

CHAPTER 16

MESSINES

The heavy casualties incurred in the prolongation of the British offensive at Arras, after all its main objectives had been attained by the brilliant victory of April 9th, had not been the only detrimental results of that excrecence on the British Commander-in-Chief's original programme. The urgent need of diverting the attention and resources of the Germans from the Aisne had involved the postponement of his next project until the beginning of June and threw even further back the larger undertaking to which that project was to be the prelude. To free British shipping from the running sore of the use of the chief Belgian ports as German submarine bases was a strong incentive to transferring to Flanders the main British effort. To any offensive in Flanders the recovery of the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge was an indispensable preliminary. Plans for its recapture had been prepared as far back as the autumn of 1916; indeed some of the mines which contributed so much to the success of June 7th had been in readiness for months, and the battalions of The Queen's Own who spent the earlier months of 1917 in the Second Army's country had noted how the enemy's activities increased as the British preparations became increasingly apparent. His guns became more numerous and more active, his aeroplanes more aggressive and inquisitive, and the troops in the line found even "quiet" sectors becoming decidedly "lively" as the spring gave place to summer.

June 1917

The battalions in question were the 8th, the 10th and the 11th. The 8th had left the Lens front in the middle of April, and had spent three weeks resting and training in pleasant country round Delette. It moved

8th Battalion

261

up to Ypres about the middle of May and had a strenuous tour of duty in trenches at the most Easterly point of the Salient, just South of Hooge, coming in for an exceptionally violent bombardment which almost obliterated its trenches, though it very fortunately escaped with no more than 40 casualties. On June 6th it shifted to Dickebusch, its Division being in readiness to extend the area of the attack astride the Ypres-Comines Canal should the success of the main operation warrant it.

The 10th and 11th were not very far away, as the Forty-First Division was in the left wing of the main attack. Its objectives were the Dammstrasse, S.E. of St. Eloi, and a line of trenches round Englebrier Farm, N.E. of Oosttaverne. For the attack on the first objective the Division was using the 124th and 123rd Brigades, while the latter employed three battalions; the 10th R.W.K. had come down two days before the attack from a final training in the Reninghelst area and occupied its assembly positions on the night of June 5th-6th, holding the battle front with outposts only. But the enemy were so far from attempting to interfere with the British movements that they had withdrawn from their front line in places, for next night a patrol of A Company found it unoccupied and very badly damaged. Meanwhile the 122nd Brigade, which had been holding the Divisional line since the beginning of the month, was drawn back into support.

June 1917
10th & 11th
Battalions

see sketch 31

Punctually at 3.10 a.m., June 7th, the mines were exploded, the bombardment opened and the infantry pressed forward. The ground over which the 10th was to attack was too rough and boggy for the use of tanks, but even without their help things went well with the Forty-First Division, which met no opposition worth the name till it reached the

June 7th
10th Battalion

Dammstrasse, so great had been the effect of the mines and the bombardment. At the Dammstrasse the enemy put up more of a fight, but the 10th was not to be denied.

262

Led by Colonel Wood-Martyn it stormed the position without delay, capturing 40 prisoners and driving the survivors of the defenders in flight before it; then after pushing on a little further it began consolidating a defensive line. It came under more shellfire while doing this, but the example set by Major Beattie and Lieut. F. W. Roberts, both of whom remained at their posts, although wounded, and continued to direct the work, had much to do with the success with which the line was made good. Lieut. Roberts, too, took command of some men of other regiments who had become disorganized, and got them into order, in which work C.S.M. Cooper also did excellent service.

June 7th 1917
10th Battalion

It was now the 122nd Brigade's turn, and about 5 o'clock it started for an advanced position of assembly behind the Dammstrasse. This was reached without delay and with trifling losses from the rather ineffective reply which the German guns were making to the British bombardment. The 11th was on the left between the 15th Hampshires on its right and a battalion of the Forty-Seventh Division. It had to pass through the 11th Queen's and to capture in succession two lines known respectively as Oblong Trench and Oblong Reserve.

