

Volume 12 Section 318

The Spring Offensives

The 8th Battalion

Re-organisation

On the 3rd February 1918 the 8th Royal Berks left the 1st Division as part of the general re-organisation being conducted at that time and joined the 18th Division, where they took the place of the disbanded 6th Royal Berks in the 53rd Brigade. The other two battalions in the brigade were the 7th Royal West Kents and the 10th Essex. They were now to move to Picardy where Gough's Fifth Army was to bear the brunt of the first phase of the coming German offensives. 18th Division came under III Corps which held that part of the British line south of St Quentin, recently taken over from the French. The divisional front ran north-south along the river Oise.

On the 7th February the 8th Battalion entrained at Proven for Noyen, SE of Amiens, arriving there on the 8th and marching to Baboeuf, then to Jussy on the St Quentin Canal and on to Clastres. On the 26th they were in the left sector of the 53rd Brigade front line near Alaincourt. By the end of the month air reports and photographs were indicating signs of a forthcoming offensive on the Fifth Army front and these were confirmed during March by prisoners and deserters. On the 20th March warning was received by the 8th Royal Berks of an impending German attack in their sector. Battalion HQ was now at La Guingette Farm near Cerizy, north west of Moy. B and D Companies were in the front line of the forward Zone with " " in support and C held back as the counterattacking company behind Battalion HQ. The 7th Royal West Kents were on the right. [CF]

Lt Randall's Recollection

Lt JW Randall wrote his recollections of the time while he was recovering from wounds in September 1918. He was serving with C Company of the 8th Berks at the time. We will include verbatim quotes from his account at relevant points in the overall narrative. He writes first of the situation before March 21st.

March 20th 1918 produced an unprecedented amount of excitement and discussion among all ranks of the 8th Berkshires, for it was on this day that it became known without the slightest shadow of doubt, the long-talked about German offensive was to start tomorrow. The first intimation was the calling together of the four Company Commanders by the CO Lt Col RE Dewing DSO and it was at this conference that a copy of the report which

had been issued by the Intelligence Department of the Fifth Army, and received that morning at Battalion HQ was made known and discussed.

The Company Commanders at this time were Capt Gentry-Burch MC (A Coy), Capt DJ Footman MC (B Coy), Capt HR Fenner (C Coy) and Lieut RJ Macey (D Coy)

At the time the Battalion

was holding a considerable front, some six miles south of St Quentin, with a battalion of the 14th Division on our left and a battalion of our own brigade on the right, the Royal West Kents. At this point there was an unusual distance between our front line and that of the enemy, varying from 1500 to 2000 yards. The Canal de l'Oise et la Sambre ran between the lines, but small bridges over this were still in existence. There were also the ruins of two villages on the Battalion front - Alaincourt, facing our northern boundary and Moy which was opposite the southern end of the sector. It was interesting to study these with binoculars and in Moy the Chateau and Railway Station could be easily picked out. The outside of the station buildings was still standing and on the wall the large white letters "MOY" could be plainly seen.

Our patrols used to go through the villages nightly, and they were very keen as the Brigadier had offered 14 days special leave to anyone who brought in a prisoner. The Companies actually holding the front line were B and D each with 3 platoons, with one platoon each in reserve at their respective Company Head Quarters which were situated about 500 yards in rear of the front line. Each front line company was responsible for patrolling in advance of its own sector during the night and this patrol was usually supplied by the platoon in reserve.

A Company were in Battalion support and their positions were situated at about 1500 yards behind the line and consisted of four strong points, each manned by a platoon, with distances of approximately 200 yards between one another, being so sited that under normal conditions the garrisons would co-operate by cross-firing with Lewis guns etc. Three of these strong points were on the east side of the main St Quentin to La Fere road and one just on the west side.

Battalion HQ was situated on this road and they were accommodated in a large dug-out, divided into various compartments. Their strength would total about forty, all ranks, and in addition to officers consisted of the usual retinue of Signallers, Runners, Servants, Observers, Clerks etc.

C Company were acting as Reserve and Counter-Attack Company (having been relieved by B Company in the front line on the night of March 19th). The Reserve Company's battle positions consisted of an isolated redoubt, about 120 yards west of the main road. This was held by 3 platoons. No 12 Platoon acted as Company support, holding a small trench some 200 yards behind

the redoubt. One section from this platoon had been attached as "moral" support, to a battery of field guns in the vicinity. From the Redoubt a communication trench ran right back to the Battle Zone, which it joined just in front of Ly Fontaine village.

