

CHAPTER 2

THE MARNE AND AISNE

When on the evening of September 5th, the welcome orders for the advance reached the British Army the actual situation was that the bulk of the German First Army was South of the Grand Morin with its right midway between Coulommiers and Lagny with its left NE of Montceaux. Opposite its left and left centre was the Fifth French Army, now under General Franchet d'Esperey. The British Army, in position from Rozoy on the right to North of Brie Comte Robert on the left, was about 8 miles away from von Kluck's right, while more than 12 miles lay between it and Franchet d'Esperey, this gap being in some measure filled by a French Cavalry Corps. Some way behind von Kluck's right rear, and North of the Marne near Meaux, was his flank guard, one corps and a cavalry division; this, in the course of the day, became engaged with Manoury's new Sixth French Army, now advancing NE from Paris. Directly the news of this advance reached von Kluck it was recognised as a serious menace to his flank and communications, and he suspended his advance, brought his right and right centre corps, II and IV, back over the Grand Morin to meet this new enemy, and directed von der Marwitz's IInd Cavalry Corps to move SW on Lumigny and Rozoy to cover their flank. (1) Thus just as the British started to advance a gap was opening in the German line opposite them, and it was their advance into this gap until they were behind the left flank of von Luck's new line on the Lower Ourcq, which constitutes the British contribution to the great battle of the Marne. Their continued advance would have

September 5th
1914
1st Battalion
See Sketch 5

(1) These orders were issued at about 10 p.m. September 5th.

rendered his position untenable, and, therefore, just when it was going decidedly in his favour, von Kluck had to break off his struggle with Manoury. Once again over rating the damage inflicted on the British in the first encounters, von Kluck had so much underestimated the force necessary to hold them up that they were able to play a decisive part in the battle without ever having to engage much more than the advanced guards of their columns.

September 5th
1914
1st Battalion

The orders for September 6th issued to the Second Corps on the previous evening gave it as its objective the line La Houssaye-Villeneuve le Comte, the Fifth Division being on the left and advancing on Villeneuve. For this day's march the 13th Brigade was detailed as advanced guard and the Queen's Own, much the strongest battalion in the Brigade, had the satisfaction of finding the vanguard. Parading before 4 a.m., A and B Companies started off at the head of the column and, passing through the 14th Brigade, who had been on outpost, pushing steadily NE, through the Forest of Crecy. Everyone was in high spirits and anxious for an encounter with the enemy; they were not, however to have this satisfaction as, although the Division Cavalry and cyclists encountered a few Uhlans, no opposition was met with before Villeneuve was reached about 8 a.m. Here an outpost line was taken up by A and B with C and D in support. Sounds of firing could be heard away to the SE, and about 1 p.m. orders were received to continue the advance, but this time in an Easterly direction, Dammartin being now the objective assigned. The K.O.Y.L.I. had now taken over the vanguard duty, and the march to Dammartin was accomplished without incident, though the mounted troops

September 6th
1914

accounted for several German cavalry patrols. Shortly before reaching Dammartin the Brigade was halted and ordered to bivouac, but almost immediately the order was cancelled and the march resumed to Courtry which was reached about 8 p.m. The day's advance, 17 miles,

had brought the Second Corps to the Grand Morin, on the Northern bank of which it established its outposts after a little fighting. On its right the First Corps had met more serious opposition from the main body of von der Marwitz's Cavalry Corps; this had retired early in the afternoon, but the First Corps had been so much delayed that it was behind the Second and did not reach the Grand Morin. On September 7th, therefore, the Second Corps did not advance far, having to wait till the First got up level, and for the battalion the day proved uneventful. The 13th Brigade did not start its march till the morning was well advanced, and then moved to Boissy le Chatel without encountering the enemy, though signs of his recent presence were plentiful enough. "Every village had been turned inside out by the Germans" writes an officer, "and bottles were as thick as peas". Meanwhile the First Corps had reached the Grand Morin, and the Germans had retired behind the Petit Morin almost without offering any opposition.