11th Battalion

At 6.30 a.m. the 122nd Brigade started its attack. The 11th at once came under enfilade machine-gun fire from the area of the Forty-Seventh Division; then, after a tank had attended to this, it was caught on the other flank by a machine gun in Pheasant Wood, which held up the advance. However, Captain Maltby promptly pushed forward at the head of a small party which included 2nd Lieut. H. J. Greenwood, who, though severely wounded, had continued to lead his company. (1) They soon disposed of this obstacle, capturing the gun and killing or taking its crew, and then the battalion swept on to Oblong Trench, which was

(1) Both these officers were awarded the M.C.

263

reached about 7 a.m., and captured after sharp fighting. Oblong Reserve proved a rather more serious matter, but in the end it also was taken, and the 11th set to work to consolidate a defensive line. This had to be sited behind Oblong Reserve as the British barrage was falling a little short and causing some casualties. Despite this, patrols were pushed forward to a track leading N.E. from Englebrier Farm, where they found and cleared several dugouts and added several prisoners to their bag. There was one attempt at a counter-attack somewhere about mid-day, but the 11th met it with a charge, routed the enemy, captured 25 prisoners, and inflicted heavy casualties. During the afternoon the Twenty-Fourth Division came up and passed through the 122nd Brigade, carrying on the attack to the final objective N.E. of Oosttaerne. Like the 10th Battalion, the 11th had achieved all that was asked of it at a moderate cost, its casualties only slightly exceeding 100.

June 7th 1917
11th Battalion

In this day's attack the Twenty-Fourth Division were using the 17th and 73rd Brigade, and as they gained all their objectives without having to call on their reserves, the 8th R.W.K. was not engaged in the fighting, but went up into the front line two days later,

8th Battalion

when its brigade took over from the Twenty-Third Division the ground captured North of the Ypres-Comines railway between Zwarteleen and Klein Zillebeke. While its right company had to hold the Northernmost trenches taken the centre stretched back across what had been No Man's Land to join up with the left in the original British line South of Mount Sorrel. Here the 8th had a strenuous time. The new line needed much work to bring it into a satisfactory state of defence, the enemy were obviously anticipating another attack and put down barrage after barrage so that the battalion had to endure a good deal of shelling and had rather heavy casualties. C.S.M. Greenaway distinguished himself greatly by good

264

work in this period, leading his men across the open under intense shelling to occupy a disused trench and averting many casualties by his skilful organizing of the defence.⁽¹⁾ But it was anything but an easy ten days which the 8th spent in these trenches, completing the work done on June 7th. The 10th and 11th had also been kept busy. The former spent the four days following the attack in the positions it had won, extending its line to the right on the 8th and consolidating the position under a shell-fire which increased in intensity as the Germans recovered sufficiently from their surprise and disorganization to bring up more guns. In consequence casualties mounted up considerably and by the time that the 10th returned to Voormezele on relief they had amounted to 9 officers and 228 rank and file. Of these 5 officers ⁽²⁾ were killed with 30 rank and file. Shortly after this action Colonel Wood-Martyn was compelled to relinquish command owing to ill health, and returned to England. He had been as successful a commander in the field as he had in raising and training the battalion, and his departure was much regretted by both officers and men, who were all pleased to hear a little later that he had been awarded the D.S.O.; at the same time Major Beattie, Captain Wallis and Lieut. Roberts received the M.C., and C.S.M. Cooper the D.C.M. for their services on June 7th.

June 1917
8th Battalion

The 11th had been relieved by a battalion of the Twenty-Fourth Division on the night of June 7th-8th and spent four days in reserve before the 122nd Brigade had to take over the frontage of the Forty-Seventh Division between that of the Forty-First and the Ypres-Comines Canal. The 11th was in the front line in Opal Reserve trench, a continuation N.E. of Oblong Reserve, and had its Battalion Headquarters in the ruins of the White Chateau. It was destined to have an active time as it was desired to push the line

11th Battalion

(1) He was awarded the D.C.M.

