

CHAPTER 10 FROM LOOS TO THE SOMME

The lull on the fronts held by the British Armies in France, which had followed the Loos offensive, continued all through the first half of 1916, unbroken by any major operations. This does not mean that there was not much hard fighting, lengthy casualty lists, much activity on the part of Tunnelling Companies, constant local bombardments, that trenches were not lost and won at many points, that raids did not increase in frequency and in scale, that the troops holding the line did not have much to endure and ample opportunities for putting to the proof their discipline, their courage and their skill. But as far as the British Armies were concerned the one serious change was the extension of their line in February 1916. Hitherto in the section of the Allied line from Loos Southward past Arras French troops had interposed between the right of the British First Army and the left flank of the Third. To afford some relief to the French, then very hard pressed at Verdun, this section was taken over, but otherwise nothing of major importance happened. At the same time the local activities of the British, still considerably hampered by the not yet too plentiful supply of ammunition, kept the Germans opposite on the alert and constituted a constant drain on their resources, while as yet the strength of the British Armies in the field was steadily increasing.

October 1915 –
June 1916

January – June
1916

In this long period of strategical inaction the work that fell to the four battalions of The Queen's Own already in France varied greatly. At the beginning of 1916 the sector in which the 1st and 7th were stationed was still conspicuously "quiet," the 6th, who had gone into the line North of Givenchy in the middle of

153

December was in a more "lively" quarter, while the 8th found the Ypres Salient, of which they had now had a couple of months' experience, decidedly unrestful. Of the four only the 6th was to see really severe fighting in the first half of 1916, but what it came in for was some of the most desperate of the crater-fighting of the whole winter in which it earned no small credit.

Jan – Feb 1916
1st Battalion

The 1st Battalion had found trenches in chalk country much less comfortable in wet weather than they had been in summer. Conditions went from bad to worse; communication trenches became impassable owing to the depth of sticky mud in which men became embedded and unable to move; water would not drain away, parapets dissolved into adhesive mud. At the New Year there was an important change in the composition of the Fifth Division, four of its original battalions with the 14th Brigade Headquarters were transferred to the Thirty-Second in exchange for the 95th Brigade, (1) two battalions of which, the 14th and 15th R. Warwicks, replaced in the 13th Brigade the K.O.Y.L.I. and Duke's, with whom the R.W.K. had so long co-operated. However, to the battalion's satisfaction it was not parted from the K.O.S.B.'s, with whom it had been so particularly closely associated; indeed, to the end of the war these two battalions continued to serve side by side, and their long and cordial association was fitly commemorated when, after the Armistice the officers of the 1st R.W.K. and of the 2nd K.O.S.B.'s made each other honorary members of each other's messes. Shortly after the New Year the Division was relieved by the Thirtieth Division and withdrew for a month's welcome rest. When the battalion returned to the trenches it was not to the familiar Carnoy sector but to quite new country. The Fifth Division was among those selected to take over the new front, and on February 25th it started on a memorable march to Arras

in the teeth of a raging blizzard from the N.E., over roads congested with traffic and horribly slippery with ice and snow. "The Moscow march" it was called in the Division, but the battalion stood it well, though it was a specially trying time for the regimental transport, which found the frozen roads almost impassable.

By March 4th the relief of the French had been completed and the Fifth Division was holding a sector running Northward from the Scarpe near St. Laurent Blangy to the famous "Labyrinth," just E. of the road from Arras to Lens, the dividing line between the sub-sectors being the road from Arras to Bailleul. (1) This sector, the scene of desperate fighting in the past, had by this time become fairly "quiet," though the enemy had evidently been having things his own way for some time, for his working parties were exposing themselves in a way which argued that they expected an immunity the battalion did not allow them to enjoy. (2) ^{However}, though there were occasional heavy bombardments and some mining activity, the four months which the Division spent in this sector were on the whole quiet enough, and the total casualties for the period were little over 60. The most noteworthy incident occurred one unlucky early morning in April when Captain Gross and Lieut. Dobie were caught by a sudden burst of rifle-fire while out in front of the line inspecting the work which had been done during the night by a wiring party. Lieut. Dobie was killed on the spot, Captain Gross very badly wounded. Upon this C.S.M. Crossley, Sergt. Hammond and L/Cpl. Liddamore immediately went to their Captain's assistance, despite the heavy fire which the enemy kept up, and managed to bring him in, but the C.S.M., a valuable N.C.O., who had distinguished himself at Neuve Chapelle, was killed and Captain

March – June
1916
1st Battalion

(1) This was not the Bailleul in the Lys Valley but that S.W. of Douai, less familiar to the British Troops.

