

## **Report by Brig Gen Gordon on the attack of the 70th Brigade (including the 11th Sherwood Foresters)**

The 70th Infantry Brigade consisting of 70th Machine Gun Company, OC Capt Weiss, 70th Light Trench Mortar Battery, OC Lt Gale, 11th Sherwood Foresters, OC Lt Col R F Watson DSO, 8th KOYLI, OC Capt Poyser, 8th York and Lancs, Lt Col B L Maddison, and 9th York and Lancs, OC Lt Col A J B Addison, attacked the German trenches from X.2.c.1.1 to X.2.a.3.2.

The attack commenced at 7.30 a.m. 1st July, was launched in accordance with 70th Brigade Preliminary Operation Order No. 63 14/6/16.

The 8 KOYLI on right and the 8th York and Lancs on the left moved out from our parapet at 7.27 a.m. and by 7.30 a.m. were crossing the German first line.

They had few casualties except on the extreme left during the first dash across and the hostile artillery barrage was not intense. The German wire was completely cut and offered no obstacle at the first trench, only small portions of wire remained in front of the second trench and no report has been received about that in front of the third line.

It is certain that the two battalions reached the 2nd German line and a good many men also entered the 3rd German line towards the centre of our attack. Between the 3rd and 4th German trenches the attack however appears to have ceased.

Many reports speak of our men advancing from the third line German trench but the course of the action from this point is quite uncertain. The attack had succeeded well in the centre but on the left the casualties had been very heavy from machine gun fire and the extreme left was unable to get further than the German front line. On the right flank the attack had been a success, the 8th KOYLI had got into the 2nd German trench and were working towards the third German trench, the bombers of the KOYLI being intermingled with those of the Lincolns; some R Irish Rifles were also seen in the German front line at a later hour, Sometime about 8.30 a.m. an order appears to have been given to retire from the right.

The Lincolns together with some 20 or 30 men of the KOYLI fell back to our parapet. Some bombers of the Lincolns however remained in the German trenches working up the communication trenches and entering the second line. The men of the KOYLI who had fallen back were collected by a Staff Officer and returned to the 1st German trench with the 9th York and Lancs who were coming on in support of the two leading battalions. By this time the enemy had recovered from their first confusion and had put on an intense barrage behind our front lines, Bamberbridge Street, in particular being very heavily barraged; one company of the 9th York and Lancs losing 50% of its effectives before leaving its assembly positions. An hour after the start the attack had assumed an arc like formation, the centre had pressed on and was occupying the 2nd German trench where they could be seen fighting. No movement could be seen in 3rd German trench and those of our troops who gained this trench were either prisoners, killed or wounded.

The extreme left flank of the 9th York and Lancs, the supporting battalion, had never

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been able to reach the German front line but the men of the 8th York and Lancs on the left flank had pressed on and were fighting on the first and second lines. The 9th York and Lancs hampered by the enemy's intense artillery barrage on our support trenches and by the dead lying in the trenches and streams of wounded who were now returning left our trenches at 8.40 a.m.

The battalion was able to make way in the centre and reach the second German line. The company on the extreme left was however unable to leave our trenches X.12 and Sap No 4 being swept by numerous machine guns from the direction of Thiepval and the north of the valley.

The right of the 9th York and Lancs was able, together with the KOYLI which it had absorbed in moving forward, to make the first German trench; some Lincolns accompanied this attack which was stopped at this point. The 9th York and Lancs lost a great many men moving up from the assembly positions to our front line and also suffered very severe casualties from MG fire both from its left and right flanks crossing No Man's Land, 1½ hours after the commencement of the assault, the position was as follows:

The centre of the 70th Brigade had crossed the 1st and 2nd German lines and were in the 3rd line; both flanks were thrown back and had not been able to make headway further than the 1st German trench. Both of these flanks were completely exposed. Machine gun fire from Ovillers and also from Thiepval were bringing a cross fire to bear upon No Man's Land. The enemy's artillery barrage was intense upon our support line.