(2) 2nd Lieuts. Davies, Dodgson, Mothersell, Foster, and Samuels.

265

forward nearer to Hollebeke, so as to bring it up level on this flank with that already gained by the Forty First Division. Accordingly at 7.30 p.m. on June 14th three companies of the battalion, with two of the 18th K.R.R.C. on their right, delivered a surprise attack on Optic Trench. The artillery put down a capital barrage and the attack proved speedily successful. On the right B and C Companies captured Optic Trench after a sharp tussle and pushed covering parties of bombers and Lewis gunners forward to Optic Support to protect the consolidation of the captured position. Captain Stallard

June 14th 1917
11th Battalion

was conspicuous for his good leading, and 2nd Lieut. Rooney's (1) skill and coolness also contributed appreciably to the success. On the left D captured the junction of Optic Trench and Oblique Row, just East of which it established a block, while bombers working down Oblique Row cleared it as far as the Canal. The operation was a complete success, the whole objective was taken with 15 prisoners while heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy; but its success was marred by the death of Captain F. G. Frazer, who was killed in going forward under heavy machine-gun fire to bring back some men of D who had overrun their objective. He had distinguished himself repeatedly, had been a most successful company commander and his loss was much felt. Apart from his fall the casualties were light, only just over 30 all told.

The 11th did not long enjoy undisturbed occupation of its gains. Next evening, after a heavy bombardment, the enemy advanced in force against Optic Trench from Optic Support and at the same time attacked the barricade on the left flank. The party attacking the barricade made some progress but were driven back by bombers headed by 2nd Lieut. C. P. Webb, (2) who set a splendid example of courage and

June 15th

(1) Awarded the M.C.

(2) 2nd Lieut. Webb was awarded the M.C.

disregard of danger; he was ably seconded by L/Cpl. Chapman, and by their efforts the position at this corner was made secure. Meanwhile the main attack from Optic Support was no less effectively dealt with by rifles and machine guns, 2nd Lieut. Berger (1) showing a fine example of coolness under heavy fire, which greatly encouraged his men; while if the artillery's response to the "S.O.S." signal was a little slow it was most effective when it came. The Germans never reached the British wire, and fell back after suffering heavily. Thus the position was satisfactorily maintained, and when it was handed over two days later to the 12th East Surreys it had not only been well consolidated but a communication trench had been dug back across the 1,000 yards which separated the new line from Opal Reserve. The 11th could certainly look back with considerable satisfaction on the battle of Messines: its casualties had, it is true, amounted to 250, but of these only 40 were killed and missing, amongst them Captain Fraser and 2nd Lieuts. Fenton and Sims, while Captains Stallard and Maltby, Lieut. Gordon-Smith, and 2nd Lieuts. Bernard, Carter, Greenwood and Quartermain were wounded.

June 1917
11th Battalion

It was no more Sir Douglas Haig's intention to continuing pressing on the Messines front after the success of June 7th had given him all he wanted than he had originally meant to prolong the Arras offensive after the middle of April, and for the next few weeks there followed something of a lull on the Flanders front. This was devoted to the necessary preparations for the further offensive, the collection of stores and munitions of every sort, the improvement of communications and of hutting accommodation, and the transfer to the front selected for the new offensive of additional heavy artillery, and of all the Divisions whom the cessation of active operations at other points

(1) Lieut. Berger received the M.C. and L/Cpl. Chapman the D.C.M.

June 1917

had rendered available. The Headquarters of the Fifth Army was now moved to the North and took over the Salient from Observatory Ridge Northward on June 10th; and among the Divisions which followed it in the next few weeks was the Eighteenth, so that the arrival at Poperinghe on July 4th of the 7th Battalion brought the battalions of The Queen's Own in the Ypres area up to four.

