

Battalion Diary Extract

2nd BATTALION THE SEAFORTH HIGHLANDERS

1916, July

THE FIRST DAY OF THE SOMME BATTLE

1st: A very fine day! The 4th Division had an objective to take at a distance of about 3600 yards away. The objective was the ridge running between GRAND COURT and PUISIEUX au-MONT. The 11th Brigade which went forward first had as its objective the last trench of the German Front System – named MUNICH-TRENCH. The 10th and 19th Brigade had to move forward at a given time after the 11th Bde had sufficient time to gain their objective, to pass through the 11th Bde, and gain the final objective along the ridge. The whole attack was arranged by time, working in hours from “zero”. The 29th (Gallipoli) Division attacked on our right, and the 31st (New Army) Division on our left. “Zero” was arranged for 7.30am. From 5.30am onwards there was a very intense bombardment concentrated on the German trenches in front. At 7.30am the 11th Brigade moved forward from our front line trenches in waves. By 3.45am, no message had come through from the 11th Bde, nor from Bde HQ. However it was time for us to move forward. So the patrols under Lt. Harrison left the assembly trenches and advanced. Almost at once heavy hostile machine gun fire commenced, fire coming chiefly from the direction of BEAUMONT HAMEL, and Lt. Harrison was badly wounded. (He died of wounds 5 days later at OULLENS). Our telephone wire to Brigade HQ being at that time out of order, two orderlies were sent there for orders. As they had not arrived back by 9.00am, the hour appointed for the Battalion to advance, the remainder of the Battalion moved forward. ‘A’ Coy in the centre, ‘C’ on the left, ‘B’ on the right moved in waves of platoons. ‘D’ Coy followed as company in reserve. The 12th Brigade advanced on our left, the 2nd Essex being next to us. The 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers did not move forward with us, and hung back awaiting further orders from the Brigade.

On coming into view of the German trenches, the Bn came under heavy machine gun fire from the front and the direction of BEAUMONT-HAMEL....A gun firing front trench opposite the REDAN was later silenced by our Lewis Gunners from behind, but owing to its fire, the German trenches about 150 yards south.....of the REDAN.

After passing the German front, parties pushed forward and reached the 3rd line between points (62) and (94). Other parties of our men may have reached MUNICH-TRENCH but there was no possible communication and none returned. As will be understood, the 11th Brigade had failed to reach their objective owing to the very heavy machine gun fire, and by this time we were right in among them. Their casualties were very severe, and they had already lost their Brigadier General Prowse (died of wounds) and all four Commanding Officers (killed). The Germans were holding their 1st, 2nd and 3rd lines on our right and left. Attempts were made to consolidate the ground gained. The enemy however made determined bombing attacks on both our flanks. These attacks were held in check as long as the supply of bombs lasted, and it was not until heavy losses had been inflicted on our advanced parties that the 3rd line was given up. This took place about 1.00pm. By 11.00am there were only 5 officers left with the Battalion, and casualties were proportionally heavy in the ranks.

During the evacuation of the 3rd line a large number of men of various regiments went back to our trenches. It was at this juncture that No 68 Drummer Ritchie repeatedly jumped onto the parapet of a German trench, and sounded the charge, with idea of encouraging those waverers who had lost their leader. This gallant action in addition to his gallant conduct throughout the whole day, gained him the Victoria Cross.

The next position held was about point (77). While there, Lt Buckworth, one of the regiment but attached to the 10th Brigade MO Coy, came up and reported that he had 8 machine guns and 1 **** gun in section just south of point (02) on our left. From there he was able to enfilade the Germans in their front line trenches north of point (87). It was soon after this that Lt Buckworth was severely wounded and last seen. While holding the above position near point (77) as many bombs as possible were collected from casualties and messages were sent back for further supplies; but as none arrived and the enemy continued to bomb our flanks, the line was finally withdrawn at about 5.00pm to the original German front line position extending from point (**).

July 1st (contd): At this time there were about 40 men of this Bn left, in addition to two platoons of the right Coy which were unable to advance from our trenches on the south side of the REDAN. On arrival in the German front line the trench was consolidated by double blocking the flanks, and at about 3.30pm a supply of bombs arrived by carriers and bombed depots were established on the flanks. After this the enemy made no serious attack and was easily driven back when they attempted to bomb us. Orders were received at 5.15pm to return to our line as soon as possible – after dark if necessary. It was considered best to wait till dark until leaving, in order to avoid casualties and to enable us to evacuate as many wounded and as much material as possible. A message was also sent back asking for stretcher bearers to be sent back. Several of the wounded were evacuated before dark, and also a number of men from other Battalions of the 11th and 12th Brigades returned to our lines.

At about 7.00pm 2 platoons of the 1 Royal Irish Fusiliers arrived with a good supply of bombs, and the right flank which we had consolidated was handed over to them. The other 2 platoons which were to follow went astray and got hung up by the enemy's artillery barrage which was laid across "No Mans Land" from about 10.00pm – 11.30pm. At about 9.00pm two messages – J.22 and H.18 – were received from the 10th Brigade. The first contained orders to hold on at all costs and the other contained orders to return to our own lines. These messages were not timed, but both were brought by the same orderly. It was decided that J.22 was the later of two as the 1/RIF had been sent up to relieve us. We therefore waited for the remaining 2 platoons of the 1/RIF to arrive. This they did about 1.00am on the 2nd, and returned to 1 SUNKEN ROAD in .3.a as previously ordered, taking with us what wounded we could find in the dark and all the material the men could carry. At this time the enemy were quite inactive so that the relief was completed without further loss.

(This account is taken from the report on the action by Capt J*. Laurie (DSC Captain).

The same track as the Battalion from BEAUSSART, arrived in the TENDERIOIN about 10pm. They remained there for an hour or more, awaiting further orders, and then moved back to the SUNKIEN ROAD. The men were put in a trench running along the east edge of the road about 300 yards south of the SUCRERIE. Colonel Hopkinson, who had during the later part of the day been wounded in the face and the shoulder, Captain Laurie the Adjutant, and Captain Gordon COB Coy, with what remained of the Battalion arrived at this point on the SUNKEN ROAD about 2am. Very great tribute was paid to the Battalion by all who took part in the day's fighting, and very particularly to Colonel Hopkinson, the Adjutant and Captain Gordon who hung on for several hours, commanding and encouraging men not only the remaining few of their own Battalion, but also men of every unit in the Division who, having lost their own leaders, left themselves in charge of Col Hopkinson and fought most gallantly. In due course the Colonel and the Adjutant were awarded the DSO, Captain Gordon the Military Cross and also CSMS Fenboulost and Aitken of 'B' and 'D' Companies respectively, whereas Sgt K Mcleod of 'A' Company, who was left very early in the day as the senior NCO in his company, when all his officers and senior NCOs had been killed, was awarded a truly well-earned DCM. The casualties were heavy, and the proportion of killed among the officers was particularly severe. The very large majority of the casualties especially those of the officers occurred during the first two hours of the day's fighting. The casualties among officers were:-

KILLED

Capt Baird, CH
2nd Lt Shaw, W
2nd Lt Gourlay, JH
2nd Lt Sillars (3rd A & S Highlanders)
2nd Lt Buchanan, D
2nd Lt Williamson, J
2nd Lt Broom, FO
2nd Lt Harvey
2nd Lt Crum, SA
2nd Lt Connor, PA
2nd Lt Blackwood MH
2nd Lt Lancaster TH (12)

DIED OF WOUNDS 5/7/16

2nd Lt Harrison, B (3rd Gordons)