



**The Battle
of
Le Transloy Ridges
2nd Lancashire Fusiliers
1st october to 18th October 1916**

THE BATTLE OF TRANSLOY RIDGES

1ST TO 18TH OCTOBER, 1916

"LE TRANSLOY"

2nd Battalion

Farther to the east, steady pressure had forced the Germans slowly back and a salient had been formed which threatened their last completed line of resistance. The British losses had, however, been heavy, the troops were exhausted, and rain had begun to make the shell-ploughed land impossible for further operations. Near the point of the salient, between Lesboeufs and Le Transloy, there was a dent in the British line ; and before winter set in it was desired to straighten out the position and to obtain possession of the ridges near Le Transloy, which would give the British observation over the enemy positions. One of the Regular Battalions, the 2nd, under the command of Major R. R. Willis, V.C., was given a role in this scene of the closing act of the drama. 2ND BN.

After its disastrous experiences on 1st July, it had rested for three weeks in the back area and then gone north by rail for training near Poperinghe. On 25th July it had suffered a great loss in the departure of Lieutenant-Colonel G. H. B. Freeth, C.M.G., D.S.O., on his well-deserved promotion to command the 167th (London) Infantry Brigade in the 56th (1st London) Division. From 4th August to 17th September it carried out routine tours of duty in the line near Ypres, going thence by train to the rear of the Somme area once more.

On 8th October it marched from Corbie to Citadel Camp, Fricourt, mainly by tracks across country which were none too good by now. On 9th October, by still worse and more exhausting tracks, it moved to Trones Wood. That night it relieved the Queen's Westminster Rifles in the brigade commanded by Brigadier-General Freeth, who met and chatted with some of the officers. The trenches taken over lay half-way between Gueudecourt and Lesboeufs ; but as they represented the limit of the recent attacks, they were naturally as yet incomplete and the exact position of friend and foe was uncertain. A difficult relief was made still more complicated and exhausting by brigade headquarters specifying which companies of the 2nd Battalion were to hold the various sectors ; as this allotment differed from that laid down by Major Willis, who had assumed that such a domestic matter would have been left to his discretion in the usual

way, many hours were spent in marching and counter-marching in accordance with the various orders and counter-orders and in trying to wed guides to companies and companies to tasks. As the Germans knew from the experience of two years how useful were the sunken roads near Lesboeufs for the movement of troops, they added to the confusion by shelling them heavily. It was thus a weary unit which

... was thus a weary unit which faced the heavy shelling of 10th and 11th October.

On the 11th the second-in-command, Major A. J. W. Blencowe, assembled the four company commanders, Captain W. D. P. Mansell, Captain W. P. Salt, Lieutenants V. F. S. Hawkins, M.C., and M. Robinson, and explained to them the outline plan of the forthcoming operations and the dispositions of the line as then held, from which it appeared that, between the battalion and the 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regiment on the right, a stretch of trench was held by the enemy. The party returned to battalion headquarters and waited for Major Willis, who arrived at 3 p.m., having raced a 5.9-inch shell for the last few feet. He gave them his orders. The battalion, in conjunction with French and with other British troops, was to attack next day, 12th October, its objective being part of a ridge which lay about 1,500 yards in front of the existing line and half-way between it and Le Transloy. The attack was to be in eight waves, of which the first four were to take the objective, push patrols forward and dig in, while the remainder were to follow them and dig a support trench two hundred yards in rear of the objective. Four machine guns and four trench mortars were allotted to the battalion. "A" and "C" Companies had been pushing saps forward from their line; these would be joined up during the night and, with a forward piece of trench already held, would form the battalion's assembly position, in which it was to be ready at 5.15 a.m. There would be a bombardment from 6 a.m. till zero (which was fixed for 2.25 p.m., but not known to company commanders until 12 noon), allowing twenty minutes for the Duke of Wellington's on the right to clear the intervening pocket of the enemy. Major Willis left it to the discretion of the company commanders whether they left their trenches at zero and lay in shell holes in front of them till the time came for them to advance or whether they stayed in their trenches and carried out the whole attack from there, their decision to be based on the intensity and position of the British and German barrages and machine-gun fire.

There was some confusion in getting the companies into position, but by 6 a.m. the battalion had occupied its assembly trenches. At 12.30 p.m. twelve Germans came over and surrendered; shortly before 2 p.m. about twenty Germans ran over with their hands up, apparently very demoralized—ten reached their goal, the rest were killed; a few minutes later another small party was seen to leave their trenches and then to run back into them. These incidents gave the impression that the morale of the enemy about to be attacked was not high, but they must have had full warning of the attack, as two German aeroplanes flew low over the battalion's

assembly trenches at 2.3 p.m. and must have seen that they were crowded with troops.