The Reserve Company had some excellent dug-outs in a quarry some 300 yards behind the Redoubt and the usual procedure had been for them to "stand to" in battle positions for an hour at dawn and again at dusk. At night they would be in the line on working and carrying parties. "C" company's platoon commanders at this period were Lt N Williams (no 10), 2Lt EG Wallace (no 11), 2Lt EG King (no 12) and the writer, Lt JW Randall (no 9)

It may be of interest to note here that a large raid on the Bosche had been planned for the night of March 20th. Four parties, each of 20 men, were in readiness to "go over". Each company supplying one party chosen from their stoutest men. The officers selected were Lt Bland MC, Lt Baker, 2Lt Capes and 2Lt King. The parties under Lt Bland and Lt Capes were to enter the enemy trenches and bring back prisoners while the other two detachments held the flanks. At the morning conference however, it was decided that it would be advisable to conserve all our strength for the trial of the morrow and so the scheme was reluctantly cancelled.

Captain Fenner had been given orders to man battle positions at 1600 that afternoon and not to stand down until instructed to that effect., the idea being that it was quite within the bounds of possibility that the Bosche might alter his plans and attack earlier than anticipated by the Intelligence Department.

It was decided to thoroughly reconnoitre all ground between our positions and those of the support company and we did this in the early afternoon, taking with us all the Company NCOs and making a thorough survey, noting carefully all tactical points and approaches, as it appeared quite probable that we should be counter-attacking over the ground the morrow. At the time of our reconnaissance not a sound of war was to be heard, not a shell or even a rifle shot. As we walked round it was difficult to realise that there was a war on and I feel sure no one had any conception of the inferno that was to loosed a few hours later. When this task was accomplished we paraded the Company and duly took up our positions at the appointed time, utilising the remaining daylight in improving the trench, making fire steps, Lewis gun emplacements etc.

A further supply of ammunition and a case of emergency rations were drawn from Battalion HQ. Tea was brought up from the cooker, or field kitchen as it is called, which was concealed in a quarry where the dug-outs were. After dark a few sentries were posted and the remainder of the men told to get as much rest as possible in view of the strenuous time that was to follow.

It was amusing to listen to the conversation of the men during the evening. They were all perfectly cheerful and quite convinced that it was purely a case of "wind up". I heard my batman tell a little group that the latest rumour was that tomorrow the huns were commencing a 10 years bombardment, followed by 4 years of gas, "*and then*", he added, "*They're coming over*" Another critic was heard to remark "*this is no ordinary wind but a blooming cyclone*"

About 2230 the Battalion second in command, Major Tosetti, came to the Redoubt and said we could all go back to the quarry and get some sleep. Needless to say

this was carried out with alacrity. I am sure no one was too troubled to sleep.

Under attack in Picardy 21st March

At 0440 on the 21st March the German offensive opened with a heavy barrage and gas shells. A thick mist cut visibility to 10 yards at daybreak. All telephone communications between Battalion HQ and the forward companies were broken. Lt. TH Baker, although badly wounded, brought news to HQ at 1000 that the enemy had broken through on D Company's front and that 2/Lt. WCA Hanney was holding out in a sunken road. There was no news of B Coy. Two runners, Pte. H Butcher MM and Pte. G Sparrow, tried to get in touch with the front line, making their way through the barrage and towards D Company in Magpie Wood. However, before reaching the wood, they met the enemy and had to withdraw. It appeared from statements of NCOs and men of A Coy that the enemy had reached the support line at 1000, had met with considerable resistance and were temporarily checked. At 1030 groups of the enemy were seen moving along the St Quentin to Moy road towards HQ and Col. Dewing ordered HQ to man C Company's trench immediately behind HQ dug-outs. Capt. H Le G Sarchet stayed behind to destroy papers. Whilst there he was attacked but killed several Germans with his revolver before rejoining the rest of HQ. At 1100 the Germans advanced on the trench occupied by C Coy and HQ and, because of the mist, were not seen until they were 50 yards away. They were then "*shot down almost to a man*", in the words of the Battalion report. and the advance was checked. However other enemy units worked their way round the trench and opened fire from all sides, inflicting heavy losses. Lt. N Williams located a particularly active sniper in a shell-hole 50 yards to the front and, accompanied by Pte JE Peters, his servant, rushed the sniper with a bayonet and took him prisoner. As he was returning to the trench. Lt. Williams was killed.

When the mist cleared, the remainder of the battalion found themselves surrounded and Col. Dewey ordered them to withdraw down Seine Alley, a communication trench leading from the Forward to the Battle Zone. The Battalion now numbered only 182 men, the rest having been killed or captured in the Forward Zone. The withdrawal was covered by CSM J Orsford and a group of men who led the bombers forward up the trench down which the others were passing. Major D Tosetti MC and Lt. SAG Harvey led a party down Seine Alley to clear the Germans out of the rear of C Company's trench. Major Tosetti was killed attempting to silence an enemy machine gun which threatened to hold up the retirement. Lt Harvey was also killed when he encountered a German officer face to face. Both men fired simultaneously and both fell dead.

The survivors, now under the temporary command of

Sgt WJ Spokes, carried on a running fight with the enemy down Seine Alley and reached the Battle Zone about 1330 where they joined men of the 10th Essex in manning the defences.

C Company Under Attack

At 0430 on the morning of the 21st the company were rudely awakened.

