

CHAPTER 18 THIRD YPRES

The heavy fighting which followed the relief of the Forty-First Division was almost the only major operation of 1917 in which The Queen's Own had no share. It was not till the attack of October 4th, officially known as the battle of Broodseinde, that the 1st Battalion first took part in the great contest. By this time the British line had been carried forward through Polygon Wood and into Zonnebeke, while just North of the Menin Road it had got as far as what had once been the hamlet of Veldhoek and was within reach of Polderhoek and Gheluvelt, the latter being the next point of vital tactical importance in this part of the field, though the possession of Polderhoek Chateau would go far to render Gheluvelt untenable even should direct attack fail.

The 1st Battalion had had three weeks of rest and training at Berlencourt. A draft of nearly 250 men had brought its depleted numbers up well over 800, several new officers had joined and Colonel Johnstone had now Major Wilberforce as second-in-command, Captain McClenaghan as Adjutant, 2nd Lieut. R. Brown, just promoted from R.S.M., as Assistant Adjutant, and Captains W. R. Cobb, Snelgrove, Bellman and Press as company commanders. It had moved up on September 25th, detraining at Wizernes and marching to a camp in the Brandhoek area. Here the "battle surplus" remained, having been separated from those detailed for the attack. But it was the battle surplus who suffered the first casualties, as on the night of September 27th their camp was bombed by German aeroplanes with disastrous results. Two men were killed and over 20 wounded, along with Captains

September –
October 1917
1st Battalion

291

Bellman and Nisbet and 2nd Lieuts. Nurse and Stevens. Meanwhile the main body had moved up to "Goldfish Chateau," along with the 2nd K.O.S.B.'s., as reserves for an attack on the high ground E. of Wieltje Cross Roads. As this attack achieved complete success without the reserves being engaged the battalion returned to Brandhoek, whence it moved to Berthen. Three nights later, just as it was leaving Berthen for Ridge Wood, the battalion in its turn was heavily bombed. However, it got off much better, having only one casualty, though a dozen transport animals were put out of action.

From Ridge Wood the battalion moved forward, and on the night of October 2nd/3rd took over the right of the Fifth Division's new frontage, S.E. of Veldhoek. The relief was much delayed by heavy hostile shelling, but was at last accomplished, the battalion's right resting on the Menin Road with the K.O.S.B.'s on its left and the 95th Brigade beyond them astride the head of the Reutel Beek. Hardly had the battalion settled down into its trenches before a heavy bombardment opened all along its line. S.O.S. signals went up from the Thirty-Seventh Division south of the Menin Road, and the enemy debouched from his positions in force. It was misty, and at that early hour, between 5 and 6 a.m., the light was none too good, and the Germans, though received with a hot fire, managed to penetrate to the trenches at several points only to be immediately ejected, leaving dead and prisoners behind. Sergt. Brydon, Corpl. Newman and Pte. Beckett all did fine work in repulsing this attack, and it was largely thanks to the last that the enemy obtained no identifications.

Half an hour later the Germans returned to the attack, but Lieut. Joel, who was commanding the right company, C, on whom the brunt of the attack had fallen, had taken prompt steps to re-organize and strengthen the defences after the repulse of the first attack. (1)

September –
October 1917
1st Battalion

September 30th

See sketch 34

October 3rd

C.S.M. Taylor, too, did splendid work, taking command of his platoon when his officer was hit, rallying it and re-establishing the line, while Sergt. Ashby brought up his platoon from support on his own initiative and was most instrumental in beating off the attack. Moreover, the light was now better and this time the Germans were stopped 50 yards short of our wire. Their casualties were heavy and they were increased during the day as survivors who had taken shelter in shell-holes or other cover in No Man's Land offered targets to snipers when trying to regain their own lines. C Company had over 20 casualties, A (Captain Cobb) on the left came off better with only 7, and both could congratulate themselves on a successful morning work. But as the day wore on the tale of casualties rose as the enemy's artillery activity increased. B Company, in support trenches South of the Menin Road, caught the worst of this shelling and figured largely among the 100 casualties in the day's list.

October 3rd
1917
1st Battalion

That evening C and A closed to their right and B came up to fill the gap thus created on the left of the line. After midnight company commanders laid tapes on the forming-up positions, and at 5.30 a.m. the three companies were lined up ready for the barrage to begin. The battalion had no very precise objective for the enemy were not holding any well-defined trench line but were relying on pillboxes and shell-holes. On the right C was to advance about 300 yards, on the left B had nearly twice that distance to go to keep touch with the K.O.S.B.'s, who were making for Polderhoek Chateau.