(2) The original front line had been evacuated by the French for fear of mining, but the battalion did not find the enemy particularly enterprising.

Gross died of his wounds; the other two men received the D.C.M. for their gallantry. On June 4th again, when the battalion was to relieve the 14th R. Warwicks, the enemy opened a violent bombardment, blew up some mines and attacked. Only about 30 of the battalion were in the trenches, a party on mining fatigue; these luckily escaped without casualties and did great work in helping to beat off what General Stephens, who had succeeded General Kavanagh in command of the Division, described as no mere raid but an evident attempt to secure the high ground in that particular sector. Apart from these episodes the time was uneventful. Officers came and went: in March Captain Waring joined and took over the Adjutant's duties.(1) In April Captain Newton left to become Brigade Major to the 65th Brigade. (2) Drafts appeared fairly frequently and, with good weather and a low sick-rate, the battalion was well over strength when it finally quitted the sector in June and moved South.

June 1916
1st Battalion

The 6th Battalion, as already mentioned, had moved to the Givenchy district in December, taking over trenches in the area won back from the Germans in the Festubert fighting of May 16th-25th, 1915. It was a wet quarter, the front line had generally to be held by garrisoning "islands" in the less wet parts, and though both artillery and trench mortars were fairly active and the Germans engaged in more than one outburst of

December 1915
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June 1916
6th Battalion

violent bombarding the state of the ground rather imposed an unaggressive attitude on both sides. During December and January the battalion had only about 40 casualties in action, though losses through invaliding were higher; however, a big draft which joined on December 24th brought it up to over 900 of all ranks by the end of the year. The first three weeks of February saw the battalion back in Corps Reserve at

(1) He relinquished these in June to become second-in-Command, being replaced as Acting-Adjutant by Lieut. Healey.

(2) He was killed in October, 1916, when holding this post.

156

Gonnehem, during which period the machine-gun detachment was transferred to the Machine-Gun Corps on the formation of the Brigade Machine-Gun Company, Lewis gun sections in each company now taking the place of the Vickers guns. At this time, too, the battalion lost the last of its original company commanders, Captain R. P. P. Rowe, who was invalided home. When the battalion returned to the line after its rest it was to trenches just opposite the Hohenzollern. This sector had been greatly changed since its capture in September by the Ninth Division. Most of the original Redoubt had disappeared, mine craters pitted the ground everywhere; the British held a line not very far in advance of the original West Face of the Redoubt, the German front corresponding roughly to the trench known as the Chord.

The battalion's first two turns in these trenches passed quietly enough, but on March 2nd while the 6th was out of the line, the 36th Brigade attacked the Chord and took most of it. Counter-attacks followed, and confused but heavy fighting, in the course of which a big crater on the right, known as Triangle Crater, was lost, though elsewhere the Germans were beaten off. Then the 37th Brigade took over from the exhausted 36th, and on March 6th the Buffs essayed the recapture of Triangle Crater, the battalion assisting them with large carrying-parties. Later on, when the Buffs, whose attack had been held up, were being hard pressed to beat off some determined counter-attacks A Company was sent up to reinforce. These detachments, however, escaped with light casualties, less than a dozen all told, and then on the 7th the battalion received orders to relieve the Buffs. By 4.30 p.m. the relief was complete, C Company, under Captain Dawson, was holding the craters, A was in support in Northampton Trench, D and B were further to the right holding Kaiserin Trench as their front line, with their supports in Vigo Street behind. The line was in an appalling state, the trenches were much damaged

Feb – March
1916
6th Battalion

see sketch 14

March 6th

157

and had collapsed in places, the ground was impossibly sticky and slippery and the weather was bitterly cold with wind and snow from the N.E. To have to fight under such conditions and to fight hard was a great tax on the spirit and condition of the battalion. But fighting they had in plenty and of a desperate character.

