

## 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers – Account of Attack, 17 February 1917

### OPERATIONS AGAINST S. MIRAUMONT TRENCH ON FEBRUARY 17TH 1917 AND THE PART PLAYED BY THE 11TH BATTN. ROYAL FUSILIERS

To appreciate the difficulties of communication and passing of orders and messages from Battalion Headquarters to Coys. previous to the attack, the location of Coys. 12 hours before "ZERO" must be considered.

"A" Coy. who were to form the left assaulting Coy were at WELLINGTON HUTS.

"B" Coy. (4th Coy.) were holding the Battle Front.

"C" Coy. (Right assaulting Coy.) were at MOUQUET FARM.

"D" Coy. (3rd Coy.) in HESSIAN and FABECK trenches.

Intercommunication by telephone was practically impossible owing to the congested state of the lines and communication by Runner to the front Coy. was difficult by daylight. Consequently programmes of Barrage - Maps, Aeroplane Photos and the hundred and one orders which necessarily pour in during the last 24 hours, could not be circulated as quickly as we would have liked, and we could hardly ask Company Commanders if every man knew everything there was to know about the attack. Here one must remark that it would be everything if in future operations the line could be held by another unit, probably a Coy. of the 4th Battalion right up till the time when the assaulting Battalion has taken over the line in its Battle positions. The advantages are, I think, obvious.

- (1) the troops holding the line cannot be really fresh when the hour for the attack comes.
- (2) the difficulties of communication, seeing the Coy Commander and issuing him final instructions, and for the Coy Commander himself his difficulty of getting hold of his Officers and N.C.O's when they are in advanced posts.
- (3) The extra labour imposed on a third Coy. carrying dinners, water, rations, stores etc., to the Coy. in the line.

#### Forming up

The move forward to the forming up positions had to be started very early - the Coy. from WELLINGTON HUTS leaving at 9.45 pm.

Every man had a large hot dinner before starting and carried in his mess tin a bully beef sandwich and a hard boiled egg.

There was very serious congestion at RIPLE DUMP, where the Police control was inadequate and a single line of duck boards insufficient. Consequently there was a block composed of Coy's. moving forward to form up - Coy's. coming back from fatigues, -R.E's - and these of all Brigades of the Division. "C" Coy. narrowly missed being late on account of this.

It must be remembered that the night was pitch dark and the duck boards and trenches were getting greasy and slippery. By 5-30 am all Coy's. were reported formed up and ready, but not before they had sustained heavy casualties, especially in the case of the right assaulting Coy. who had three shells land amongst the platoons killing one Officer and a lot of N.C.O's and men. The enemy had quite

obviously spotted the attack, for from 4-30 am onwards he kept up a steady bombardment of our forming up lines, and it was especially severe along the GULLY and at OXFORD CIRCUS. Considering these things it was wonderful in what good order the men were formed up. A little

before "ZERO HOUR" the enemy's barrages slackened a bit. At "ZERO HOUR" (5-45 am) our barrage opened and the men moved forward - they had been formed up in waves with two sections of the dugout clearing party of the 12th Middlesex Regt., which consisted in all of one Coy. formed up behind each of our waves.

The sniping and machine gun fire must have been very heavy if only from the fact that not one of our Coy. officers got further than the wire of GRANDCOURT TRENCH, and of all those that started at "ZERO HOUR" not one was killed or wounded by shells. Throughout the operations it was remarkable the high percentage of men that were hit through the head, shewing beyond a doubt that these Germans who had to meet us were no mean marksmen.

The wire in front of GRANDCOURT TRENCH was found, on the right especially

to be

to be still fairly strong - the wire cutting operations could not have been as effective as had been thought. The delay in getting through this wire was accountable for a number of casualties, and as already pointed out there were no officers to lead the men beyond this point. Thenceforward Coy's. were commanded by N.C.O's. "A" Coy by a Corporal, "B" Coy by C.S.M. Fitterer of whose conduct one cannot speak too highly - he took command of the assaulting wave of all the Coy's. from GRANDCOURT TRENCH up to the final objective. "C" Coy, was commanded by Sergeant Berry and "D" Coy by Sergeant Hazell both these N.C.O's did valuable work in reorganising their Coys. By the time BOOM RAVINE was reached the Battalion had diminished very considerably and men of all units were mixed together - 53rd and 54th Brigades and 2nd Division. C.S.M. Fitterer made efforts to organise a line consisting of men of these various units to make an advance on the final objective. The line pushed forward sustaining a few casualties from machine gun fire from a N.E. direction. On reaching S. MIRAUMONT TRENCH the wire was found to be so little cut that it was thought inadvisable to attempt to push through to the trench, so a line of shell holes was occupied. This must have been at about 8.am and the barrage was of course right away on the approaches from MIRAUMONT. After this position had been occupied for about half an hour an enemy counter attack from the direction of P.S. central led by an officer was seen to develop and the troops on the right and left began to retire. C.S.M. Fitterer seeing that he and his men were being left in the air deemed it advisable to withdraw his men. The right Division continued to retire and were for taking up a line on the N. bank of BOOM RAVINE and along the W. MIRAUMONT ROAD, but a few were rallied and were brought up to the crest about 300 yards N. of BOOM RAVINE. This was about 9-30.am The Battalion took up a line along the bank in R.10.d. just North of and running parallel to BOOM RAVINE, joining the Suffolks. Here a position was dug and wire was put out. This constituted the main line of defence, for the remainder of the day but posts were pushed forward as far as 350 yards ahead of BOOM RAVINE. The enemy must then have had snipers out in shell holes in front of S. MIRAUMONT TRENCH as in laying out a strong point Lieut Inman R.E. and others of 80th Field Coy were hit from close quarters. Towards the evening the enemy started to shell BOOM RAVINE, up till then he had kept up a steady fire on the GULLEY and the RAVINE and had not shortened his barrage at all.

The reason for the failure to reach the final objective and the lessons to be learnt have been fully dealt with by courts of enquiry and there need therefore be no further remarks added in this account.

An advance on which so many men displayed the greatest gallantry and devotion to duty, it is hard to select particular cases but the following certainly deserve mention in any true account of the fighting C.S.M. Fitterer mentioned frequently in this account is a shining example of a man who takes the lead without question when Officers have become casualties, who reasons coolly and acts promptly whatever the circumstances, and who is looked up to and obeyed promptly by all - he was followed and supported throughout the day by Pte. Winter & Pte Taylor, two gallant Runners. He had command of the leading waves from GRANDCOURT TRENCH up to the final objective.

C.S.M. Hazell and Sgt. Berry who were commanding Coys. shewed the same qualities and rendered C.S.M. Fitterer the greatest assistance. Corporal Franklin, a Lewis Gunner, behaved with the greatest coolness throughout the day; and although his guns were firing hard all day he never failed to keep up an ample supply of ammunition. He handled his guns boldly, choosing positions in a way which shewed great skill. L.Cpl. Morgan, a signaller, when three Runners had been knocked out in the effort to deliver an important message he volunteered and delivered it safely to the Company Commander in spite of the fact that he was blown over by a shell. Later he was invaluable in helping to rally men of the 2nd Division, he cheered them on and got them into positions under heavy Machine Gun and Rifle fire. He was then

twice hit. L.Cpl. Butler, a Lewis Gunner, shewed most conspicuous gallantry. He advanced his guns to a very forward position and accounted for a large percentage of the enemy who were endeavouring to counter attack.