October 4th

At 6 a.m. the barrage came down and the troops went forward. Mud proved the chief obstacle, for the enemy's counter-barrage fell well in rear, and before long prisoners began to arrive at Battalion Headquarters and their escorts reported the objective gained all along the line. More accurate reports, however, indicated that C had come under enfilade machine-gun fire from a

“pill-box” south of the Menin Road which the Thirty Seventh Division had not managed to neutralize, and its losses in consequence were severe. The right had to be thrown back as a defensive flank facing this “pillbox,” and before long a platoon of D from reserve, along with a couple of reserve Lewis-gun teams, had to be sent up under 2nd Lieut. Cathcart to reinforce at this point. Elsewhere the objective was taken, Sergt. Hart doing great work by bombing a troublesome machine gun emplacement and capturing the gun, while considerable losses were inflicted on the enemy, who soon began counter-attacking in some force. By 8.30 a.m. No. 1 Platoon of A was asking for more ammunition, and as the day wore on the counter-attacks continued and the enemy's artillery fire became heavier and more accurate, some guns from the South, near Tenbrielen and Comines, in particular getting in a nasty enfilade fire.

October 4th
1917
1st Battalion

However, shelling and counter-attacks notwithstanding, the battalion held its ground. It was for a time severely pressed, for the Germans were unwilling to let ground of such importance go. 2nd Lieut. Gray, who had taken over command of B on Lieut. Fleming being wounded, reorganized the remains of his company so successfully that despite a loss of two-thirds of its numbers, it beat off several attacks. Corpl. Nicholson, who had done great work in the attack, killing a dozen Germans, now took command of his platoon and then of his company and controlled them with much ability. (1) L/Cpl.

Vaughan, too, who had charge of a Lewis-gun team on the open flank, was largely instrumental by his fire in keeping the enemy at bay, while L/Cpl. Smart handled his Lewis gun most effectively though all his team had fallen. L/Cpl. Glen and Ptes. Passy and Broughton in like manner kept their Lewis guns in action single-handed or with but little help, and largely thanks to the skilful way in which the Lewis guns were used the counter-attacks were all repulsed.

(1) Lieut. Gray received the M.C. and Corpl. Nicholson the D.C.M.

294

By 12.30 p.m. Captain Cobb could report the objective consolidated and the position quite tenable, though reinforcements were needed. The rest of the reserve, two platoons of D, were pushed up accordingly to replace C, now reduced to two officers and twenty men, and later on a company of the 14th R. Warwickshires had to be asked for to bring up ammunition and rifle grenades, which reached the old British front line about 5 p.m. But the position was maintained, splendid work being done by the battalion runners and signallers in maintaining communication and guiding up parties with ammunition and water, while touch was kept with the K.O.S.B.'s, who had finally dug in 200 yards West of Polderhoek Chateau and were holding on there. October 5th saw the survivors of the battalion clinging manfully to their gains. The counter-attacks had ceased but intermittent shelling continued and a steady rain made conditions most uncomfortable. Nevertheless, many wounded were successfully brought in and the position was handed over intact that night to the 15th Brigade.

October 4th
1917
1st Battalion

But it was an attenuated battalion which withdrew to Ridge Camp. Of the 670 who had gone into action, only 7 officers and 283 men were left. 2nd Lieuts. Daniell and Redding had been killed, Captain Cobb, who had been conspicuous both in defence and in attack, died of wounds soon afterwards, Lieuts. Joel, Faunthorpe, Fleming and Gordon and 2nd Lieuts. Brett, Chauncey and Monypenny were wounded, 69 men were killed and 300 wounded. The battalion was therefore in sore need both of rest and of drafts. It had a fortnight out of the line and reinforcements amounting to 12 officers and 400 men, (1) and could take

October
5th & 6th

(1) These men came mostly from the 2/5th R.W.K., whose Division, as already mentioned, was being utilized for drafts. This reinforcement was a remarkably fine set. One of the officers of the battalion wrote of them: "They went straight into quite one of the nastiest battles one could have chosen for them and the other men commented on their spirit."

295

600 men into action at its next effort. This, however, was not till October 26th, and in the interval considerable progress had been made.

October 1917

Once the main ridge North of the Menin Road had been secured the chief object of the assailants had been to bring forward the left of the line which ran back North-West from Broodseinde along the Gravenstafel spur and South of Poelcapelle and the Houthulst Forest. Here, however, the ground was lower and the going even worse than on the main ridge. The shelling had so completely broken up the surface that the whole country was a wilderness of shell-holes which the unusual rainfall had converted into a mass of slime and bog. Except on the spurs of rather higher ground the whole country was a mere slough; and only the crucial importance of denying to the enemy that freedom of action which the suspension of the attack would have given him caused the continuation of the offensive despite such persistent bad weather and such fearful difficulties.