After its ill-starred venture at Cherisy, the 7th had soon returned to the trenches, having had barely ten days for rest. The sector it took over was not far from , the scene of its misfortunes of May 3rd, being between Cherisy and Fontaine les Croisilles. It had an active time, beating off one raid which just reached the trenches and nipping another in the bud by opening fire on the Germans as they were leaving their trenches. On the night of May 31st more serious fighting was started by the capture of a couple of advanced German posts. The attack was made by two parties, that on the right consisting of two platoons of C Company, supported by one of A, the left attack of another platoon of C and a section of D. Both got in successfully, and quickly secured their objectives, driving out the surviving Germans, who bolted, leaving over 20 dead behind. Consolidation was promptly begun, and by next morning the new position, known as Horseshoe Post, had been satisfactorily dug and wired and a communication trench running back from our old line was well advanced.

May 1917
7th Battalion

June 1st

Two nights later, just as the 6th Northhamptons were halfway through with the relief of the battalion, the Germans, after some preliminary bombardment, rushed the new post. There was a sharp fight but the Germans were in superior force and drove the survivors of the garrison back to our old lines. Sergt. Woodgate promptly organized a bombing party to counterattack, but with little success. The situation being

June 2nd

268

very obscure, Colonel Anstruther (1) ordered D Company to attack up the new communication trench on the left, and, well led by Captain Lewin and Sergt. Dungay, they got within a few yards of Horseshoe Post and established a bombing block to secure the communication trench. However, on orders from the Brigade the relief was continued and the Northhamptons were left to tackle the recapture of the post. Over 30 casualties had been suffered by the 7th, including 2nd Lieut. Neve wounded.

June – July
1917
7th Battalion

After this the 7th were out of the line for the rest of June, mostly at Coigneux, training; Lieut. -Col. C.H. L. Cinnamond of the Royal Irish Rifles was appointed to the command and took over his duties on June 9th, and then on July 3rd the battalion entrained at Doullens for Flanders. The Division took over the Zillebeke sector from the Thirtieth Division and was at once busily employed upon the preparations for the offensive. This involved an enormous amount of work and many casualties, for the enemy's artillery was exceedingly active, doing its best to hinder the preparations by almost incessant shelling, in which much gas was used, so that the 7th had a bad time, six officers were wounded and four invalided, with proportionate casualties among the rank and file, without the satisfaction of any direct retaliation on the enemy, though the British artillery gave the infantry all the support it could.

During the lull in Flanders a certain activity had been maintained on other parts of the line, mainly to distract the enemy's attention, but partly to improve the local tactical situation at points like Monchy le Preux, where it had been left in an unsatisfactory state at the conclusion of the Arras offensive. Thus the Fifth Division was actively engaged on June 28th when, under cover of an elaborate demonstration along the whole

June – July
1917
1st Battalion

front of the First Army from Hulluch to

(1) He had been temporarily appointed Lieut. -Col. to command on 19th May.

269

Gavrelle, real local attacks were made astride the Souchez River and at Oppy. But the Oppy attack was delivered by the 15th Brigade, and once again the 1st Battalion was in reserve and had no more to do than to dig assembly trenches and supply escorts to prisoners, though the next three days found it fully occupied on constructing communication trenches under the most adverse weather conditions. There was constant rain, the men were without shelter, yet the Battalion Diary remarks that “as usual the men became more cheerful as the conditions became more miserable,” and the Brigadier of the 15th Brigade was warm in his recognition of its invaluable assistance. The 1st Battalion had returned to the front line about the middle of June, with which began a period of nearly three months’ trench duty on the Arleux and Oppy sector, turns in the front line at Arleux alternating with periods in support trenches nearer to Willerval or in reserve at Roclincourt or on the forward slopes of the Vimy Ridge.

