

CHAPTER 19 INFANTRY HILL

Of the battalions of The Queen's Own in France one only did not share in the protracted and costly struggle in Flanders. But if the 6th Battalion missed the swamps and mud of "Third Ypres" it was far from inactive, and during the summer and early autumn of 1917 it distinguished itself in no ordinary fashion on several occasions. It is in itself some indication of the vast scale of the war that exploits as gallant and successful as those of the Twelfth Division in this period should not merely have passed unmentioned in the Commander-in-Chief's dispatches but should have received no more than a line or two in the daily communiqués. But to the units involved such actions gave just the same opportunities for the display of courage, resourcefulness, endurance, skill and devotion to duty as did a share in some great battle. Indeed a minor offensive in which some valuable tactical point was captured, or a local counter-attack which won back important trenches naturally meant much to the individual battalion entrusted with the enterprise, and in the story of the 6th R. W. K., the names of Monchy le Preux and Infantry Hill have fully as honourable a place as the Somme or Arras.

When the Twelfth Division went back to the front line in the middle of June some progress had been made both E. and N.E. of Monchy. On the left of its frontage the line had been advanced in front of Scabbard Trench, though the Germans still retained their hold on Devil's Trench. Further to the South much more progress had been made and the advanced position on the slopes of Infantry Hill was well to the East of Monchy. The right sector of the Divisional front

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ran from the Monchy-Cambrai road to a point N.W. of the Twin Copses which stood halfway between Monchy and the Bois du Sart. The front line here was known as Long Trench; this, however, did not cover the whole frontage and, being held by posts and not continuously, served rather as an outpost line to the line of main resistance in Hook Trench, behind the greater part of which Hill Trench served as a support line. At the Northern end of the line there was a patch of ground in which water was found 18 inches below the surface; here, therefore, digging was impossible, and North of the Green Lane, one of many tracks which led S.E. from Monchy, Hook Trench was a dead end, known as the Hook, only separated by a short space from the Southern part of Devil's Trench. Indeed it was only on June 29th, a few days before the 6th R.W.K. moved up to Monchy, that the 8th Royal Fusiliers had dislodged the Germans from the Hook.

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See sketch 36

The 6th's first turn in the new sector did not bring it actually into the front line; the battalion was in support or Brigade reserve, providing large working parties and having a few casualties. On July 11th, about . 5 a.m., the Germans suddenly began bombarding the British positions and then attacked in considerable force over a frontage of nearly half-a-mile, using liquid fire with considerable effect. The garrison of the line attacked put up a stout defence but were overpowered by numbers. Long Trench was lost, and for a time the enemy even got into the Northern end of Hook Trench but were ultimately driven out. On the right a bombing block was established in Long Trench about 80 yards from its junction with Hook Trench; but it was essential to recover the lost ground, and when the 6th took over the front line on July 13th it was with instructions that Long Trench was to be retaken two days later. Actually the weather turned wet and just a quarter-of-an-hour before the time fixed for the assault a message

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July 11th

arrived postponing the attack till the

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17th; there was only just time to send up the cancelling orders to the front line by a fleet footed orderly going boldly over the top, but he got through all right, and though the postponement cost the battalion nearly 20 casualties from the shell-fire which the enemy persistently maintained, it permitted careful reconnoitring.

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The object of the attack was the consolidation of a line of shell-holes about 100 yards West of Long Trench, which the Germans had been doing their best to convert into a new trench. Long Trench itself was to be occupied and held long enough to cover the consolidation. The 6th were to employ two companies, B on the right, D on the left, one platoon from each company and one of C being detailed to follow the assault and consolidate the new trench. Further to the left, North of Green Lane, the 9th Essex were to co-operate and were to construct a line running back to Hook Trench. On the right a bombing party of the 6th Queen's was to push forward from the block in Long Trench.

The attack, which was assisted by a very heavy bombardment by artillery and Stokes mortars, got off well at 4.45 a.m. on the 17th. The leading waves swept over the half-completed new trench with such rapidity that they failed to notice some score of Germans lying prone at the bottom of the trench, and when the consolidating party, following behind with rifles slung, came jumping into the trench on top of them these men showed fight but were promptly and satisfactorily disposed of with picks and shovels. The Queen's bombers, after one check, rushed the block in Long Trench over the top, and then pushed on up that trench killing and taking a good many Germans, while the rest of the trench was captured by B and D after a stiff fight, and several prisoners of the 17th Reserve Division were taken. But to consolidate the captured position was no easy task. The right and centre of Long Trench were under effective enfilade fire from the

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South. On the left the ground was like a basin, the Germans who held the Northern and Eastern edges commanded practically all the posts in the centre and the Essex were before long forced back. The German had put down a heavy barrage the moment the attack started and effectually prevented communication between the attacking companies and those in support, and of the fate of B and D no news came back, though the survivors of the pick and shovel men had been forced back to their starting line by German counterattacks and machine-gun fire.