Most unfavourable conditions, therefore, faced the Eighteenth Division when early in October it returned to the Salient to continue the attack, and to add to the handicaps the Brigade was called upon to attack at 24 hours' notice at a point quite different from that which it had expected to assault. The Division had been training to attack the main Passchendaele ridge and had carried out several tactical exercises over a model of the ground till all ranks were familiar with their tasks. Actually it had to attack Poelcapelle and, on the night of October 10th / 11th, the 53rd Brigade moved up to the front to relieve the Eleventh Division at that point. That division had attacked Poelcapelle on October 8th, and after losing heavily had captured part of the village, but the Northern end of it along the Staden road had remained in German hands. The relief, which pouring rain, mud that surpassed all previous experience, and intense darkness, rendered

7th Battalion

October 12th

296

exceptionally slow and difficult, had barely been completed before the time fixed for the attack of October 12th. The 7th R.W.K. were on the left of the 55th Brigade, next to the Fourth Division, with the Buffs on their other flank. The plan of attack involved the withdrawal of the companies holding the front line, A and D, to an assembly position some way further back, as the front line ran diagonally to the objectives. Detachments were left along the front line, with orders to rejoin their companies as these came along as the second wave of the attack. But the withdrawal lengthened the distance to be covered, a disadvantage the more serious because of the mud which retarded progress—it was so bad that in places men stuck fast and, being unable to move, were killed where they stood. Even the lightly equipped could hardly move in such a slough; for men encumbered with equipment, weapons and ammunition it was doubly difficult. Thus, though the enemy's barrage was not very effective, the battalion lost quite heavily from rifle and machine-gun fire before it cleared its own front line.

October 12th
1917
7th Battalion
See sketch 35

B Company, on the right, made fair progress at first and accounted for many enemy. Before long, however, they were held up by machine-gun fire from their right flank and from the Brewery, a strong point just East of the Staden road. All the officers became casualties, but Sergt. Tebbitt took command and carried on till, about 6.30 a.m., D reinforced the survivors of B. But even then the opposition was too strong to allow of much progress; casualties were heavy, and 2nd Lieut. Duffield, the only officer left with the two companies, reorganized them in a chain of posts just beyond the original line, and despite heavy fire maintained his ground successfully. (1)

On the other flank C had found the barrage somewhat erratic, indeed several German machine-guns had escaped it and gave a great deal of trouble. The

(1)He was awarded the M.C., while Sergt. Tebbitt received the M.M.

297

platoon on the flank, however, got on splendidly. When a machine-gun in a strong point threatened to hold it up, Pte. Ives rushed forward with a Lewis gun, and despite heavy fire knocked the machine-gun out, enabling the platoon to get on. Sergt. Hamblin, who had taken command on the fall of his officer, 2nd Lieut. Michell, led the platoon with so much determination and ability that it reached a strong point (1) only just short of the battalion's objective and well ahead of the rest of the attack. This point it rushed

October 12th
1917
7th Battalion

successfully, capturing two officers and 50 men with a couple of machine-guns. From here the party, reduced by casualties to 16 men, became mixed up with the Household Battalion of the Fourth Division with whom they pushed on ahead.

The rest of C were less fortunate. A strong point at the Northern end of the village brought them to a standstill, and though A came up to reinforce it was unable to carry the advance any further, nor could the 8th Suffolks of the 53rd Brigade achieve any more when they, too, pushed forward on the left. Finally, therefore, these two companies dug in a little in front of the line held before the attack. Touch was established with Lieut. Duffield's party and eventually some 120 men were collected and organised, a defensive flank formed on the right and the position consolidated, despite much trouble from snipers. Sergt. Coleman helped greatly in this work, he went up and down the line under heavy fire, encouraging the men and directing their efforts. Sergts. Coombs and Firmer were also well to the fore, but despite the gallantry and determination which the 7th had displayed it had achieved but little to compensate for very heavy losses. The weakness of the barrage (2) and the great difficulties of getting forward over a water-logged stretch of mud there had been no time to reconnoitre were mainly

(1) A on map, B marks limit of platoon's advance.

(2) This was largely due to mud, owing to which many of the guns which should have provided it had stuck fast, and never got into action.

responsible for the failure to accomplish more, but the battalion hung on all through the next day (October 13th) and maintained its ground until that evening it was relieved by the 8th Suffolks.