June – July
1917
1st battalion

Colonel Lynch White had now Major Johnstone as second-in-command; he had been Adjutant of a Territorial battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in August 1914, which he had accompanied to France early in 1915, he now on June 24th rejoined his own regiment after a long spell of Staff duty. These months were markedly uneventful; the German artillery was not very active, the ascendancy which his aircraft had enjoyed in this quarter earlier in the summer had been wrested from him on the arrival of some Sopwith Camels, and though his trench mortars were troublesome at times their activity usually provoked speedy and effective retaliation. The trenches as usual required any amount of work, in those immediately East of Arleux special arrangements had to be made for the water supply and for enabling the men in the front line to cook hot meals there. This was done by means of “Tommy’s cookers,” specially constructed in the

270

regiment by mixing dripping with paraffin and putting it into tins provided with a wick, a plan which worked admirably and made life in the front line much more supportable. Casualties were low, for the enemy were not active and the battalion had much the best of such patrol encounters as took place in No Man’s Land. This patrolling was energetically carried on and provided an opportunity to train many of the new hands in this sort of work. The battalion was also able on one of the few occasions when the enemy took the offensive to get effective oblique fire on a party who were trying to rush the right post of the next battalion on the left. But though casualties were few and the sick-rate low, drafts were infrequent and the trench strength remained much under establishment, rarely rising above 500 of all ranks and being more often down to 450. On August 25th Colonel Lynch White left to take an appointment under the First Army and Major Johnstone succeeded to the command. Shortly afterwards the battalion bade farewell to the Vimy area and moved back to billets near Berlencourt in the Canche valley for special training before moving up to Ypres.

June – August
1917
1st Battalion

After its heavy fighting on both sides of the Scarpe the 6th Battalion had fairly earned a rest, and from May 19th, when it went back to Montenescourt, near Arras, it was not in

May – July
1917
6th Battalion

action again till the first week of July. This period it spent partly at Ivergny, resting and training, partly at Arras in Divisional Reserve, finding large working parties. It was during this rest period that Colonel Alderman, commanding in Colonel Dawson's absence, received the news that he had been awarded the D.S.O.; he heard it on a lucky day for him; his pony had carried off a prize at the Divisional Horse Show and his long-delayed leave had just come through. Some small drafts arrived during May and June, but the battalion, though up to strength again in officers, had little over 600 rank and file available at the end of its rest. Meanwhile, the Twelfth Division

271

had taken over the Monchy sector in the middle of June, just after the Third Division had advanced the British line by capturing some trenches on Infantry Hill. Thus when the 6th returned to the front line its position was a little to the South of the scene of its heavy fighting in May; it was destined to become even more familiar with this section and to see scarcely less severe fighting.

June-July 1917
6th Battalion

After its strenuous ten days in the Mount Sorrel sector the 8th Battalion was granted but little rest. By June 26th it was back in front line trenches East of Battle Wood, which, like its last bit of line, were gains made on June 7th. In this sector the front trenches were to be preferred to the support line as they were too near the enemy to be much shelled. However, the Germans were pretty active, and on June 28th tried a raid on a post held by No. 2 Platoon of A Company under 2nd Lieut. Wade. This, however, proved disastrous to them as they found the defenders very much on the alert, and as a result they were beaten off with several casualties. This tour of duty, quite a satisfactory one, was followed by a fortnight near St. Omer, after which a four days' march brought the battalion back to the Klein Zillebeke area, by this time very lively with the preparations for the coming offensive and the German reply. Shelling was heavy on both sides and the mustard gas which the Germans had just introduced was a most unpleasant novelty.

8th Battalion

July

The 8th had several days in the front line N.E. of Klein Zillebeke, marked by a daring attack on Job's Post, a strong point which presented a serious obstacle to a big raid which was in preparation. Accompanied by 8 men Lieut. E. G. Brown worked his way up to the post, surprised it and captured no less than 12 prisoners, a neat piece of work which deservedly earned him a bar to his M.C., won M.M.'s for L/Cpl. Simmons and Pte. Roper and cleared the way for a successful raid by another battalion. Two days later Pte.