At zero the two right companies, "A" (Lieutenant M. Robinson) and "B" (Lieutenant V. F. S. Hawkins) decided to leave their trenches and to lie in shell holes; they did so with few casualties. "C" (Second-Lieutenant J. W. Watkins) and "D" (Captain W. D. P. Mansell) Companies stayed in their trenches till 2.25 p.m., by which time the enemy machine guns were firing furiously; they were caught in this fire the moment they advanced. Hawkins noticed as soon as he advanced that there was a small isolated trench between the lines, manned by about twenty Germans with two machine guns, which had escaped the barrage. This party inflicted very heavy casualties and held up the advance as it could pour enfilade fire along the right companies and cause considerable damage to the left. Small isolated parties of "B" and "C" Companies in the centre, including one very gallantly led by Second-Lieutenant W. C. Bolton, managed to get past this trench and pushed about two hundred yards farther on and dug in at about 3 p.m. Unfortunately, they were later cut off and either all killed or captured. The situation at this time was graphically described by Hawkins:—

" 2.50 p.m. Fifty per cent. of company already down. Whole Brigade appears to be held up. L./Cpl. Fenton, one of my Lewis gunners, has got his gun going in a shell hole on my left. Awful din, can hardly hear it. Yelled at Sjt. Manin to take the first wave on. He's lying just behind me. Hodgkinson says he's dead. Sjt. Mann on my right, of 7 Platoon, also dead. Most of the men appear to be dead. Shout at the rest and get up to take them on. Find myself sitting on the ground facing our own line with a great hole in my thigh. . . . Hodgkinson also hit in the wrist. Awful din still. Most of the Company now out. . . . I put my tie round my leg as a tourniquet. Fortescue about five yards on my right still alive. . . . Yell at him to come over to me. Show him my leg and tell him to carry on. He gets into a shell hole to listen while I tell him what to do. Shot through the heart while I'm talking to him. Addison also wounded and crawling back to our lines. That's all the officers and most of the N.C.Os. Can't see anything of Serjeant Bolton and 8 Platoon. . . ."

Company Serjeant-Major Laverick took command of Hawkins's company, but could only collect about twelve men.

Elsewhere Watkins with about fifteen men were doing their best to hold on to what they had. Second-Lieutenant S. W. Howarth reported at 5.25 p.m. that he was in a shell hole a hundred yards in front of the starting-line with four men, a Lewis gun and two rifles. At about the same time, Serjeant W. Russell reported that he had about forty men, but no N.C.Os., of "D" Company eighty yards in front of this line; at 6 p.m. he reported that the Germans seemed to have been reinforced and that he had only eleven men left.

At 7.30 p.m. the brigade commander ordered a combined raid to be made that night to expel the enemy from the small trench

which had held up the advance and to clear up the situation. Major Willis pointed out at 8.50 p.m. that he now had only two officers

and eighty men left, and that these were unlikely to produce the desired result. The project was abandoned, and steps were taken to collect the survivors and to consolidate such progress as had been possible. Eventually about 130 men were brought together, the losses having been 4 officers and 62 other ranks killed, 6 officers and 162 other ranks wounded, and 1 officer and 100 other ranks missing.

Amongst the many acts of gallantry performed that day, mention must be made of Private J. Benson who, with two other men, carried his machine gun into a shell hole in No Man's Land, where he fired continuously and inflicted severe casualties on the enemy. Further, he shot seven Germans with his rifle. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

The next day was spent in the line under heavy shell fire. Patrols were sent out at night to verify persistent rumours that the small enemy trench was unoccupied, but they found it still held. At 3 a.m. on 14th October the battalion was relieved and moved to reserve trenches at Bernafay Wood.

LE TRANSLOY AGAIN

2nd Battalion

BN. Yet a third time the 2nd Battalion was to endure destruction in the Somme battle.

Its losses on 12th October were partly made good by the arrival on 17th October of a draft of 176 non-commissioned officers and men from the 5th and 6th (Territorial) Reserve Battalions of the Regiment. On the 19th Major C. J. Burke, D.S.O., Royal Irish Regiment, took over command of the battalion, which moved forward that day to reserve trenches known as "John Bull" and "Cow," south-east of Flers. For three days it was employed in digging trenches. On 22nd October it moved to Thistle Trench, close to Lesboeufs, its assembly trenches for the big attack on 23rd October.

The battalion, with the 2nd Essex Regiment on its right and the 1st King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment on its left, was to attack and take part of Dewdrop Trench to the south-east of the sunken road which joined Lesboeufs to Le Transloy. Included in this objective were several subsidiary trenches, one of which was called Rainy Trench. Dewdrop Trench lay about four hundred and fifty yards from the British front line. When it had been captured, the other units were to go forward to another objective, while the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers took over and consolidated the whole of

Dewdrop.