September 6th
1914
1st Battalion

September 7th
1914

The next day, however, was to see more fighting. The continued pressure of the French Sixth Army had forced von Kluck to transfer his two remaining corps, the IIIrd and IXth, to the Ourcq and thus left von Bulow to maintain his ground against Franchet d'Esperey without their assistance. The IInd German Cavalry Corps began drawing off Westward across the front of the British and left only a rearguard, including four Jager battalions, about La Ferte sous Jouarre, on which the British Third Corps was advancing. Thus on the 1st German Cavalry Corps devolved the main task of holding up the British on the Petit Morin, and the day's fighting took the shape of several sharp actions for the crossings of that stream, the First Corps attempting the passage at Bellot and Sablonnières, the Second at Orly and St Cyr, further West. The Petit Morin, running through a deep and heavily wooded ravine, afforded ideal rearguard positions, but the British were not to be

September 8th
1914

denied and the passages were all forced after sharp fighting, a good many casualties being inflicted on the enemy and nearly 300 prisoners, with several machine guns, taken by the Second Corps alone.

September 8th
1914

The Fifth Division's share in this action was the forcing of the passage at St Cyr and St Ouen, held by the 5th German Cavalry Division and attached Jager. The 13th Brigade once again found the advanced guard for the Division and had as its vanguard A and B Companies, 1st R.W.K. Starting about 4 a.m. the vanguard soon found the 3rd Cavalry Brigade held up under a brisk artillery fire on the Petit Morin at Cyr. The advanced guard was at once deployed and advanced to support the cavalry, the K.O.Y.L.I on the right and the R.W.K. on the left of the Doue-Mauroy road. But the enemy's artillery which had been skilfully placed gave considerable trouble and could not be located or silenced. Meanwhile the 14th Brigade, moving to the right of the 13th, pushed down to the river and, crossing higher up at Ouen, cooperated effectively also with the troops of the Third Division further to the right. By 1 p.m. the enemy was beginning to withdraw

and the firing line of the 13th Brigade was approaching the river, which was crossed in the end with little difficulty. St Cyr was carried and the 13th and 14th Brigades, pushing on unopposed by Champtortel, reached Noisement, three miles North of the river at dusk. It had been a hard day for the battalion, which had been on the move since before daybreak, but partly owing to the thickness of the woods which had concealed both sides from each other, it had got off practically without casualties. The day had, however, had most important results. Of the 1st Cavalry Corps, The Guard Division had been thrust back NE, and no longer interposed between the British and the Marne, the other division, the 5th, had been even more sharply handled and had retired some miles behind the Marne, so that

von Kluck found it necessary to detail general von Kraewel's infantry brigade of the IXth Corps to support his cavalry, while about a whole division of the IIIrd Corps, which was just about to be thrown in against Manoury, had to wheel about and march back towards the Marne.

September 5th
1914
1st Battalion

However, these reinforcements came too late to prevent the British crossing the Marne. On their left the Third Corps was held up at La Ferte sous Jouarre, where the bridges had been destroyed, and did not get across until the afternoon, but the Second Corps had the advanced guards of both its divisions on the right bank before 8 a.m. and the First Corps on the right advanced even more rapidly. But in the course of the morning the Second Corps met with considerable opposition, especially in front of the Fifth Division SE of Montreuil aux Lions. Here once again guns concealed in thick woods defied all efforts to locate them, and as von Kraewel's brigade had been thrown into the fight at this point the 14th Brigade, which was acting as advanced guard, found its progress checked. There was some confused fighting in the thick woods around Pisseloup and Le Limon; it was difficult to keep direction in such a blind country and the enemy's positions were well chosen and hard to locate accurately, while enfilade fire from Chamoust, on the left front of the attack, probed very effectively. The 13th Brigade had, therefore to be called upon. It had stood to arms about 4 a.m., had crossed the Marne at Mery and halted. It was ordered to push two battalions forward on the left of the 14th Brigade to make for Montreuil and, if possible, dislodge the troublesome concealed battery. The R.W.K. were told off for the task and, followed by the K.O.Y.L.I., they pushed forward about 3 p.m. up the valley road towards Courcelles. As they advanced they met with a good many wounded of the 14th Brigade, making their way to the rear and reporting that the D.C.L.I. on the left of the 14th Brigade had been