We were all instantly awakened by the opening of the bombardment, which must hold the record easily for intensity and extensiveness. Not a place which presented the slightest likelihood of shelter for troops, or concealment of batteries, escaped the barrage which extended from the front line to billets and hutments 10 miles back and in some places beyond this range. When one remembers that this was not only taking place in our sector, but on a fifty mile front, it is almost impossible to conceive the stupendous effort required for concentrating such a preponderous collection of guns of every calibre necessary for such a bombardment at the varying ranges. It was certainly an exhibition of marvellous artillery work - every trench, billet, road and approach was subjected to an incessant downpour of shrapnel, high explosive and gas shells. The latter were exceedingly plentiful and particularly trying, necessitating the wearing of respirators from the very first salvo.

We had slept in our fighting equipment and were on our feet immediately the shelling commenced. Captain Fenner at once gave his officers instructions to get their platoons out of the dug-outs and into position. It is not an easy matter to see with a respirator on at the best of times and as it was still dark when the guns commenced their tireless fusillade, the difficulties of getting the platoons together in their sections was considerable. Of course several men never arrived at their post, but considering what was going on all around us it seemed miraculous that anyone did.

When we were in our positions all we could do was to crouch low in the trench and pray hard that a shell would not land right amongst us. We were continually smothered with earth, caused by bursts just on either side of us and as a matter of fact two shells actually did fall in the trench. The first slightly wounded Lt Williams, a shrapnel ball embedding itself just over his eye and four or five other ranks were wounded, two of them very severely. A "whizz-bang" (a small high velocity shell equal to our 18 lbs) also deposited itself low in the trenches but fortunately for all in the immediate vicinity, proved to be a dud.

In addition to all the smoke from the shell bursts and the gas there was an unusually heavy fog and it was impossible to see more than a few yards when one took a rapid glance over the top. It had lifted a little when the shelling ceased at 1000 or slightly after and we knew that the enemy had left his trenches. It is impossible to describe the relief one felt when the shells no longer fell all around and I know that every man would have joyfully welcomed the approach of a million Huns to such a hell as we experienced during the six hours bombardment.

We had been indeed fortunate to escape so lightly in the Redoubt - the platoon in reserve had suffered much more severely. A man of my platoon, Private Barrett, had volunteered to see how they were faring an hour or so before the barrage ceased and brought back the sad news that 2Lt King and several of his men had been

knocked out by direct hits on their little piece of trench.

Owing to the continued density of the fog, it was impossible to make any observations on the situation in front of us, although we could hear the increasing rattle of light machine guns and rifles. Our front line and the Support Company evidently put up a vigorous resistance for it was 1130 before the enemy captured the main St Quentin road.

The CO and Battalion HQ returned into our trench after having a battle royal on their own on the road in which they killed a considerable number of the enemy. So successful were they in this encounter that they even brought a prisoner with them, thinking we might be able to gain some useful information from him, but the only thing we could gain from this man was that he had just returned from Russia and the comparative quiet of the east and considered the western front a highly undesirable place.

2Lt Gordon with a few men also came back to the Redoubt about the same time. Battalion HQ had received a report on the situation from Lt Baker before they themselves actually came in contact with the enemy. This officer was shot through the face and was making his way back to the Dressing Station. He was the only officer in the front line to get away.

The Bosche seemed to be very reluctant to advance from the main road at this stage and we could hear his officers and NCOs shouting loudly and obviously trying to re-organise. Had we had sufficient men at that moment to have counter-attacked strongly, I believe we could have re-established our front line. Apparently each enemy company had a bugler, for we could hear long calls being played at various points and their units were undoubtedly trying to keep in touch by this method. In the meanwhile we were putting an unceasing hail of bullets across the road and it must have been a very unhealthy spot. It was still impossible to see for more than fifty yards and we eventually saw a few German scouts loom out of the mist. These were promptly killed.

Then appeared their first line of attackers in extended order at short intervals and they came on very steadily and made an ugly rush. "C" Company and its reinforcements were in great form however and not a man got within 20 yards of us. On three separate occasions were these tactics employed against us, but so well did our men use their rifles that each time they were stopped dead. The Lewis gun did great execution too and as one of the gunners remarked afterwards "rolled 'em up in heaps" The men were greatly encouraged by the Colonel, who walked up and down cheering everyone up and I heard him repeating 'Keep it up boys there are rows and rows of dead Jerries in front' It must be borne in mind that our redoubt was quite isolated and we knew that other enemy detachments had advanced beyond our flanks and were also round behind us in large numbers.

The next move of our attackers was to send men to crawl forward into shell holes as near as possible to us. These were obviously picked shots and, making good use of cover, they were difficult to spot. The result was that we began to lose men rapidly. In every case they were sniped through the head. It was at this stage that we lost 2 Lt Gordon who was using a rifle with good effect. Lt Williams was also killed by a sniper's bullet. This officer observed one of the Huns who had crawled forward and was about to shoot him with his revolver when the man put his hands up. Lt Williams went out on top to bring him

in, pushed him down into the trench and was getting ready to jump in himself when he was shot from another direction. Capt Fenner was also shot in the head but fortunately it was not fatal in this instance and he was eventually officially reported as 'wounded and prisoner' It was quite impossible to get any away who were severely wounded. The Germans co-operated with their snipers by sending forward a large bombing party which secured a footing in the left flank of the redoubt and also by worrying us with enfilading fire from a light machine gun.