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Colonel Alderman came up to Hook Trench and pushed out scouts to ascertain the situation, but not till after 2 p.m. did a messenger at last get back. This was Pte. Adams, who had courageously crawled back under an intense fire, creeping from shell-hole to shell-hole, and having to dodge not a few of these which were occupied by Germans. It had taken him nearly five hours to cover the 500 yards he had to cross, but his news was very welcome. It was that Captain Thomas, though wounded, had established himself in Long Trench near the junction with Green Lane, and was hanging on there with a handful of D Company and resisting all efforts to bomb him out. On his way back Pte. Adams had come across another rather larger party under 2nd Lieut. Scott-Marten and Sergt. Glare, who also were clinging to the captured position and had repulsed several German attempts to dislodge them. Immediately this news reached Colonel Alderman he began organizing a fresh attack. The Queen's were asked to make

another effort to bomb up Long Trench; the Brigade arranged for artillery co-operation, and thanks to careful preparation and to the dash with which A and C Companies advanced to the help of their comrades, the fresh attack, launched just as it got dark, was a brilliant success. The Germans were taken by surprise and driven completely out of Long Trench, many were taken and more killed, and touch was regained

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with the tenacious little parties who had held on so long and were still unconquered. With Captain Thomas were Captain Henderson-Roe (B Company's commander) and 2nd Lieut. Bull. The latter, though wounded, had crawled from shell-hole to shell-hole, collecting water, food and ammunition from casualties and helping wounded, and had done much to keep up the defence. Captain Henderson-Roe, though buried by a shell which burst close to him, had managed to dig himself out, and, in crawling along the lines before he reached Captain Thomas' post, he had collected several wounded, bandaged them and helped them to get into better shelter in shell-holes. Both he and Captain Thomas had richly earned the D.S.O.'s awarded to them, as had 2nd Lieuts. Bull and Scott-Marten their M.C.'s. and Sergt. Glare and Pte. Adams their D.C.M.'s. Their courage and endurance made the day memorable in the battalion's annals, even apart from the very considerable success with which the operation ended. By next morning the new German trench had been satisfactorily consolidated and wired. Over 150 yards of a communication trench had been dug by the 5th Northhamptons, the Divisional Pioneers, to continue Vine Street to the new position, in Long Trench a block had been made at the junction with Green Lane and The Queen's had successfully cleared the Southern end. Corps and Divisional Commanders alike were warm in their appreciation of the battalion's fine work. "It is greatly due to their pluck and tenacity and the splendid defence which Captain Thomas, 2nd Lieut. Scott-Marten and their parties had put up that the ground was secured," was Sir Charles Ferguson's (1) verdict. Naturally in such a fight casualties had been heavy; 2nd Lieuts. Bristow, H. G. C. Mann, Grocott and Rudall and 10 men were killed; 29 men were missing, while in addition to Captains Henderson-Roe

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July 18th

(1)The old Divisional Commander of the 1st Battalion in August, 1914, was now G.O.C., Seventeenth Corps, in which the 6th were serving.

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and Thomas and 2nd Lieut. Bull, 2nd Lieut. Thurburn was wounded with 55 men. But the German casualties must have been heavier, over 30 prisoners were taken, many had been killed both in the new trench and in the storming of Long Trench and in the bombing fights, while the artillery had had some fine targets in Germans bolting from Long Trench before the original attack.

A fairly quiet fortnight followed, chiefly spent in the reserve lines, finding working parties, and then on August 1st the battalion relieved the 7th East Surreys in Hook Trench. This had again become the front line, as on July 25th a strong German attack on the 36th Brigade had driven out the posts in Long Trench and the trench captured on the 17th and now known as Spoon Trench, though several saps in front of Hook Trench were still in British hands. But the Germans were evidently not yet satisfied with the position, for after a day of desultory shell-fire their artillery and trench- mortars

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See sketch 326

suddenly worked up to a hurricane bombardment about 6 p.m. on August 2nd. This lasted nearly three hours and inflicted great damage on the trenches; but casualties were minimized by the prompt action of the officers in charge, who pushed their men forward to the far end of the saps whereby they not only avoided the shells but were well posted to break up the infantry attacks when, about 9 p.m., these developed.