Our artillery barrage had now lifted to the Divisional objective and the heavy artillery barrage had been lifted for over an hour from the valley. The German infantry and machine gunners who were now unmolested on the flanks were able to remain in their positions and take deliberate measures for defence. The 11th Sherwood Foresters were moving up very quickly to our front line following closely in support of the 9th York and Lancs and at 8.56 a.m. Col Watson reported that his first wave was across No Man's Land and had entered and passed over the German front trench. His second line with Headquarters was about to cross our parapet; he had received no news from the front. Meanwhile news had been received from the 25th Brigade that they were back in their own trenches and orders were given to OC 11th Sherwood Foresters to consolidate the 1st German trench and hold on to this. The Sherwood Foresters suffered severely crossing No Man's Land being enfiladed on both flanks by MG and much hostile shrapnel fore which was now barraging our front line whenever troops attempted to advance.

It was impossible to stand at all in No Man's Land and the battalion crawled forward on hands and knees to the help of the battalions in front. It is doubtful if any of the 2nd wave ever got further than just outside the German front trench. From this moment communication with our troops in front was cut off and the further course of the action was seen by observers in our O.P.s and front line.

At 10.16 a.m. a Staff Officer, after a personal tour, reported our trenches to be completely clear of men and the whole of the Brigade to be over our front line parapet, except for 100 men of the 9th Yorks and Lancs on the extreme left where it had become impossible owing to deliberate hostile machine gun fire to expose oneself at all.

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Heavy fighting was proceeding in 1st and 2nd German lines for certain and possibly in 3rd German trench. It had become quite impossible by now however to cross No Man's Land anywhere on the Brigade front as it was covered by cross fire from machine guns from both right and left flanks, and numerous machine guns were firing directly down it from R.31.d.

News came from the 97th Brigade on our left that they were held up by rifle and machine gun fire on their right from R.31.d. This point was in rear of our position and many machine guns from the same point were also reported to be enfilading our men in front German trench and firing straight down No Man's Land from left to right.

Telephone lines which had been laid across No Man's Land had been cut and attempts at visual signalling were unsuccessful. It was apparent that unless the high ground around Thiepval and R.31.d. was heavily barraged and the MGs on the high ground about Ovillers barraged or captured that no communication could be effected across No Man's Land until dark. At 10.45 a.m. the Artillery Liaison officer was asked to out on heavy barrage on the valley about R.32.c. central and 97th Infantry Brigade to out their heavy barrage on R.31.d., etc. At noon this barrage did not appear to have been brought back and no information was obtained as to when it did eventually materialise.

The 8th Division artillery barrage was now also brought back to the Brown line, i.e. just beyond the 4th German trench and eventually brought back on to the Green. Later in the afternoon when movement was seen to have ceased in the 2nd German line it was brought back to the Pink line but never brought back beyond this point which was the third German trench.

Between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. news was received that GOCs 25th and 23rd Infantry Brigades had asked for barrage to be brought back to 2nd German trench. At 11.48 a.m. the following telegram was sent to the 8th Division:

"Have not had any direct news of 8th York and Lancs from the beginning. I think they got on well and probably had heavy losses. 8th KOYLI are probably in front German trench and 9th York and Lancs – less about 100 men – are somewhere in front of our line. Sherwoods suffered heavy losses and remainder are either in front line German trench or just our side of it. The 100 men 9th York and Lancs referred to cannot advance as movement across No Man's Land now is practically impossible until machine guns on left are put out. I think to do any good a fresh attack will have to be made with fresh barrage. I do not think this can be done with this Brigade which has had considerable losses. Until the enemy MGs are put out I cannot communicate with front German line nor can I withdraw men from there. The attack was stopped on account of the left flank which was active from the beginning with machine guns."

At 2 p.m. a last effort was made to communicate with the Brigade across No Man's Land.

News was received that the 25th and 23rd Brigades together with the 56th Brigade (19th Division) were going to attack on our right. The 100 men 9th York and Lancs who had been prevented from leaving the NAB on our extreme left were moved up to the right and ordered to accompany the 25th Brigade across No Man's Land. These

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men were detailed to take messages to our battalions in the German trenches informing them of the situation and of the fresh attack and order them to consolidate 1st German trench. The GOC, 25th Brigade, was also asked to open communication with our battalions when he reached the German lines. This attack did not materialise and the 100 men 9th York and Lancs were soon reduced by 50%.