Lt King's body had been witnessed by two of his men. Their reports were included in his papers deposited at the Public Record Office.

The first by Pte Barratt

"About midday on March 21st the first day of the retreat we were holding the second line just behind Moy on the right of St. Quentin and I was ordered to go down a communication trench to see a gun team in a quarry. On the way down the trench I came on Lt. King (platoon commander C. Coy. XI or XII platoon) half buried and lifeless. I went on to the quarry and found his servant Pte. Frank Barr wounded. He informed me that both he and Lt. King had been hit by the same shell. I saw the gun team and then went back to the trench and almost at once had to retreat 3 kilos that day and further for the next 7 or 8 days. I heard afterwards that Barr had been taken prisoner.

31420 Barratt P.

4 October 1918 Rouen" [TX01463]

The second by Sgt Mitchell

"He was in C company and in charge of XII platoon. On March 21 our position was about a kilo to the right of St. Quentin in a quarry. The German line was along a ridge and ran through Gauchy or another village to the right of it. Mr King got killed in a trench by a shell about 9am the trench led from the quarry. A runner brought me a message that Mr King had just been killed. I saw his body when we retired back about midday. There was no time to stop but I recognised him. Jerry would have his body. He had been a splendid officer.

36817 Sgt. G. E. Mitchell

9 October 1918 Rouen" [TX01464]

C Company Retire

Lt Randall's account continues:-

The attacking force was being continually re-inforced and, as the position had become quite untenable, Col Dewing ordered a retirement by way of the communication trench to the battle zone. This meant moving in single file and we had not proceeded many yards before we encountered another large bombing party who had evidently been posted to cut off our retreat and to try to force us out of the trench. Some of them were actually in the trench and others lining either side. Lt Harvey, the works officer, was leading the retirement at the time and he showed wonderful pluck in dashing straight at this party and shooting the first one he met at point blank range. Unfortunately he was shot by another of the enemy at almost the same second and we also had the misfortune to see Major Tosetti meet his end in the same way. This

was indeed a blow for this gallant gentleman was a great favourite with all ranks and greatly beloved by his fellow officers. Those following took up the fight with such vigour that the remainder of this Bosche party took to their heels and we carried on at top speed towards the battle zone.

The mist was now lifting rapidly and, on glancing back, we could see hordes of Bosche passing over our old positions. Messages were being continually passed up from the rear for us to 'double up in front'. We were moving as quickly as possible, but doubtless the presence of large numbers of the enemy, almost on the heels of those behind, literally gave them wings.

On reaching the battle zone we attached ourselves to a battalion of the Essex Regiment who, assisted by a detachment of trench mortars and six Vickers guns manned by the MGC, were holding the line. They had had rather a bad time during the shelling, their trenches were unfortunately incompleated, being in some parts less than two feet deep. The obstacles had been finished however, and there was a very substantial belt of wire all along the front. The trench, by which we retired, crossed a ridge and the high ground was about 600 yards from the battle zone line, but the downward slope ended some 200 yards from it.

A battery of our guns were situated a few yards behind the position and the gunners quickly grasped the state of affairs as they saw us retreating towards them. They waited until the first enemy waves were well in view and then opened rapid fire into them with devastating results. We arrived in the new position in time to enjoy the latter part of this spectacle and, after the Huns had made a few ineffectual attempts to push on, he saw the futility of these methods and halted on the side of the ridge opposite to us. We felt very grateful to these particular gunners for it was entirely due to their excellent shooting that we were able to settle down, even temporarily, in the battle zone and get a brief respite. One may safely conclude that the attackers also considered this momentary pause a good opportunity for a few minutes breather and for deciding the best plan for exploiting their successes.

It was during the first lull that, through a depression in one part of the ridge, I saw a Bosche battery gallop up into action. These guns however were not successful in obtaining our range and, remarkable to relate, we only suffered two additional casualties from the time we actually took up the new position, until we evacuated it some eleven hours later. Single enemy observers appeared on the ridge from time to time, but they were invariably greeted by bursts of rifle fire and, if they managed to escape being hit, quickly took cover.

Also one of their planes flew towards us at a very low altitude. This aviator could not have been more than 300 feet up and, although every rifle was turned on him and his wings must have been riddled, he succeeded in flying all along our line before proceeding back with his information. He was an exceedingly fearless flyer and his bravery carried him through. From this observation he would obviously report that our line was not continuous and, doubtless guided by this knowledge, the enemy decided on the plan which we discovered to be his next move. This took the form of a stealthy manoeuvre on a large scale, the object being to eventually completely encircle us.