The enemy was active and aggressive, making repeated bombing attacks on the craters, especially on Nos. I. and II., just short of Triangle Crater. But, despite bombs, rifle-grenades and trench mortars, C stuck to its posts and beat off every attack. Captain Dawson set a splendid example of courage, resourcefulness and skill, and was the heart and soul of the defence. Though severely wounded he insisted on rejoining his men directly his wound had been dressed, and continued to direct the defence, although wounded a second time, till the German attacks died down somewhere about 3a.m. (1) At

March 7th 1916
6th Battalion

March 8th

10a.m. Captain Matthews brought up D Company to relieve C and to undergo a similar experience. After a fairly quiet day the enemy started attacking again about 6 p.m., coming out of Triangle Crater and directing their attack upon I. and II. But they never effected an entrance, though for over an hour their bombers maintained the attempt, well supported by trench mortars, machine-guns and artillery. However, the British gunners were on the alert, and the support they gave to the men in the trenches was most effective. Soon after 7 the enemy relaxed his efforts, only to renew them half-an-hour later with redoubled vigour but no better success. The day's casualties were over 80 all told, but fortunately the proportion of killed was exceptionally low.

The small hours of the 9th saw a brief renewal of activity, a German attack being successfully nipped in

March 9th

(1) It was for this action that Captain Dawson received the D.S.O., the first of his many distinctions, while Corpl. Everist earned a D.C.M. by creeping forward under heavy fire to ascertain the direction of the attack and so direct the efforts of our bombers.

158

the bud. This was followed by intermittent rifle grenade and trench mortar fire till dawn. It was now the turn of Captain Williams and B Company to take over the craters. The relief was accomplished under great difficulties: it was colder than ever, the frozen snow made the communication-trenches almost impassable, and after all this fighting the trenches were in an appalling condition, "a mixture of Boche, mud, refuse, dislodged German sand-bags and equipment and unexploded instruments of devilry" was one account of them. B came in for one vigorous attack about 8.30 p.m., Crater A being assaulted while bombers engaged the garrisons of Nos. I. and II. But this effort was no more successful than its predecessors and was soon repulsed. Trench mortars continued active all night, but the Germans for the time being had shot their bolt, and next morning the battalion was relieved by the Buffs. Its total casualties since taking over the craters had been over 150; 24 men were killed, 3 officers (1) and 132 men wounded, but nevertheless the men came out justifiably elated despite their exhaustion. They had taken a heavy toll of the Germans, had held their own in a kind of warfare in which the German equipment was at the time superior, and had maintained intact the none too defensible position handed over to them.

March 1916
6th Battalion

Three days in support followed and then another three in the front line, one company in the craters as before, one in Northampton Trench, two in Kaiserin. This was another period of activity, but of a less pronounced character, the main need being to clear and improve some most dilapidated trenches. The enemy started a bombing attack early on the 14th, but a prompt barrage quenched their activities and one rather feeble effort to rush No. I. Crater was effectively dealt with by Lewis guns, while our snipers were busy and successful, and on one occasion German working parties were detected and promptly dispersed by rapid fire.

March 10th

March
10th – 15th

(1) Captain Dawson, 2nd.Lieuts. Coombs and Wood.

159

This tour cost the battalion Lieut. Barker (died of wounds) and 7 men killed, with 2nd Lieut. Ashton and 53 other ranks wounded.

For the next few days the battalion remained in support to the 6th Buffs, having one company up with them each day. On the evening of the 18th the Germans suddenly

March – April
1916
6th Battalion

March 18th

opened a tremendous bombardment, after which they rushed the craters and managed to secure the front lips of several of them, though the Buffs held on stoutly to the rear lips. Nearly the whole battalion was sent up to support the Buffs; it did good service in helping to recover much of the ground but was lucky in escaping with under 20 casualties, and next morning it went back to Annequin for a week's much-needed rest. It was much below strength now, under 600 for the first time since it had landed.

March 19th

On returning to the trenches on March 27th it took over a quieter section of the line, opposite the Quarries, and had little trouble from the enemy though much from the melting snow which flooded the line. Till the end of April it continued in this section or in the Hohenzollern, being then withdrawn to Allouagne for training. April was a fairly active month, but the enemy had replaced their troops in this quarter by a new division, who were reported "jumpy and less aggressive than their predecessors," and there was nothing like the heavy fighting or the long casualty lists of March, 5 men only were killed and 28 wounded, and as several drafts arrived the battalion was over 700 strong when it reached Allouagne, and during the two months it remained out of the line it rose almost up to full strength, even after deducting the numerous "employed" officers and men detached on one account and another. In June Captain Dawson rejoined on recovering from his wounds, while Captain Wingfield-Stratford vacated the Adjutancy on appointment to the Staff of the Twelfth Division, being succeeded by Captain Alderman. Towards the end of June the

April – June
1916
6th Battalion

160

Twelfth moved South to the Somme area. After so long a spell of rest and training the battalion was not only well up to strength but in the best of condition and readiness for the great battle now so clearly imminent.