July 26th

July 28th

272

Neal earned a D.C.M. by his devotion and promptitude in picking up a bomb which had just been set alight by the explosion of a shell and throwing it out of a dug-out which was full of men, thereby averting a serious loss of life.

July 1917
8th Battalion

The 10th and 11th Battalions meanwhile were enjoying a peaceful July. The Forty-First Division was relieved by the Forty-Seventh at the beginning of the month and had three weeks near Fletre, in which, if training was by no means neglected, officers and men were given ample opportunities for rest and recreation.

10th & 11th
Battalions

These were enjoyed to the full, indeed this interval of rest was quite a halcyon period for the 10th and 11th, and as several drafts were received both battalions marched back to Ypres in full strength and in excellent condition and took over the line astride the

Canal on the 24th. This brought them in for a very trying week before the great attack was launched. The weather was wet, the trenches had been much knocked about and were little better than mud-holes, and the Germans were replying with great vigour to the British bombardment. Indeed, the week cost the 11th no less than 80 casualties, many incurred by a fighting patrol sent out to investigate a report that the enemy were withdrawing from their front line. This was found anything but the truth. The Germans were in force and the patrol suffered heavily in returning to its own lines. The 10th lost less but had an arduous and exhausting time in very uncomfortable conditions.

Meanwhile yet another battalion of The Queen's Own had found its way to France. This was the 3/4th, which, since its reconstitution as an active service unit in July 1915, had been retained at home all through 1916, constantly expecting orders for France. The "Second Line T.F." divisions were sent out and the Sixty-Seventh received orders to prepare for service overseas, but final orders to embark never came and the Division was finally broken up in September 1917 and

3/4th Battalion

273

its personnel used for drafts. (1) Three of its battalions, however, had been despatched to France in May. Of these the 3/4th was one, and Colonel Simpson had thus the experience for a second time of taking a T.F. battalion of The Queen's Own on active service. (2)

June-Aug 1917
3/4th Battalion

Landing at Havre on June 1st, the 3/4th proceeded to the neighbourhood of Arras, being attached to the Ninth Division, then holding the sector on the left of the Scarpe near Greenland Hill. On the relief of the Ninth Division in the middle of June by the Seventeenth the battalion was at first attached to the 51st Brigade with which it had some uneventful days in the front line; during the greater part of July it acted as Pioneers and was extremely busy on the construction of communication trenches, and then in August it was definitely posted to the 52nd Brigade in place of the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers, transferred to the Thirty-Fourth Division. This month found it in the front line near the Roeux Chemical Works and was not marked by any great activity. But it gives some clue to the normal wastage of ordinary trench warfare that by the end of August the 3/4th had dwindled from the 1,000 officers and men, who had embarked on May 31st, to little over 850, although it had not taken part in an operation of any note. Among the casualties was Colonel Simpson, who had been invalided in June, being replaced first by Major King of the 10th K.O.Y.L.J., and then by Captain James, from the Lincolnshire Regiment.

(1) The 2/5th R.W.K. was among the battalions broken up, practically all its officers, N.C.O.'s and men were sent out to France as reinforcements; a very large number of them had the good fortune to be sent to the 1st Battalion, to which they proved a very welcome addition.

(2) The officers who went overseas with the 3/4th Battalion were:

Colonel A. T. F. Simpson, commanding;

Major A. E. Jones, second-in-command;

Lieut. XV. T. Monckton, Adjutant;