During the afternoon we continually made attempts, all of which were unsuccessful, to get in touch with any units

on our left or right. It afterwards transpired that they had been forced to give ground more quickly than we had and one of our patrols, working in a northern direction, discovered that the enemy were holding the small wood south of Hinacourt, well beyond our flank. Reconnaissances on the ground to the south showed a similar state of affairs.

During these operations 2Lt Wallace had a miraculous escape: a bullet fired at him from close range, first striking his revolver, which was in his holster, and then ricocheting on to his respirator container. Both of these articles were rendered useless, but he himself was untouched. After dusk we actively patrolled along our wire and did everything possible to prevent being surprised.

2/Lt Gerard Capes had joined the battalion only in January. He was one taken prisoner. When he returned to England he made the following statement:-

I was in support line & about 8 am of 21st March one of the men came & reported that the enemy had broken through our front line. There was a dense mist at the time and shortly afterwards a German machine gun opened fire on us from the rear & then our trench was severely bombed & owing to the mist we [were] unable to find out from what direction they were coming. & our own supply of bombs falling short we were unable to do anything. As our men were fast decreasing in numbers orders were given to fall back & attempt to make (?) along a communication trench to BHQ & after going for about 300 yards we ran right into an enemy machine gun posted at a corner of the trench & the first men of the returning file threw up their hands & surrendered seeing the hopeless position they were in & as the remainder came along they did likewise. It was thoroughly realized at the time that we were entirely surrounded by superior forces. [WO339-113300]

Battalion Retirement

22nd to 24th March 1918

At midnight Col Dewing received orders to withdraw via Remigny, the canal bridge at La Montagne and Frieres Faillouel, where they bivouacked for the remainder of the night. On the morning of the 22nd they went into huts between Friers Faillouel and Faillouel, occupying a position on either side of the Friers Faillouel road late in the afternoon. Here remnants of the 7th Royal West Kents were attached to them. In the evening they moved into huts in the wood at Rouez.

C Company in Retreat

A very welcome ration of biscuits was distributed by the Essex Battalion and they also managed to supply each man with a teaspoonful of rum. Before midnight [on the 21st/22nd] the Brigadier sent orders for us to withdraw to the other side of the St Quentin Canal and, having ascertained the presence of a large gap in the German circle, it was decided to retire through this. This space was in the open fields between Ly Fontaine and Remigny. Brigade HQ had previously moved back and Col Dewing took charge of all troops in our portion of the battle zone, including the personnel of the battery that had done so well. The guns had to be abandoned, but they were rendered useless by the gunners who carried

away the breech blocks. These men had fired their last round and were feeling quite satisfied with their day's work.

It was highly desirable that the withdrawal should not be discovered by the enemy whilst it was actually in progress and the men were taken from the trenches in small bodies and assembled just in rear. A few sentries were kept in the line to fire occasional rifle shots while the assembling was taking place and, when the main body moved off, they doubled after us and fell in in rear of the column.

The men were moving in file and fortunately it was a dark night and, proceeding with the utmost caution, we succeeded in avoiding the enemy and continued on our way without our withdrawal being discovered. We entered Remigny and it was with keen personal regrets that this village was left behind. It was a favourite place of mine. I had spent some most interesting days there earlier in March.

2Lt Wallace and I were walking together and we looked into the field ambulance to see, if by any chance, there was anyone there. It proved to be empty, but we discovered a large tin of biscuits and also a packet of tobacco which afterwards proved a great boon to us. Having abnormal thirsts we took the opportunity to have a long drink of water and then followed on after the others.

From Remigny we turned in a southerly direction and proceeded down the St Quentin to Liez road, eventually crossing the canal by the bridge situated about half a mile north of Liez. Here we saw the first re-inforcements, the 54th Brigade, who had marched up from billets in Caillouel and Bethancourt. They were resting beside the canal, prior to taking up a line there. A party of Royal Engineers were in readiness to blow up the bridge when all our forces had crossed and we afterwards heard that this was successfully accomplished before day break.

We proceeded on to Mennessis, then by the road through the wood towards Faillouel, the place where we were to stay for further instructions and where we arrived at about 1500 on the 22nd March. Here we found our Quartermaster had made a dump of the day's rations all placed in sandbags. These were supplies drawn for the full fighting strength of the Battalion, about 600 men and, as we then numbered slightly over a hundred, practically every man received a sand bag containing six times the normal ration. As is usual in that part of the country, all the village was in ruins. We immediately sent out NCOs to search for any places that would serve as billets for a few hours and in the meanwhile all rested by the roadside. Personally, although it was chilly, I went off into a sound sleep.

Many of the men commenced on their food supplies and they made the meal of their army career. Those who thought it advisable to be sparing and save for the morrow were unfortunate enough to be penalised by so doing, for, a few hours later, in response to the clamouring of other units whose Quartermasters had not been so enterprising as ours, each man had to give up a share of the remaining food to feed the hungry.