Meanwhile the 7th Battalion also had enjoyed nearly a couple of months of respite from the line. After two turns in the trenches in January the battalion went back to Quarrieux and La Houssoye, partly for employment on railway construction, partly to serve as demonstration party to a Divisional School which had just been started with Colonel Fiennes as Commandant and Captain Anstruther among the instructors, Major Phillips taking command during the Colonel's absence. Not till the last half of March did it return to trenches, when its Division took over the extreme right of the Third Army's front. This included a stretch of the actual bank of the Somme N.E. of Suzanne, and involved very novel conditions, as there were posts to be held on the little islands in the marshes through which the river runs. This made the patrolling very complicated. Still if it was difficult, this patrolling was excellent training for junior officers and men, and some good work was accomplished during April, the whole of which was spent in the line. At the beginning of May the battalion was withdrawn for more training, making a 40 miles' march in four days to the Picquigny district beyond Amiens. Hence in the middle of June it returned to the Carnoy sector and had a couple of spells in the front line before the great offensive began. In the second of these it attempted a raid on the German trenches, but owing to one party of the raiders missing their way the plan miscarried and several casualties were incurred.

Jan – June 1916
7th Battalion

March – June
1916
7th Battalion

After its severe "baptism of fire" at Loos the 8th battalion had to wait some time before enjoying any real rest. It had barely been brought up to strength by large drafts, including several of its original officers

October 1915 –
July 1916
8th Battalion

whom it had left behind on going overseas, before it was hurried off into trenches S.E. of Ypres. Major Parker had been transferred from the 6th Battalion to take command on October 6th, and he had Captain Tillie as his Adjutant and Lieut. Evans as his Quarter-Master, while in Captains W. Wood,

October 1915 –
July 1916
8th Battalion

W. V. Ross, T. P. P. Walker, and C. F. Penton, (one of the old officers of the 8th) he was well off for company commanders. But the battalion had a bad time when it first tasted the pleasures of trench warfare in the sector so familiar to the 1st Battalion earlier in the year. Whether it was the Spoilbank and Bluff sub-sectors on either side of the Canal, or the St. Eloi trenches further to the right, it made little difference; in all alike there was mud and water, dug-outs were non-existent, parapets and paradoss in the habit of dissolving into a liquid mush, while, if the communication-trenches theoretically provided shelter against shot and shell, they offered those who used them a better chance of being drowned. Fortunately the Germans opposite were in similar plight, though a little better off where, as at St. Eloi, they were higher up the slope and their trenches drained down it towards the British line. They also were too well occupied with keeping the trenches in some sort of repair to spare time for being “offensive,” and casualties consequently were not as high as might have been feared from the lack of protection.

From the end of November to the beginning of January the 8th had a welcome and much-needed rest at Bonningues, near St. Omer, during which time it was at last completely re-equipped and brought up to full strength, while Captain Whittv arrived from the 1st Battalion and became second-in-command. Then followed nearly three months more of the Ypres Salient, this time further to the left, at Hooze and in Sanctuary Wood, a part of the line in which conditions were a little better but the enemy’s activity rather greater.

January – June
1916
8th Battalion

162

One unlucky day, February 19th, when the reserve dugouts were heavily bombarded, cost the battalion four officers, including Captain Ross and Lieut. W. L. Wigan, a most efficient and popular young Regular who had recently joined the battalion, having served for some time with the 1st Battalion in the previous winter, but on the whole casualties were not very heavy.