But its cup was not yet full. When boarding lorries next day to withdraw to the back area, it had the misfortune to be attacked by German aeroplanes, an experience which was becoming unpleasantly frequent, and suffered nearly 40 casualties in addition to those already incurred. These had been serious enough, just half the 600 men who had gone "over the top" were on the casualty list, along with 14 officers, of whom Captain Lewin, Lieut. H. T. Gregory, 2nd Lieuts. Allen, Coles and Michell were killed or died of wounds, Captains Anstruther and F. H. F. Smith being among the wounded. (1) To these the bombing attack added Lieut. Gladwell killed. Captain Heaton, died of wounds, and Captain Hogg and 2nd Lieut. Day wounded. It was a sadly shattered remnant that was left of a battalion which had come up to the front in fine condition and fighting trim. (2)

While the 7th had been finding mud even more formidable than Germans round Poelcapelle, another battalion of the Regiment had been employed in the same quarter of the battlefield, though without being engaged in any real heavy fighting. The 3rd/4th had arrived in the Ypres area on October 4th, and after a week at Proven moved forward when its Division relieved the Twenty-Ninth in the line North-East of Langemarck. But it was only in Divisional reserve, and on October 14th was detailed for work under R.E. supervision in constructing roads between the Pilckem Ridge and Langemarck Church. "Road-making" in

October 1917
7th Battalion

3/4th Battalion

(1) Of the officers who had taken part in the attack, Colonel Cinnamond and Lieut. Duffield were the only two unhurt.

(2) Captain Reynolds, R.A.M.C., the Medical Officer of the Battalion, had done exceptionally fine work during this attack. His name was sent up with a strong recommendation for the D.S.O., but to the disappointment of all ranks he was only awarded the MC.

the state to which rain and shellfire had reduced the ground was arduous and almost unending work, but if uninspiring it was absolutely essential, and, moreover, was not without its dangers, costing the battalion 20 casualties in twelve days. Ten days in back areas followed and then the Seventeenth Division relieved the Fifty-Seventh between Poelcapelle and the Ypres - Staden railway on November 7th. This brought the 3/4th into the front trenches between Requette Farm and the Broombeck two nights later, but by that time active operations on the Poelcapelle front had been suspended, though through shelling and snipers the battalion had over 30 casualties in its four days in the line.

Oct – Nov 1917
3/4th Battalion

On returning to the fighting line on October 24th the 1st Battalion found itself practically at the point to which it had itself advanced the line on October 4th. B and D Companies occupied the front line NorthWest of Gheluvelt, A and C being back at Stirling Castle. A day of intermittent shelling intervened between the relief of the 7th K.S.L.L. and the opening of the next attack. This time the battalion's objective was North of Gheluvelt, the village itself being allotted to the Seventh Division, whom it now had on its right astride the Menin Road. The ground was, if possible, more of a bog than it had been three weeks earlier, and merely to move up from support to the assembly trenches was quite exhausting. But somehow the troops got into position in time for "zero," 5.40 a.m. on October 26th, though one platoon of A Company remained behind at Stirling Castle, never having received orders to move. In order to get a satisfactory barrage line it was found necessary to form the attackers up 400 yards in rear of the line gained on October 4th, and the enemy, discovering that this line had been evacuated, promptly re-occupied it, so that when D and B went forward at "zero" they had to fight hard to recover the old front line. They cleared it, however, and moved forward, A thereupon came up in support,

October 24th
1st Battalion

October 26th

though meeting heavy fire and suffering severely even in reaching the old front. Little information came back from the attackers once they cleared the old line, though about 7 a.m. a message was received that Captain Press had been killed, and an hour later an officer of the Machine-Gun Corps came back to report that the troops had gained the first objective and were in touch with the Seventh Division, who had got into Gheluvelt. Shortly afterwards, however, some of the Seventh Division came drifting back upon the old front line of the battalion, having been dislodged by a counter-attack which, it was ascertained later on, led to the survivors of B and D holding the first objective being rolled up from the right flank and rear and killed or taken almost to a man. The attack of the Seventh Division on the South of the road had been held up by Germans in "pill-boxes" on the outskirts of Gheluvelt, which were the key to the situation at this point. By this time Captain Winn had brought C Company up to the front line, and though his attempts to clear these "pill-boxes" proved fruitless, he did great work in organizing a defensive line, rallying men of all units of the 20th Brigade whom the German counter-stroke had forced back, and setting a fine example. Lieut. Lewis Barned, who had been up to the front to collect more accurate information than was available at Battalion Headquarters, came back again to help in securing the right flank and rallying stragglers. He did good service by repairing three Lewis guns which had been put out of action and which he soon rendered serviceable again. Colonel Johnstone, too, was indefatigable in collecting men of all regiments and bringing them up to assist in holding the defensive line. It was largely through the exertions of these

October 26th
1917
1st Battalion

three officers (1) that the original line was manned and organized in readiness for the expected counter-attack, which developed early in the evening but withered away

(1) Colonel Johnstone received the D.S.O., and the two others the M.C.