When those who were looking for billets returned, they reported that the only place not yet completely filled with troops, was the ruined church. We forthwith fell in an adjourned to this building and then everyone looked after himself and made his bed in any corner, on a seat or any small section of floor space not already covered by a sleeping figure. At about 0730 Col Dewing and Capt

Sarchet, the Adjutant, came in and roused up all the sleeping Berks. They had discovered some unoccupied wooden huts, just out of the village and we all made our way there. The men were divided into 4 platoons and put into a large hut and the officers took over a smaller shelter. Breakfast was then prepared for all and we ourselves were very lucky. The remaining Headquarters' servants producing a most excellent meal of bacon, bread and hot tea.

Most of us managed to get a wash also and then rested until almost mid-day. We were all feeling confident that the German advance had reached its limits and were optimistic enough to tell ourselves that we should in all probability be sent back for a rest until we could be made up to strength again. Our calculations proved decidedly wrong in this respect, but I do not think that anyone, even those best able to judge, anticipated that they would force their way across the canal.

Under Attack Again

22nd March 1918

There was plenty of gunning going on all around, but no missiles had fallen near enough to cause us any anxiety until, suddenly, our meditations were violently disturbed by the approaching screech of a large shell: it sounded like an 8 inch. Those who have not experienced it cannot conceive what a lapse of time the waiting second seems under these circumstances as one rapidly speculates as to where the shell will land. This particular one came into contact with the ground about 100 yards from us and mid way between us and the men's hut, causing a crater of more than 12 feet in diameter.

We quickly decided to get the platoons away as one such shell on the hut would have finished off what was left of the Battalion. I took off one party to a quarry nearby and then split them up into sections, managing to get them all under cover. Brigade HQ and a field ambulance had been established at the same spot. Brigade were trying to keep in touch with events in front but the situation was very obscure.

A battery of our field guns came into action just in front of the quarry and did some very good work. The Major commanding them told me they had only just arrived from England with everything perfectly new. More than 80% of his men had not seen active service previously, having been kept back as under age. Considering it was their first time in action, these youngsters were simply splendid. Their gunners fired ceaselessly while the drivers galloped backwards and forwards to the ammunition dump. It was evident from their faces, that they were enjoying the battle thoroughly

Later in the afternoon we received instructions to take up certain positions and act as the second line of resistance to delay the advance should the attackers succeed in forcing their way across the canal. Our line ran slightly in rear of the quarry mentioned previously and we took up positions north and south of the road between Faillouel and Frières-Faillouel. We worked hard digging in and making the best possible arrangements for fire positions.

By 17:00 the first walking wounded began to return to the field ambulance and stretcher cases commenced to come back also. Several ambulances were in readiness in the quarry and, as each one was loaded up, the wounded were taken back to the casualty clearing station. We questioned all those capable of talking as to the progress

of the fight and they all told what seemed almost incredible, that the Bosche had crossed the canal.

We knew that the bridge in front of us had been blown up and therefore could not help thinking that the men were mistaken. It was established later in the day that they were perfectly correct. The Division retiring on our left had failed to blow up the bridge at Jussy. This was five miles from the Liez one and there was no other bridge in between. What actually happened was that the enemy crossed at Jussy and then part of his forces swept along on our side of the canal bank in a south easterly direction. The 54th Brigade held on valiantly until after night fall and we ourselves did not actually try to get in touch with the enemy. Our chief occupation was turning back stragglers and sending forward any small detachments who had lost direction. After crossing at Jussy the enemy pushed through fresh divisions and made such rapid progress that we were again outflanked on the left and, distasteful as it was, another retirement became inevitable.

Second Withdrawal

23rd March 1918

To enable the survivors of the 18th Division, to whom we were attached, to withdraw, the Dismounted Division were sent up to relieve us and, being fresh, they were instructed to delay the advance as much as possible. This division consisted entirely of cavalrymen who had been taken from their horses and thrown into the fight, so great was the need for infantry re-inforcements. We were ordered at 2100 [on the 23rd] to make our way in a southern direction to Rouex. This was a place 5 miles away and we took the route through a large wood. When we were clear of the wood and had reached a point within a mile of our destination, we were intercepted and told not to enter the village for a time. It appeared that it had been heavily bombarded with gas shells earlier in the evening and that it would be dangerous to enter as the fumes were still very strong.

We split up into groups and rested in a field for a couple of hours and by that time it was safe to proceed into Rouex. There was no shortage of billets there and we took over buildings that, until that day, had been used for a Corps HQ. There were some large dumps of materials and stores at this place and they passed into the hands of the enemy on the following day, practically intact. On arriving we distributed piles of sand bags among the men and everyone had a good rest that night. Our unique batmen gave us another very excellent meal and all of us then had two or three hours luxurious sleep.

We were about again soon after day light and received orders to be ready to move at a second's notice. French re-inforcements now began to arrive in fairly large numbers and one was struck with their excellent physique. One of their officers, who spoke English perfectly, stopped and had a chat during which we we learned that they were going straight on until they came into contact with the enemy when they would launch a vigorous counter-attack. They proceeded through the eastern side of the Bois de Genlis, the wood through which we had retired a few hours previously.