There being no troops left of the Brigade to send to the assistance of our battalions across No Man's Land and it being impossible to communicate with them the remnants of our carrying parties some 30 strong, together with 50 men of the 9th York and Lancs still left were ordered to assist in clearing our trenches and evacuating the wounded. This was continued throughout the day very gallantly and under the greatest difficulties. The closing scenes of the battle which had continued in the German lines can be deduced from the following telegram which was sent to Divisional Headquarters at 3.20 p.m.

"Artillery Observer's report begins: Movement in enemy front line has practically ceased. There is no sign of any British occupation nor have any of the KOYLI returned to our front line. Rifle fire is being directed at one of our aeroplanes from German lines. Wounded men crawling in from between the lines have been repeatedly sniped. Infantry Observer's report confirms above. Under circumstances I am not digging a communication trench. We held German line from 8 a.m. but were gradually bombed out from the south."

There is no possible doubt that during our occupation of the hostile trenches very heavy loss was inflicted on the enemy whose front line trenches were crowded. Up to 2.30 p.m. various observers report seeing bomb fighting going on in the front German line. Parties of our men were seen standing on the parapet and throwing bombs, doubtless these had been driven back fighting from 2nd and 3rd trenches. They were eventually overpowered by the enemy who got at them from both flanks with were open.

Our artillery had killed men at the entrance to their dugouts when they had attempted to leave them. The German front line was filled with German dead intermingled with our own.

In the second line the dead were almost exclusively German and an NCO who entered an officer's dugout with beds in it found both occupants dead, killed by bombs which had been thrown down the steps.

A large party of the enemy charged in close formation from their 2nd to their 1st line and were engaged by one of our Lewis gun which inflicted heavy casualties. On our extreme left a party of about 20 to 30 Germans were seen standing on their parapet with the apparent intention of counter attacking or bombing some of our men. These were wiped out by two Vickers guns from a position in front of the Nab. No authoritative reports can be obtained about the third German trench. The communication trenches were however filled with dead, killed by our artillery when they were reinforcing or killed by our bombers.

The battle in the trenches seems to have been fought exclusively with bombs and bayonets and the Germans who were very large and powerful men fought with desperation and to a finish.

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When the barrage was put into R.31.d. again an observer speaks of seeing one or two machine guns were firing across our lines blown into the air.

Six hostile machine guns are said to have been destroyed but until the trenches are captured or prisoners taken on this front any report such as this can only be accepted with reserve. Great care has been taken however to eliminate any exaggeration and all statements that are given here are corroborated not by a single witness but by many independent witnesses.

At dusk the defence of the line was taken over by D Company, 5th South Wales Borderers under Maj Lochyner. This company in conjunction with 100 volunteers from 2nd Field Company, RE., rendered invaluable assistance in bringing in the wounded from No Man's Land during the night.

At 5.40 a.m. the line was taken over by 12th R Fusiliers, 56th Brigade, and the 70th Brigade was withdrawn to Long Valley.

I cannot speak too highly of the gallantry and determination shown by the Regimental officers and men. All of them were inspired with the one idea to get forward and attack the enemy. Their conduct was beyond all praise. Though severe losses were suffered both in our own trenches and in crossing over NO Man's Land the ranks remained firm and no hesitation or wavering could be seen. The enemy's artillery could not stop them but with nothing on their right and less on their left except hostile machine guns when supports from behind were exhausted and from in front and flanks fresh enemy reinforcements were engaging them they fought for over 6 hours in the positions they had won till they died.

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### **11th Sherwood Foresters**

#### **Officer casualties**

##### Died of wounds:

2nd Lt S C Carter

##### Missing

2nd Lt W A Davis

2nd Lt S Longhurst

Lt E Russell

2nd Lt C V Tomlinson

Capt H S Harris

##### Wounded:

Lt Col H F Watson DSO

Maj G H W Bernal DSO

Capt G B Fyldes

Capt L R Halford

Capt H C Watts

Lt J C Harrison

2nd Lt E H Brittain

2nd Lt J R Byers

2nd Lt R W Clark

2nd Lt L G Humphrys

2nd Lt G C M Jackson

2nd Lt W E R Short

2nd Lt H C de M Manisty

Capt P H MacDonald RAMC

#### Other ranks

Killed 28

Wounded 182

Missing 278