January – July
1916
8th Battalion

In March the battalion was taken back to Berthen, near Bailleul, but instead of getting a rest was almost immediately sent up to the Wulverghem sector, where it remained for three months. Conditions here were decidedly better, but the reputation for quiet which the sector had enjoyed before the Twenty-Fourth Division arrived did not last long. As the weather improved both sides became more active, especially their artillery, while the Germans twice made gas attacks on a large scale. Neither time did the battalion happen to be actually holding the line, but it had large working parties up either in the front trenches or just behind, so that its gas discipline and steadiness were fully tested and stood trial well. Its most notable experiences were a tremendous bombardment on June 29th, a retaliation for a successful raid by the 8th Queen’s, which cost the battalion 40 casualties, and a raid on the night of June 4th/5th by a party under Lieut. Green, who had rejoined after recovering from his Loos wounds. This enterprise, though gallantly carried out, was not successful, the wire being insufficiently cut. A little earlier the battalion had suffered a severe loss in having Captain W. Wood killed on patrol; he was a fine officer who had had 17 years’ service in the Regiment before receiving his commission and had done splendid work as a company commander in the 8th.

At the end of June the battalion was withdrawn from the Wulverghem line, but

unexpectedly found itself called on for a turn in the Ploegsteert trenches, where it had to wear Australian head-gear in the hope of concealing from the enemy the departure of their previous

163

opponents. This turn, however, was brief, and by the middle of July the 8th was on the way South, bound for the Somme.

Meanwhile two more Service Battalions of The Queen's Own had made their way to France, for early in May the Forty-First Division had gone overseas and had joined the Second Army. At the end of the month, after three weeks of additional training round Moolenacker, near Strazeele, the Division relieved the Ninth in trenches between Armentières and Ploegsteert, so that June found the 10th and 11th R.W.K. receiving their initiation into active service. (1) The Forty-First Division remained in this district nearly three months, a period marked by no very outstanding incidents but nevertheless one of considerable minor activity. There were intermittent bombardments, at times fairly heavy, both battalions tried their hands at raiding the German trenches, though without any marked success, snipers and machine-gunners were busy on both sides, and the casualties of the 10th in the period totalled over 130, including five officers. Among these was Captain

July 1916
8th Battalion

May – August
1916
10th & 11th
Battalions

(1)The officers who proceeded overseas with these battalions were as follows:-

10th Battalion: Colonel A. Wood Martyn (commanding), Major W.F. Soames (second-in-command), Captains H. H. Logan (A Co.), F. R. Slaney (Adjutant), G. M. Watney (D Co.), C. H. Wild (B Co.), F. A. Wallis (A Co.), R. L. Pillman, T. J. Guest (Transport Officer), Lieuts. G. F. Drayson, C. H. Wickham, H. I. Jones, G. V. Hinds, A.J.S. Pearson; 2nd-Lieuts. A. A. Barling, J. A. Tennyson-Smith, F.W.Roberts, F. T. Licence, S. Lawrence, J. K. Ground, G. P. Couch, G.J.Brown, A. Morgan, C. R. Browne, I. T. Grant, G. G. Samuel, F. C.Turnpenny, L. A. H. Gingell, V. Holden, A. W. Edmett, J. R. Coke, Dickinson, 2nd-Lieut. and Quartermaster E. H. Jarrett.

Captain S. H. Beattie joined the battalion on arrival in France and took command of A Company.