We received a few re-inforcements ourselves at the same time from the Battalion Transport lines. They consisted of men who had returned from leave after the Battalion went into the line, the band and some signallers, as only two

thirds of these specialists are taken into the trenches at a time. They arrived under the command of Major Morony, Lt HBF Kennedy of "C" Company and 2Lt Morland. We were afterwards instructed to support the French and took up a line just in advance of the second class road running from Rouex to an ancient abbey, thus holding the exits from this portion of the wood. We again made exhaustive efforts to get in touch with any British units on our flanks, but without success.

Detachments of the Dismounted Division began to retire through us and from them we gathered that the Bosche was advancing through the wood in such overwhelming numbers that it was impossible to hold on. The French were coming back also and once again we received orders from Brigade to withdraw.

Our Allies were willing to fight a delaying action and the 10th Essex, who were probably stronger at that moment than any other battalion in the Division, fought with them. We retired to the high ground behind Villequier Aumont on the east side of the main road to Chauny. The troops in front stood firm during the rest of the day and at night several more French Battalions arrived. They took up a general line slightly in advance of us and the mixed force, who were tenaciously hanging on to the wood exits and whose numbers were now considerably reduced, fell back. The French then expressed the readiness to take over the sector entirely and all the English troops were accordingly advised that they were now relieved.

Defence of Caillouel

24th March 1918

By this time we had become somewhat disorganised and it took almost an hour to sort out the various units. When this was accomplished we proceeded to Commenchon, arriving there between 03:00 and 04:00 on the 25th March. This place was already filled with troops, fresh ones going up, tired ones returning and a number of the longer range batteries who were in position here and firing ceaselessly.

The only thing we could do was to tell the men to find any shelter they could and general instructions were given to be ready to move off again at 0800. Together with 2Lt Morland I found a billet with some hospitable gunners who also gave us some bread, jam and hot tea which was highly acceptable. The noise of the guns was not conducive to sleep and we were all quite ready to parade when 0800 came.

Our orders were to proceed to Caillouel and await instructions there. As we passed Béthancourt we saw more French soldiers and they were all in excellent spirits. Most of them were engaged in either preparing or eating their breakfasts. We continued on to Caillouel, a village which we already knew extremely well. We had been fortunate enough to get a brief period of rest here, from Feb 15th to 25th, and it was a most enjoyable time. In the early days of the war the enemy had been in occupation here, but it was one of the few places which had, for some reason or other, escaped his usual destructive mania.

We arrived at Caillouel at about 0930 and found our transport there and the Quartermaster with a good food supply together with the cooks with breakfast all ready for us. There was an abundance of bacon, bread and tea. We also had mail. It was the first time there had been an opportunity to distribute letters and those of us who were

fortunate enough to receive correspondence rejoiced greatly.

The inhabitants had all departed earlier in the morning and it was pathetic to see how they had left all their worldly goods and fled from the Hun whom they had such cause to hate for his behaviour during their previous acquaintance. Their cupboards were all flung open and it was easy to picture how they had hastily put together a few extra clothes and one or two bare necessities before their hurried departure.

Afterwards the CO called a parade and we re-organised the four platoons that now represented the Battalion as far as possible getting the men of the respective companies together. Col Dewing told us that he was afraid that even we could not look for much respite as the French had requested us to hold the village if they should again be forced back. We then marched off and took up a line on the high ground in front of Caillouel, commanding the valley between there and B.thancourt. Transport of all classes and guns were now retreating in what seemed an almost endless procession and making their way down on to the the main Noyon road.

In the meanwhile we were digging in in a field where wheat had been sown and it was then five or six inches high. We had some observers out watching events in front and they had nothing of interest to report until 1400 when they discovered that the French were withdrawing, not towards us, but in the direction of the Noyon road. An hour later they observed the first enemy patrol enter B.thancourt and it became evident that there was now nothing between us and them. Our Brigadier ordered us to 'hold on' and he had been informed that French reserves were coming to our aid. The attackers quickly discovered our position both by low flying aeroplane and by observation balloons which, although a mile off, seemed to be almost over our heads.

The field guns which were following up his infantry opened up a steady bombardment and we were also subjected to enfilade machine gun fire from the flank in the direction of Meufleux. However we stood firm for the time and by 19:00 the fresh French troops began to arrive. They came up in artillery formation in half platoons, but so good was the German observation from his balloons that his guns were able to inflict heavy casualties upon our allies. The poor fellows had not a hope of getting into position; they wre right out in the open and we were without artillery support then, but they kept bravely on.

I was walking along the line at the time and took a few steps in the direction of one party that had been unfortunate enough to get a shell right in the middle of them when a fragment from another burst caught me.

This abruptly ended Lt Randall's account.