September 9th
1914

heavily counter attacked. However, no enemy were encountered, and soon after 5 p.m. the leading companies C and D had established themselves on high ground about Moitiebard and Major Buckle reported that he was pushing out two platoons of D to his right, in which direction the enemy were said to be. No contact with the Germans, however, followed, and the battalion dug itself in, having received orders to push on to Montreuil early in the morning. It would seem from the accounts given by the 14th Brigade that the advance of these two battalions had proved effective even though they had not fired a shot. On their approach the German counter attack against the D.C.L.I. had been suspended while von Kraewel hastened to disengage directly it became dark

September 9th
1914

and fell back to Gandelu, 6 miles North of Montreuil. Von Kluck's Army was in full retreat, its left, imperilled by the British advance, going first and being covered by vigorous action on the part of the right wing.

In the pursuit of September 10th, marked by more than one sharp rearguard action and by the capture of 1,000 German prisoners, The Queen's Own had no very active part. The chief fighting and the substantial captures of prisoners occurred on the lines of march of the First Corps and Third Division, and though the Fifth captured many stragglers it met with nothing like serious opposition. The battalion had started off for Montreuil in the small hours and by good leading succeeded, despite the woods and darkness, in arriving there about 5 o'clock. But, the only Germans in Montreuil were dead or wounded, and the inhabitants reported that the enemy had cleared out an hour before.

September 10th
1914

After a couple of hours' halt, which allowed breakfasts to be eaten in the main street in pouring rain, the battalion was off again before 8 o'clock, pushing on through Gandelu to Chezy. The road was strewn with the debris of an army in retreat, ammunition carts, some full, some empty, broken down waggons, dead and

34

wounded horses, packs and equipment of every kind. Despite the rain, the men's spirits were high, all this encouraging evidence of the hurried nature of the German retreat showed those who had endured the long tramp from Mons to Tournan that indeed the tables were turned and that they were getting their own back. At Chezy, which was reached about 6 p.m. the battalion bivouacked and was joined by a draft of 185 men, (1) which raised it practically up to strength again.

September 10th
1914
1st Battalion

September 11th brought a hard march in pouring rain, but no fighting. The battalion leading the Division again, marched at 5 a.m. and after covering 15 miles arrived at Hertennes at 3 p.m. wet through. However it was able to get some excellent billets and a good night's rest. The British were now within a short distance of Aisne, which would form a serious obstacle to a further advance should the Germans elect to stand and fight. It was all important, therefore, to discover their intentions, whether the bridges had been destroyed and whether the passage of the river would be opposed. The 13th Brigade, still keeping its place at the head of the column, started off before 6 a.m. on September 12th, close in rear of the cavalry. This was another day of heavy rain, but of recovered touch with the enemy, for after passing through Chacrise and Serches and reaching the hills overlooking the Aisne at Ciry, the battalion came up with the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, who had been held up by the enemy's guns and could not get on. The battalion deployed into battle formation and advanced into Ciry, while the battalion scouts under Lieut Moulton-Barrett pushed forward to the river to reconnoitre Missy Bridge and discover if it was held. The patrol did not manage actually to reach the bridge, but, on getting within 150 yards, drew a heavy fire which provided all the information required,

September 11th
1914

See Sketch 6

September 12th
1914

(1) With this draft were Lieuts Moulton-Barrett (from the Regular establishment of the 3rd Battalion) and Furber (3rd R.W.K) and 2nd Lieut Russell (newly commissioned from the R.M.C.)

though thanks to bad shooting of the Germans, Lieut Moulton-Barrett and his men got back with only one casualty. Shortly afterwards the battalion received orders to fall back to Serches as no billets were available. This meant a five miles' tramp back in the rain for very tired men, but good billets at the end of it.