The strength of the battalion available for the attack was no more than 5 officers and 250 other ranks, with 48 more in battalion reserve. "A" Company was commanded by Second-Lieutenant T. E. Parry, "B" by Second-Lieutenant R. N. Higson, "C" by Second-Lieutenant F. G. S. Watson—all three of whom were killed that day—and "D" by Second-Lieutenant J. W. Watkins, who had

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been transferred to it on Captain W. D. P. Mansell being killed on 12th October.

The attack was to take place in four waves. Lieutenant-Colonel Burke felt that its real difficulty would arise after the 2nd Essex had passed on from Dewdrop Trench and his line had to be extended and that position consolidated. He therefore left Captain W. P. Salt in the assembly trench with twenty-five non-commissioned officers and men of the reserve, with the role of directing them on any portion of Dewdrop Trench which might not have been cleared of the enemy and of generally helping in its consolidation and the reorganization of the troops in it.

The attack had been timed for 11.30 a.m., but at that hour a thick fog lay over the ground. In March, 1918, the Germans carried out their most successful attacks in fog and mist. But on 23rd October, 1916, the attack was postponed till the weather was clear, and at 2.30 p.m. the battalion went over with a loud cheer, and had to "double" in order to catch up the creeping barrage, which appeared to begin a minute too soon. The German "S.O.S." went up practically at zero. Enemy machine guns opened fire immediately on the assaulting troops; their artillery began a few moments later to search the roads behind the British lines so as to prevent the arrival of reinforcements.

Before many yards had been covered, men began to fall fast from the machine-gun fire. A few, however, under Second-Lieutenant J. W. Watkins, with a Lewis-gun team, managed to get within eighty or a hundred yards of Rainy Trench, but were there held up. At 3.30 p.m. he reported to Salt where he was, and added that the attack appeared to have failed and that the troops on his right had fallen back. This message, the first news of the attack to arrive, reached the battalion headquarters at 5.10 p.m. Shortly after 5.30 p.m. the situation appeared to be that Watkins and fifteen men had dug themselves into a new trench in front of Rainy Trench, that Salt had thirty men (including all the unwounded men he could find) in the front line, and that the rest of the battalion reserve close by had dwindled to some twenty men as a result of losses. In short

there were 2 officers and 65 men left to the battalion in formed bodies out of the 6 officers and 298 men in the line at 2.30 p.m. All were tired ; some were exhausted.

At about the same time, Lieutenant-Colonel Burke received information that the 2nd Essex Regiment had two companies digging in on its final objective, and that another was about to attack Dewdrop Trench from the east. He also received a message from 12th Brigade urging the supreme need of capturing Dewdrop. At 5.50 p.m. therefore he ordered that every available man should be used to attack and clear Rainy Trench and then to push on to Dewdrop. No sooner had he done so than he discovered that the information about the Essex was not true ; and he received orders to clear up the situation and to re-form his line in conjunction with the Essex and the King's Own in readiness for an attack on Dewdrop.

in which the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders of the 10th Infantry Brigade were to help. At 6.15 p.m. he cancelled the attack orders which he had issued at 5.50 p.m., and went forward to see for himself how things stood. He found what he described as "a good deal of debris of units." In the front line he came upon Salt, who had collected nearly all the unwounded men and had extended them to link up with the troops on the right and left. Thanks to the leadership of Salt and Watkins, these survivors were in good spirits.

The situation as regards Rainy and Dewdrop Trenches was still obscure, and at 7.45 p.m. Watkins took out fifteen men to find out whether there were any British troops in them. After vigorous efforts to get information he came back with a definite report that they were both held by the enemy. During the night the trench dug by Watkins's party during the afternoon was extended to join that of the King's Own, with the effect that three hundred yards of trench were held by eighty men and five Lewis guns. Lieutenant-Colonel Burke ordered the digging of a communication trench from the original line to this new trench.

The net result of the day's operations was an advance of a hundred and fifty yards at the cost of 3 officers and 205 other ranks killed, wounded and missing. The total casualties between the 10th October and 25th October—when the battalion was relieved and marched to the brickworks at Montauban—had been 16 officers and 542 other ranks. The only officers left on the 24th were Lieutenant-Colonel C. J. Burke, D.S.O., Major A. J. W. Blencowe, M.C., Lieutenant G. C. Martin, M.C. (the adjutant), Major W. Bowes (the quartermaster), Second-Lieutenant J. W. Watkins, and Captain W. P. Salt, who, however, was killed by a shell on the afternoon of that day together with a captain of the 1st Middlesex Regiment which was relieving the battalion. The actual number brought out of the line by Watkins, whose splendid work was a foretaste of his achievements as commanding officer of this battalion, was forty-six all ranks.