August 2nd

This they did in strength, not only against the 6th, but against The Queen's on their left in Twin Trench and the 7th Norfolks on the other flank. Three times the Germans emerged in force from their trenches, but each time the parapet was manned the moment the German barrage lifted and the attackers were met by a steady fire from rifles and Lewis guns, under which their lines melted away. Their last effort was rather more successful, they reached and entered the Norfolks' trenches and got into several saps on the

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left of the battalion's front and into "the Hook." From another post they were only beaten off by the courage and devotion of Sergt. Lambeth who, though three times buried by explosions, kept his Lewis gun in action and opened a heavy fire as the attackers came on.

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It was essential to expel the enemy from the ground they had gained, for the line behind was only held by a series of posts, and if the Germans retained their gains they would endanger the whole line. 2nd Lieut. Bankes, whose steadiness and coolness had done much to keep the defence going, despite the heaviness of the shelling, promptly took measures to recapture the lost ground, and counter-attacks soon ejected the enemy from all but the two saps on the left, a machine-gun and several prisoners being taken.

To these two saps the Germans clung desperately, and at daybreak were still holding the Hook and one sap, a length of perhaps fifty yards. Further attacks were postponed till evening when the sap was quickly retaken, but the night was so bright that an attempt to rush the Hook over the open failed in face of heavy machine-gun fire. Colonel Alderman then organized a barrage of rifle-grenades to assist the bombers and at last, after a strenuous bombing fight lasting an hour-and-a-half, in which 2nd Lieut. Godly led his bombers with great determination and skill, he was able to report to the Brigade the complete recapture of the position. As the survivors of the 40 or 50 Germans who had been contesting possession of the Hook bolted for their own lines they were caught by Lewis guns, which had been waiting this opportunity, and many of them fell. It had been a costly venture for them, their losses had been extremely heavy, (1) while those of the British were very light considering the weight of the bombardment and the vigour and strength of the infantry attack. The 6th had 14 men killed and missing and 2nd Lieut. Godly and about 30 men wounded,

August 3rd

(1) They were estimated at least 200.

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though as the battalion was very much below strength these losses were proportionately higher than might be thought. It was the more satisfactory to have recovered the Hook because the Germans had evidently attached considerable value to its possession, had intended to incorporate it in their own lines and had actually dug communication trenches leading back to Long Trench. These were promptly blocked, and when the battalion was relieved by the 9th Royal Fusiliers on the 6th Colonel Alderman had the

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September 1917
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satisfaction of handing over the position intact.

After this success, which won the battalion high praise from Divisional, Corps and Army Commanders and brought M.C.'s to 2nd Lieuts. Bankes and Godly, and a D.C.M. to Sergt. Lambeth, the next two months were much quieter; turns in the front line, usually four days at a time, alternated with periods in support or reserve, but in none of its front line tours did the battalion have to carry out an attack, and none of them happened to coincide with German counter-strokes to the raids which the Division continued to make with much success. On August 24th Colonel Dawson returned and resumed command, Captain L. C. R. Smith also rejoined and a dozen new subalterns made their appearance. Drafts, however, were scarcer, and though casualties were few the battalion's trench strength continued very low; of those on its rolls a large number were absent for various reasons. Thus at the end of July there were two officers acting as Town Majors, one each at Brigade Headquarters, a Training Camp and the Divisional Depot, and two sick in the country, while of the men 11 were at Brigade Headquarters, 19 in different employments under the Division, 7 attached to the R.E., 26 with the Brigade Machine Gun Company or acting as Brigade snipers; classes and schools, the Divisional Rest Camp and miscellaneous employments accounted for another 23, and with 13 sick and 8 on leave a total of 107 is reached, as compared

with just over 500 actually with the battalion. And this, it may be noted, was distinctly below the normal number of absentees; at the end of August there were 148 away to 450 present, so that the strain of holding and repairing the trenches normally allotted to a battalion fell extremely heavily on the small number actually present, especially when deductions have been made for the transport detachment and men regimentally employed. A draft of 103 men, which arrived on September 22nd, did something to improve matters, but when at the end of October the battalion at last left Monchy and the Seventeenth Corps (1) it had only just over 500 rank and file actually present.