September 12th
1914
1st Battalion

But, if the Second Corps had not secured the bridges over the Aisne the Third Corps on its left had been more fortunate and its leading troops had not only managed to begin crossing the half destroyed bridge at Venizel, two miles below Missy, before midnight, but the 11th Brigade had pushed rapidly forward across the low lying fields near the river bank and seized the higher ground about Bucy le Long before daybreak on the 13th. This prompt and daring stroke had therefore effected a considerable alteration in the tactical situation on the British left when the Fifth Division again advanced to the Aisne on the morning of September 13th. With the Fourth Division already well across it was possible for the Engineers to throw another bridge across the bend of the river between Venizel and Missy without being prevented by the enemy. This was Moulin des Roches, a mile above Venizel, to which spot the 14th Brigade was diverted. Meanwhile the Queen's Own had renewed their efforts to secure a passage at Missy for the 13th Brigade.

September 13th
1914

Starting about 4 a.m. the battalion pushed forward to Sermoise, where B and C Companies deployed astride the road leading down to Missy Bridge. Directly B began to advance towards the river it came under a very heavy fire from the far bank, both from rifles and machine guns. This inflicted a good many casualties, and unfortunately among those killed was Captain Fisher, who had gone ahead to reconnoitre the line of advance. The battalion thus lost one of its most capable junior officers, a man of real character and great promise. But well supported by the artillery on the heights

behind B pressed on nevertheless and Nos. 6 and 8 Platoons established themselves on the river bank not far from the bridge and opened a heavy fire against the enemy on the far side. The bridge, a three span iron girder structure, had had its northernmost span blown up, and the passage was held by the Germans in some force while their guns replied vigorously to the British bombardment. The advanced detachment was accordingly ordered back to the Northern edge of Gobinne Wood, as there was little to be gained by clinging to its rather exposed position, where it to some extent masked the fire of its own guns. In doing this B was so unfortunate as to lose Lieut Vicat, another valuable and popular officer, and shortly afterwards the whole company was withdrawn to the railway embankment East of Sermoise, where it entrenched, C meanwhile maintaining its position and keeping up a steady fire. For some time the artillery duel continued, while the 14th Brigade began crossing the river at Moulin des Roches and advancing across the low ground towards the village of St Marguerite to support the Fourth Division, who had been counter attacked but were making some progress. Either because of this threat to their flank, or because of the effects of the artillery bombardment, the defenders of Missy Bridge thought it expedient to fall back, and when, about 3 p.m. C Company pushed forward again they found the bridge unoccupied. Just before this 2nd Lieut Holloway had worked his way down to the riverbank, located a German machine gun and managed to get one of the British guns on to it, effectually silencing it.

On Lieut Holloway's report that the bridge head had been evacuated the rest of the battalion advanced to the bridge. Luckily a small boat had been discovered which would take five men, and in this, using sticks instead of the missing oars, Lieut Holloway, Sergt Hodge, and three men crossed the river. One

of the men took the boat back and in five minutes' time a second boatload was across. The party thereupon pushed forward into the wood, encountered and rushed a German picquet and gained the far edge. More men were constantly coming over, and by 6.30 forty were on the edge of the wood ready to advance. Just then strong German patrol appeared advancing down the road. It was getting dark, but against the light of a burning village in the rear they were clearly visible and gave a good target, and a few minutes' firing soon sent them to the right-about. After that the passage went on without further interruption, though twice during the evening the Germans made attacks which the covering party beat off with ease. The 59th Field Co. R.E. fitted up a raft to supplement the means of ferrying, and before long C and A Companies were across and entrenching in the wood, while the rest of the battalion was gradually transferred to the right bank as the night wore on.

September 13th
1914
1st Battalion

Meanwhile the 14th Brigade, co-operating with the Fourth Division had advanced against the Southern end of the Chivres spur, the dominating tactical feature in this part of the line. Neither the Fourth Division attacking from the West nor the 14th Brigade attacking from the South could effect much, but the 14th reached and passed St Marguerite and established itself between that village and a point just West of Missy, ready to renew the advance next morning. The 15th Brigade, which had followed the 14th across at Moulin des Roches, was directed to push forward and prolong the line of the 14th by attacking Missy. But for the R.W.K and for the K.O.S.B's who had followed them across and taken post in the woods to their right, an active part in the attack was not possible. Their position was commanded from the slopes of the Conde spur, some 900 yards away, and to have advanced without more artillery support than was available would have been useless. As it was, the tow battalions were under

September 14th
1914

a heavy fire throughout the day and were not very fortunate in getting targets at which to fire back. They could only hold on and improve their positions.