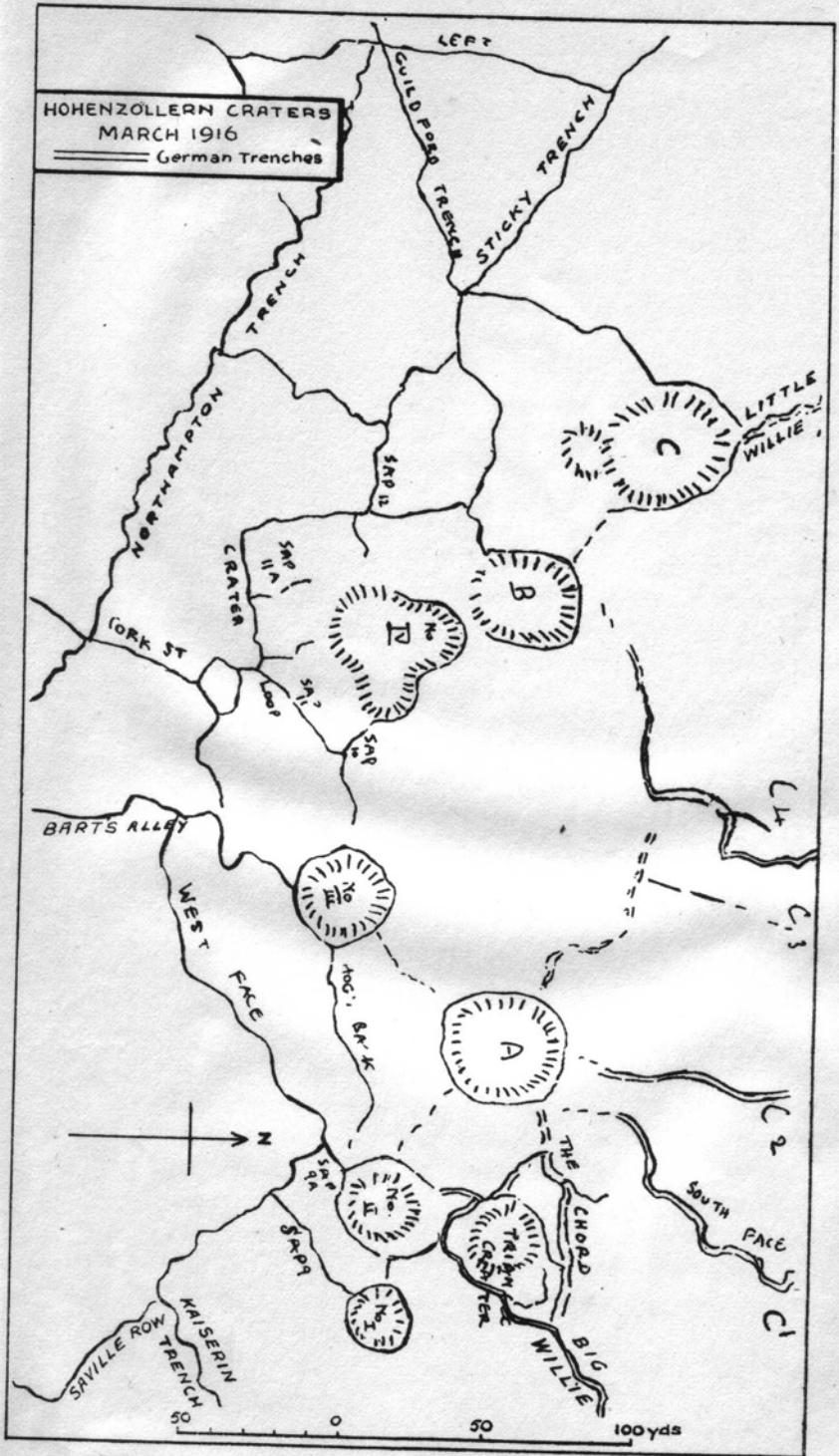
11th Battalion: Colonel A. F. Townshend (commanding), Majors A.C. Corfe (second-in-command) and G. A. Heron; Captains A.J. Jiminez (Adjutant), A. E. Dickinson, S. L. Simmonds, P. Clarke-Richardson, L. V. Stone, R. G. Solbe; Lieuts. H. W. E. Bainton (Transport Officer), W. E. Roberts (Machine- Gun Officer), C. B.Smith and B. A. Purver; 2nd-Lieuts. R. G. Rogers, T. G. Platt, A. B. Bateman (Signalling Officer), J. O. Heath (Bombing Officer), G. D.Henderson, P. T. Cooksey, S. Gordon-Smith, C. W. Habrow, C. E.Malpas, S. J. Jones, A. V. D. Morley, F. J. Argent, N. C. Barrs, C.H. Yorke, H. G. R. Prior and H. R. Smith.

164

R.L. Pillman, mortally wounded in leading a raid on July 8th. The 11th got off more lightly with about 20 men killed and three officers and 50 men wounded, the heaviest losses being on June 30th, when the Germans plastered the line with shells in retaliation for an attempted raid by a party under 2nd Lieut. Rogers, which found the wire uncut and had to come back. Both battalions lost rather more from sickness, and as drafts had not been too plentiful both were down to about 800 rank and file, though better off for officers, when they moved South. But if these months were barren of outstanding events they provided a useful apprenticeship in actual warfare for the 10th and 11th Battalions, who profited by this experience, as their record on the Somme was to show when they took their turn in the great offensive.

May – August
1916
10th & 11th
Battalions

165



Face Page 160.

SKETCH 14.