

MEMORIES OF THE BATTLE OF ARRAS

Colonel Unthank (4th Seaforths) Looks Back

As you may remember, the winter of 1916-17 was a very severe one and lasted well on into April. We marched up on the night of the 8th in a heavy snowstorm and we took up position at the extreme right of the Canadians, linking up with them on the Arras – Vimy road.

The Attack Begins

The attack began at 4am the following morning, and the Canadians had taken the famous Vimy Ridge – well known in Marlborough's day – by 9am and making slower advance by stages, reached Arras an hour or two later.

The job of my battalion was to capture the four lines of the 1st German position and stay there. The advance then went further with fresh troops well over the Ridge and out of sight. We attacked from the bottom of the valley and from my Headquarters in our front, I could look right over and along the Ridge.

At 2pm, the wounded had all been cleared and I started out to visit my men. A German gun had been shelling my dug-out continuously since 4am and was still doing so, but beyond that their guns were silent. I and one companion walked along our old front line. What a change was here. The whole countryside was churned up. Blown in dug-outs were all round us and litter of every description, splintered wood, odds and ends of rifles and equipment, old tins and every sort of refuse. No one to be seen, even the tree stumps along the Vimy road were gone; the shattered Church in a village before Vimy, just visible over the sky-line, was gone and only a solitary thorn on our right was standing. The whole country was pitted with shell holes, but the snow which had now ceased falling, gave a covering of the worst.

Shells Stream Overhead

Our own shells were still streaming overhead, but now much farther up and busting well out of sight. A cold wind was blowing.

Dead lay scattered along the trench. One group was playing bridge, the shell had hit the table and one man sat against the bank, cards in hand and, in alarm threw back his head and was killed in the very act of playing his card. The rest lay scattered in a heap of cards.

And now a Company of Canadians appeared on the left and advanced in small columns up the hill. They were spotted and went forward under salvos of shells, but went on unperturbed and disappeared over the skyline. On our right a battery, double manned, was struggling up a steep bank, again under fire, and disappeared.

Suddenly, in an instant, every British gun ceased fire and silence fell, followed by the burst in the distance, and slowly the rumble died away and all was still.

But again, after a second or two, the German gun firing on my Headquarters blared out and we heard the shell rumbling towards us. We watched it burst and then slowly and methodically it started to traverse our trench and passed us, then it crossed no man's land and traversed each of the four lines of captured trenches where my men lay, and then it, too, ceased, and for two hours saw no living thing.

No Man's Land

The wind had dropped with the shelling. It was as if the whole world stood still in awe of what we had done. We spoke together in whispers.

We now descended and crossed No Man's Land that was. No shells had fallen here and it was quite unchanged and the only safe spot in all the bombardment, as no side could shell it.

Crossing the German front line, empty and unoccupied, we approached a small knoll. This was just in front of the German 2nd line, and which our guns had left untouched. Here some Germans had collected, and as our men advanced, greeted them with a volley of hand grenades, and we came upon a line of dead and 20 yards in front lay the officer, killed like David slew Goliath with a round hole in his forehead. The opposing sides had closed and the snow was all a mush and stained with blood, and the German circle grew smaller and smaller as they were driven back until the last remnant lay in a small ring. The opposing Sergeants, two huge men, had singled each other out, and casting aside their arms, had fought it out. They lay together, the hands round the Highlander's throat, the Highlander's teeth fixed in the Germans. Brave men these Germans, no surrender here, just isolated and alone and without hope of help they fought it out and died to a man.