Just before this it had achieved about the most successful of its exploits. Raids had been undertaken by most battalions of the Division and it was decided to make just one more on an unusually large scale before the Division quitted the area. At the beginning of October a specially-selected party of one officer and 50 men from each company, the whole commanded by Captain L. C. R. Smith, was detailed to proceed to Beaurains for special training, along with a similar detachment from the 6th Queen's and another of 350 from the 7th Norfolks. The line to be raided lay rather to the South of the quarter where the 6th had so far had their hardest fighting, the objective being the German trenches known as Strap Trench and Buckle Trench, not far North of the Arras-Cambrai road. The 6th attacked from Tool Trench just East of Tite's Copse, having The Queen's on its right and the Norfolks on its left. The German trenches had

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See sketch 36
October 14th

It was about this time that the 6th lost the services of the Medical Officer, who for two years had bandaged its wounds and dealt with its ailments, major and minor. Captain Carson R.A.M.C., was a man of character and competence, highly efficient, acute to detect and to discourage in effective fashion any tendency to report sick without just cause, helpful and sympathetic; he had done much for the efficiency of the battalion in more ways than one, and his departure was universally deplored. His M.C. may not figure in the honours won by the battalion, but it was none the less a source of great satisfaction to the 6th's officers and men alike.

been systematically bombarded for days before the raid and the actual attack was preceded by an eight hours' bombardment in which one 15 inch howitzer, three 12 inch, twenty 9.2 inch, over sixty 6 inch, twenty-eight 4.5 inch and seventeen 60 pounders took part, to say nothing of seventy-four 18 pounders and twenty trench mortars. The First Army would have been glad of such a weight of metal, with practically unlimited ammunition, behind its attacks in the spring of 1915. During the period of preparations for this raid Colonel Dawson was for the time in command of the Brigade, General Cator had left to take command of the Fifty-Eighth Division, the new Brigadier, Brig.-General Incedon-Webber, of the Irish Fusiliers, had not yet arrived and the senior battalion commander was away sick.

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The raid proved a conspicuous success. So good were the communication trenches in this quarter that the stormers reached their assembly positions without a casualty, and advancing behind a most accurate barrage and under cover of smoke they reached Strap Trench with little loss, for the German barrage came down well behind them. The right party of the battalion, under 2nd Lieut. Slade, met a little resistance from a machinegun and some bombers, but rushed them and swept on in close pursuit of 40 or 50 Germans, whom they chased to Buckle Trench, accounting for the majority. 2nd Lieut. Davy's party, the next to the left, drove a party of Germans from the front line into the British barrage, and then, pressing on to Buckle Trench, took some 20 prisoners and blew up a dug-out full of Germans who refused to surrender. The next party, 2nd Lieut. Parmenter's, had hardly any fighting till it reached Buckle Trench, where about 20 Germans put up a stout resistance with a machine-gun. 2nd Lieut. Parmenter, however, promptly moved to a flank with some bombers while other men covered his movements with rifle-fire; and then attacking from the flank he

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routed the enemy, taking six and killing the rest. Only the left party, 2nd Lieut. Elliott's, met any real resistance in Strap Trench, for the wire on their front was less well cut and part of the trench was but little damaged; but by taking the defenders of this section in flank they soon dislodged them, shooting them down as they fled.

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Seven minutes after "zero" all the objectives had been taken and the raiders were blowing up dugouts and strong points, rounding up prisoners and pushing patrols out beyond Buckle Trench. Everywhere tremendous damage had been done by the bombardment and it was obvious that it had inflicted heavy casualties, quite apart from the large number killed by the raiders. There was plenty of time to complete all that it was intended to do, the Germans had been hit too hard to counter-attack and their artillery fire was ineffectual. Half-an-hour after "zero" the withdrawal began and was concluded in excellent order; the patrols went first, then the men from Buckle Trench, lastly Strap Trench was evacuated under cover of parties lying out in shell-holes in No Man's Land. Casualties had been light. The 6th had only 3 men killed and 12 missing with 2nd Lieuts. Davy and Parmenter (1) and 31 men wounded; The Queen's had about as many and the Norfolks about 70, while those of the enemy could at a quite conservative estimate be put at 400. The prisoners alone taken by the 6th equalled its total casualties, and the killed on the frontage it attacked came to at least 100, while the other two battalions had done equally well. Moreover, when the Germans re-occupied their damaged trenches next day, their efforts to repair them added considerably to their casualty list, for they had to expose themselves freely to the snipers and Lewis gunners who were kept busily employed. Altogether the raid was a most conspicuous success and a

