

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE (GREAT) WAR

By Captain H King, MC and Bar

Seaforth Highlanders

The Somme Offensive 1916 – La Boisselle

The beginning of July marks a great turning point in the war. The Boche lost the war when they failed to seize Paris in 1914. But up to July 1916, each side was able, and neither side could do more than, to hold on to their own trenches. July 1916 saw the commencement of the first successful advance of the British Forces. True we lost, for a few months, all the ground we had gained, but that was the final effort of the Boche, and when that effort was exhausted, the Boche was done. Prior to July 1916 we had acted on the defensive, waiting for the moment when we should be strong enough to attack. On 1st July we felt ourselves strong enough and since that date we have persevered until at last success crowned our efforts.

1st July 1916

The offensive commenced with a prolonged bombardment of the enemy positions. There were numerous batteries in the valley to the right of our post and these maintained a ceaseless fire. Heavier guns were behind us, and we could hear the shells passing overhead in a continuous stream. The fire ceased suddenly on the morning of the attack, and its place was taken by the rattle of machine guns. The infantry were going over the top. But from our post we could not see with what success. They did not appear up the far slope of the valley. The machine gun fire had been too heavy. It was not till the second day, after progress had been made on the right, that we gained the far slope of the valley, and not till the third day that we captured the village of La Boisselle. From our post we could see the whole of the fighting for this village, and also for the village of Ovillers La Boisselle, which fell later.

The strength of the Boche lay in his machine guns. These were situated in great quantities in the village of La Boisselle and could bring an enfilade fire to bear on the valley between the opposing trenches, and could cover the whole of the ground in their vicinity.

Shortly after the capture of La Boisselle, the division was relieved, and we were billeted in the village of Hennencourt, about 2 kilometres from Millencourt. Here we remained for about a fortnight, employing the time preparing for the next effort. This came towards the end of the month. Our front was to be in the neighbourhood of Bayentin Le Petit and Longueval. We had captured Mamety Wood but High Wood (Bois de Foureaux) was still in Boche hands. So was Pouieres.

Bayentin Le Petit and Delville Wood – 13th July 1916

During this attack I was again to be in charge of a visual post. This was sited between Mamety Wood and the Fricourt-Montauban Road – about 100 yards from the latter. We were to be in communication with the three Brigade Headquarters, which were in (1) Mamety Wood, (2) Wood east of Bayentin Le Grand, where there were two Brigade Headquarters. We were seldom in communication with the Divisional forward Signal Station – which was about 500 yards in our rear, on the reverse slope. We were on the forward slope of a slight rise, and could see in front of us the whole of the valley between us and Mamety Wood as far as Bayentin Le Grand.

As before, we were about a fortnight in the post. It was situated in an old German communication trench. There was no shelter when we arrived, but before long we had constructed quite comfortable quarters. There was plenty of material lying about, which had been left behind by the Boche.

We were unable to follow the progress made by the troops, except for messages that came back for transmission; but several exciting incidents occurred. On one occasion, an artillery ammunition wagon drawn by a team of six horses was returning empty down the valley between us and Mamety Wood. It was evidently spotted by the Boche observers. Their artillery got on to it, and shell after shell exploded in its vicinity. The horses were put to a gallop. But the shells followed them up, and it seemed impossible that they should escape. But after a short distance they swerved to the left and disappeared behind some rising ground. For about a minute or so the shells still came down along

their original course. On another occasion one of our aeroplanes, probably owing to engine trouble, had to make a forced landing close to us. Immediately on landing it capsized. It had run into some barbed wire. The pilot was injured but not seriously.