrison had evacuated it and gone up the hill behind it. Weaver's party also found the post in front of it had been evacuated. The raiders only had one man slightly wounded.

Raid 15th September 1918

On the 15th a similar raid was carried out farther forward, over the crest of the Piton and down the northern slope. No details are given of this raid, in which six men were wounded, of whom five remained on duty.

Preparations for the Advance 16th to 22nd September 1918

Preparations now commenced for the coming general advance on the Doiran front. From the 18th there had been desperate fighting for the possession of Grand Couronn6 and Pip Ridge, in which of course the 26th Division, away to the left on the Vardar, could take no part. These two great positions had defied capture, but the Bulgars had been prevented by the attacks from moving their reserves towards their right to oppose the Franc-Serbian attack which had broken through, turned the flank, and cut the communications of the enemy by the Vardar Valley. The Bulgars had no option, under the circumstances, but to let go their hold on the Doiran-Vardar line and fall back into Bulgaria.

On the 21st, when the battalion was at Smol Hill, news was received that the enemy was retiring, and had evacuated the Dome and the Piton des Mitrailleuses, which had been occupied by the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

The Advance Begins 22nd September 1918

On the 22nd the way was clear for the battalion to advance along the Macukovo track by the Piton des Quatre Arbres, Mulberry Hill, Frontier Hill, and Bogorodica. The outpost line was placed on that day on the line Stojekovo-Table de Bogorodica. The latter place, on the left bank of the Vardar, was four miles north of the left of the British line as it had been up till then.

On the 23rd the advance continued to Gjavoto where the 7th Royal Berkshire were in Brigade reserve, covered by outposts of the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire at Cernica.

For the events of the 24th-26th we have to guide us the report of Colonel Dene in the diary, and a very clear account kindly furnished by Captain Ravenshear, who was then acting as second-in-command of the 7th Royal Berkshire.

Throughout the 24th the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire had acted as advanced-guard of the 78th Brigade, in touch with the retreating enemy. In the evening they had occupied Valandovo at the southern foot of the high mountains on the Serbo-Bulgarian frontier.

At 20:00, as the rest of the brigade was about to bivouac at Cestovo in rear, Colonel Dene arrived from Brigade Head-quarters with orders placing him in command of the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, 7th Royal Berkshire, and 11th Worcestershire Regiments, and to push on as fast as possible.

Captain Ravenshear was sent on to Valandovo with verbal orders to Major Martin, commanding the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, to withdraw his outposts and proceed to piquet the heights commanding the pass in front. It was quite dark when Captain Ravenshear arrived, and by the time the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire had discovered the route and were ready to advance, the 7th Royal Berkshire had come up, followed by the Worcestershire.

The route up the mountains was a mere stony goat track pointed out by a local guide, and was quite impracticable for wheeled traffic. The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were to lead the way, followed by the Berkshire and Worcestershire Battalions. All were to reach Izlis, the first village on the Bulgarian side of the frontier, by dawn on the 25th. The night march was one of extreme difficulty, over a steep ascent of four thousand feet where the enemy might be met at any moment in positions of immense advantage over the British troops marching, as they generally had to, in single file. Fortunately, he did not put in an appearance, and half an hour after midnight the leading British safely reached the plateau on the top, across which passed the frontier line.

Izlis

25th September 1918

It was nearly dawn when the 7th Royal Berkshire reached it. All were exhausted. On their right was the height known as Fortin Serbe, on their left Fortin Bulgare, the frontier posts on the Serbian and Bulgarian sides of the frontier respectively. Beyond the frontier, on the left of the track leading to Izlis, were three steep bare heights known as the Pyramids. On reaching the top of the pass the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire had reported all clear, and the descent to Izlis was commenced by them and the 7th Royal Berkshire, the Worcestershire being left in support at the summit.

As day broke the Royal Berkshire passed through the Oxfordshire, and both battalions were in close formation on some open ground near a stream, preparing to have breakfast and a short rest. The most easterly of the three Pyramids was now some eighteen hundred yards to the left rear of the Royal Berkshire.

At this moment heavy, but ill-directed, machine-gun fire was opened by a party of the enemy from this Pyramid on the Worcestershire who were cut off from the rest by the storm of bullets on the plateau. At first there were no casualties amongst the leading battalions, and the men quickly got into formation. There was, however, practically no cover, and casualties soon began to occur.

Action was delayed, owing to its being believed that the fire came by mistake from a regiment of Greek cavalry, supposed to be operating on the left. This was found to be erroneous, and Colonel Dene ordered three companies of the Royal Berkshire to assault the hill. In this they were supported by the fire over their heads of the Brigade Machine Gun Company.

The attack failed owing to the steepness of the hill and its complete lack of cover, and had to be abandoned for the moment, in the hope that artillery support might be available later. The farthest point reached was two hundred yards from the enemy's position. In this attack Lieutenant R. E. Childs, commanding C Company, had received wounds of which he died, two men had been killed and twelve wounded. The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, who were behind the Royal Berkshire in this affair, also had casualties, as had the Worcestershire on the top of the pass.

A letter from the chaplain was published in the Reading Chronicle of 25/10/18 he wrote:-

"On September 25th the battalion entered Bulgarian territory and met with severe opposition from machine guns. It was in driving back these machine guns that your son was hit by a bullet in a vital part and was instantly killed. He died in action, fighting bravely in a long forced march over a mountain pass by night. Your son's was one of the first of the British graves to be dug in Bulgaria"
[Pte Ernest John Hallet of Reading TX00123]

Till about 15:00 the two battalions in front lay out in great heat in the open, with very little cover to protect them against the Bulgar fire. About 15:00. the enemy withdrew, apparently on account of the appearance of Greek troops in their rear, and of more British troops by the main road.

The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire and Berkshire Battalions bivouacked in peace for the night. An attempt had been made to pursue the retreating enemy with two companies of the Royal Berkshires, but the men were utterly exhausted and the pursuit had to be abandoned. The officers and men had had no sleep worth mention for forty-eight hours and no time for a proper meal. They had marched twenty miles on the 24th, and had a most exhausting climb in the night of the 24th-25th.

Captain Ravenshear says the enemy force was afterwards ascertained to have consisted of only about fifty Bulgars with six machine guns. Major Marks estimates only three or four machine guns. The history of the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, however, says the Bulgarian prisoners gave the numbers as two hundred men and sixteen machine guns. They would have soon been dislodged had artillery support been available, but of course the pass was impossible for guns of any sort.

It was now decided to halt for the night just south of Izlis, with outposts pushed out northwards and round the village, which had been ascertained to be clear of the enemy. It was searched for arms.

End of the Fighting

30th September to 11th November 1918

The march continued northwards without incident till the 30th September, when orders had been received by the brigade for the forcing of the Hamzali Pass. That operation never came off, for it was announced that an armistice had been concluded with the Bulgarian army, and hostilities were to cease at noon on that day.

The fighting days of the 7th Battalion were at an end.

The 26th Division was now under orders to represent the British in the Army of Occupation of Bulgaria. The march was at first in the direction of Sofia, till Slatin was reached.

Since the 22nd September some one hundred and seventy miles had been marched. Then, on the 15th October, the direction was changed, and the division was sent by rail to Mustafa Pasha on the Turkish frontier towards Adrianople, where divisional sports were held on the 9th November.

Sources

Petre pp 308-315

Berks Chronicle 25/10/18

The account concludes with section 347