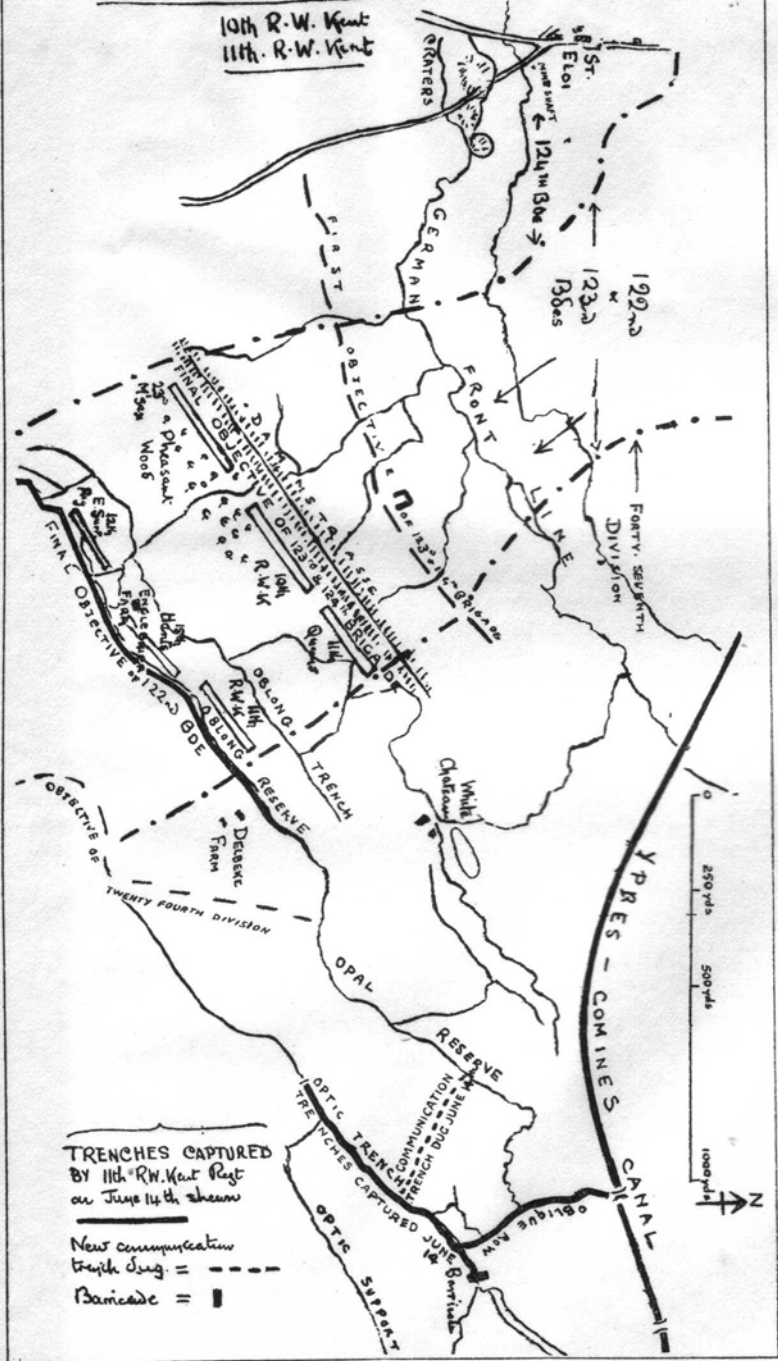
Lieut. C. T. Ruse, Quartermaster;

Captains B. J. Robinson, I. L. Tanner, J. D. Kennedy, E.W. Stephens, L. R. S. Monckton, E. Watts, F. C. Needham, C. E. Waite, Lieuts. F. S. Fleming, G. Gosselin, S. J. Needham, F. C. Compton, I. A. Beadle, E. S. Nicoll, R. A. E. Starkey, E. C. Wise, V.A. Weeks, F. C. Lovett, H. R. Rainey, H. Ambrose, E. P. Annetts, D. Brook, E. M. Williams, H. Lewis, F. T. Fairhurst, W. C. Clifford, G. O. Richmond, and E. F. Harris.

274

MESSINES, JUNE, 1917

10th R.W. Kent
11th R.W. Kent



TRENCHES CAPTURED BY 11th R.W. Kent Post on June 14th shown

New communication trench dug. = - - - -
Barbed wire = |