301

under the fire of the defenders and a most effective artillery barrage. L/Cpl. Sears, who set a fine example and controlled the fire of his men with marked ability, accounted for a large number of the enemy, and thinly though the line was held it was maintained successfully. Shortly afterwards some of the Welsh Fusiliers of the Seventh Division came up on the battalion's right between it and the Menin Road, and a company of the K.O.S.B.'s also arrived to reinforce, while during the night the remnants of the battalion were relieved by the 1st Norfolks.

October 1917
1st Battalion

It was a scanty remnant indeed which reached Ridge Wood Camp. Except for the few who fell wounded near enough to our line to drag themselves back or be fetched in by stretcher-bearers, practically none of B or D Companies ever got back. Those who were wounded at any distance from our line had no chance of extricating themselves from the awful mud which was the dominating feature of the day; it checked the advance of the attack, it impeded and almost prevented communication between front and rear, it choked rifles and Lewis guns so that at critical moments they were out of action. To its all-pervading influence it is chiefly to be ascribed that October 26th 1917 was the worst day in the battalion's experiences in the war. To lose 12 officers (1) and 348 men out of the 16 officers and 581 men who went into action, 225 of the men killed and missing, and to gain not a yard of ground, was a depressing result, even if in the left and centre of the attack ground was won and the line advanced appreciably towards Passchendaele. It was the last major operation in "Third Ypres" in which The Queen's Own was represented. The 1st Battalion was to have another turn in the trenches just North of the Menin Road, but this tour of duty (November 7th/11th) was marked by no serious fighting, though the guns at Comines and

November 1917

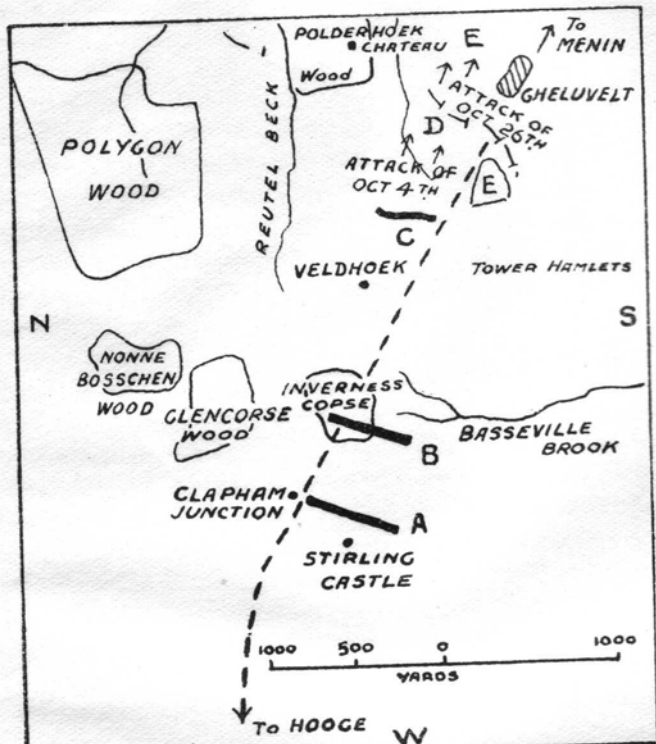
(1) Besides Captain Press, 2nd-Lieut. Lovelace was killed, and 2nd-Lieut. Fry was returned as "missing."

302

Tenbrielen still proved very troublesome; actually most of the 25 casualties incurred were caused by one shell which caught the rear platoon of C Company on its way up to the trenches. Conditions were now almost at their worst and imposed inactivity on both sides. After this came relief and a change. November 14th saw the battalion entraining at Ouderdom for Selles, in the Pas de Calais, where it was still resting when ten days later it suddenly received orders to recall all men on leave and detached duties, to dispatch all surplus kit to England, and to hold itself in readiness to entrain for a destination not announced but generally anticipated to be beyond the Alps.

November 1917
1st Battalion

303



OPERATIONS OF 1ST, 7TH & 8TH R.W.K
 DURING THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES

A. position of 7TH R.W.K Aug. 3RD - 8TH 1917
 B. " " 8TH " Sept. 7TH - 10TH 1917
 C. " taken over by 1ST R.W.K Oct 3RD 1917
 D. " captured by 1ST R.W.K Oct. 4TH 1917
 E. GHELUVELT WOOD