24th to 27th March 1918

Between the 23rd and the 26th March the Battalion, having received a draft of about 200 men under Major Morony, made a series of withdrawals, taking it via a crossing of the river Oise at Varesnes to Pontoise and on to Caisnes. From here they marched to Nampcel. From the 26th March the whole of 18th Division rested in this area. On the 28th March the remains of the Royal Berks and the Royal West Kents temporarily formed a

composite battalion under Col Dewing. Together with the 53rd Trench Mortar Battery they totalled 23 officers and 433 other ranks.

Casualties

Casualties between 21st and 27th March were:

Officers killed: Major D Tosetti MC, Capt CA Birch, Lt SAG Harvey, Lt N Williams, 2/Lt EG King, 2Lt JC Jordan (*all on 21 March*)

Officers wounded and missing: Capt HR Fenner (*21 March*)

Officers wounded: 2/Lt JW Randall (*24 March*) Lt TH Baker (*21st*), Lt HBF Kennedy (*25th*)

Officers missing: Capt DJK Footman MC, Capt CHC Byrne RAMC, Lts GR Goodship, N Langston, CFR Bland MC, EF Mecey, 2/Lts JR Mullen, EF Johnson, TH Roberts, WCA Hanney, G Capes, WV Heale, AG Williams (*All on 21 March*)

Other ranks killed: 19

Other ranks wounded: 37

Other ranks wounded and missing: 10

Other ranks missing: 386

Other ranks missing believed killed: 1

Total casualties for the period 21st March to 3rd April were 24 officers and 469 other ranks. These were the third highest in the Division; the officer casualties being the highest.

These figures compare with a Battalion strength on 21st March of: 33 Officers and 773 other ranks.

The Defence of Amiens

4th April 1918

The next engagement of the Battalion came on 4th April, during the defence of Amiens. The 8th were brought forward at 1000 from billets in Gentelles, where they had been in brigade reserve, to a position north of Hangard Wood ready to counter-attack a German attempt at break-through expected later that day. The position occupied was due south of Villers-Bretonneux and due east of Gentelles. Following a heavy bombardment, the German attack began at 1630 and their infantry advanced in waves on the wood. The Royal Berks opened fire with Lewis guns and rifles and went forward on the attack, inflicting heavy casualties. Col Dewey was wounded and had to leave Battalion HQ. He was being carried to the rear by his servant, Pte Bailey, when a stray bullet passed through his head, killing him instantaneously. Bailey was also hit but escaped serious injury. The Adjutant, Capt H Le G Sarchet, was seriously wounded at the same time. Before leaving his HQ, Col Dewey gave instructions to Capt RE Holland

about the deployment his reserve company, but Capt Holland was killed shortly afterwards. The signalling officer, 2/Lt E Wallis, was wounded. Command of the Battalion devolved on Lt AM Bray and at 1800 HQ was withdrawn 600 yards in face of superior numbers. The Battalion was now on the Bois de Hangard to Villers Bretonneux road and from this position covering fire forced the enemy to call off the attack. It is worth noting here that the Battalion's counter-attack and the death of Col Dewing both attract a mention from the official historian, Brig-Gen Sir JE Edmonds.

Casualties for the 4th April were:

Officers killed: Lt Col RE Dewing DSO, Capt R Holland.

Officers wounded and missing, later

recorded as killed: Capt H Le G Sarchet MC

Officers wounded: Capt JM Richardson MC, 2/Lts E Wallis, AW Morland

Other ranks wounded and missing: 1

Other ranks wounded: 32

Other ranks missing: 12

Total 6 officers and 45 other ranks.

Picardy

5th to 26th April 1918

Command of the Battalion was briefly assumed by Major HB Morony on the 5th April. The Battalion was relieved on the following day by units of the 5th Australian Brigade and they moved into billets, first in Gentelles and then in St Nicolas.

On the 9th they marched to Boves where, on the following day, Major TM Banks MC of the 10th Essex took command.

From the 13th to the 20th April the Battalion was at St Fuscien, re-fitting and training new drafts of 16 officers and 589 other ranks who had come in from other units.

On the 21st April Capt (Acting Lt Col) NB Hudson MC took over command from Major Banks who re-joined the 10th Essex.

On the 24th April the Battalion occupied the defences at Blagny, relieving a battalion of the 8th Division at L'Abbé. They now came temporarily under the 24th Brigade of 8th Division until they were relieved on the 26th when they re-joined the 18th Division and moved to Boutilleries.

At the end of the month they were in billets in Méricourt. By this time the German offensive in Picardy had come to a standstill and the Battalion was able to enjoy what the regimental historian calls "*a long period of comparative rest*".

19/04/18

203426 Bayliss Harry

Kidderminster

23/04/18

32855 Duffin William

Burghfield

25078 Matthews Elijah James

Bristol

25/04/18

36722 Long James

Kidderminster

Sources

Petre pp 342-351

Account of Lt Randall

Soldiers Died in the Great War

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Papers of Lt Eric King at PRO

Continued in section 328