October 15th

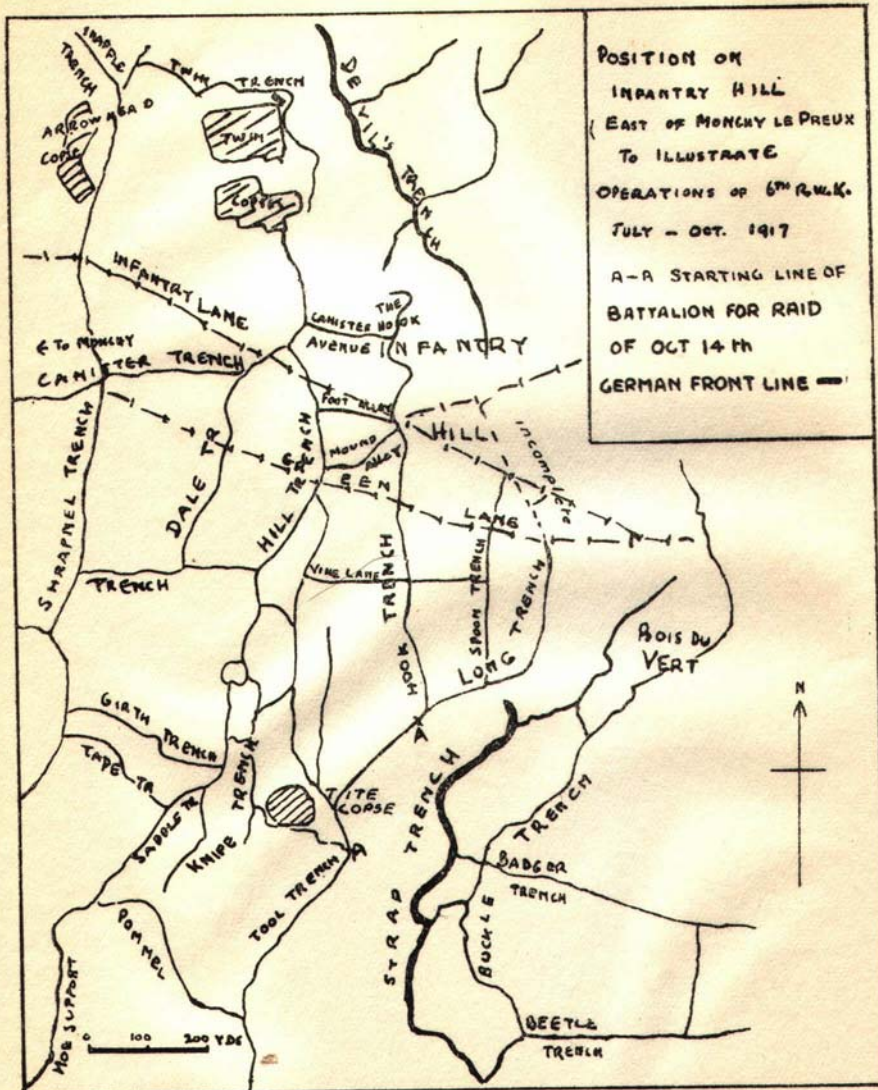
(1) He received the M.C., as did also Captain Smith, to whose careful training and skilful leadership much of the success of the raid was due.

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triumphal finale to the four months the Division had spent in this quarter. The Army Commander, Sir Julian Byng, spoke warmly of the “complete mastery over the enemy” which it had shown, and of the “dash and determination” which the raiders had displayed. The Corps Commander was not exaggerating when he took leave of the Twelfth Division on its departure from the Seventeenth Corps; “Whether in attack or defence,” he wrote, “the Division has done uniformly well and has shown qualities of tenacity and determination which have been an example to all. It has gained a great reputation.” To the 6th these words most certainly applied; its stay in the Monchy area had added notable laurels to the regimental record, and though in itself it is no infallible guide to what a battalion had deserved, to have obtained so many honours in what was from the broader point of view only a “side show” is some indication of the way in which those in authority regarded its performances.

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POSITION ON
 INFANTRY HILL
 EAST OF MONCHY LE PREUX
 TO ILLUSTRATE
 OPERATIONS OF 6TH R.W.K.
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 A-A STARTING LINE OF
 BATTALION FOR RAID
 OF OCT 14 TH
 GERMAN FRONT LINE —

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SKETCH 36.