September 14th
1914
1st Battalion

The attack on the Chivres position at first went well, and some of the East Surreys and Bedfords made their way some distance up the spur. But in the woods direction was hard to keep; there was confusion and congestion in the firing line, and finally the attackers withdrew to a new line, slightly in advance of their starting points. As the village of Missy was included in this, the battalion was able to push forward during the night and take up a new position along the road from the bridge to Missy. Three companies were in the firing line, A and B, East of the road and facing E, D on their left just South of Missy, flung back to face North, while C was held in reserve on the West of the road. The position had many defects; it was difficult to dig deep trenches as about three foot down water was reached, the Germans on the Chivres-Conde spur

September 1914

overlooked the low ground between Missy and the river and their snipers, well concealed in the woods on the hillside and along the river bank above the bridge, proved very troublesome, though sat 900 yards the distance to the foot of the ridge, they did not make very good practice. But the worst feature was that whereas the German guns could play upon the British trenches with much effect, they were themselves mostly out of the reach of the British artillery, which could not be brought across the river in the Missy area and had to put up with the positions on the hills some way back from the left bank. The Fifth Division, therefore would not get from its artillery the support needed to push forward, and only by pushing forward could it find positions from which its artillery could support it adequately.

This was perhaps the main reason for the comparative inactivity to which the Fifth Division and the Third Corps, the left wing of the British Army, found themselves

39

committed from September 15th onwards. Below Conde the artillery position favoured the Germans so much that to have renewed the attack which had been checked at Chivres spur would have little prospect of success. The Germans on their part made no effort to drive back in to the river the troops who had established themselves on the right bank, but contented themselves with keeping them under an intermittent shell fire. This varied greatly in intensity and effect; sometimes it amounted to a regular bombardment, as on September 20th, when Missy received a severe dose and was very much damaged, some days passed without a single casualty from shell fire, but on the other hand a single shell would inflict several. Thus on September 19th D Company lost three splendid N.C.O.'s in Sergts. Fitzgerald, Barden and Warnett, all killed by the same shell. Another day the machine gun section had its wagon blown to pieces, three horses killed and Lieut Johnston, the machine gun officer, put out of action by concussion. On the whole, however, the snipers were responsible for more casualties, especially at first. After that the men were pretty well dug in, communication trenches had been dug and screens of branches planted in the road so much interfered with the view of the snipers that men could move about outside the trenches in day time without at once attracting bullets. Fortunately, also, if the wetness of the ground made life in the trenches very uncomfortable it greatly diminished the effects of the high explosive shells, whose bursts often did no more than cover those near at hand with mud and water. But the fortnight which the battalion spent in these trenches at Missy was a costly period, judged by the standards of later days of the "trench warfare" to which the British Army was getting its first introduction. The total casualties on the Aisne came to two officers killed (Captain Fisher and Lieut. Vicat) with 31 other ranks, two officers wounded

September 1914
1st Battalion

40

(Lieuts. Wilberforce-Bell and Johnston), with 96 men. (1) On the other hand the sick rate was unexpectedly low, considering the frequent rains, the wet state of the trenches and the lack of all those appliances like gumboots, which were later on to make life in the trenches more endurable. At first especially, the men were never dry and had to sleep in wet clothes without a chance of changing them or getting a wash. Nevertheless, only one officer (Captain Bonsor) and under 40 men had to be sent to hospital for

September 1914
1st Battalion

sickness. These losses were more than balanced by the arrival on the 23rd of 176 men under Lieuts. Pownall (2) and Harding. (2) This draft included a few recovered wounded and stragglers, and on the 18th Captain Tulloch, who had been wounded at Le Cateau, rejoined, while Captains Grant, (3) Beeman (4) and Bonsor, (4) and 2nd Lieuts. Tinne, (2) Williams (2) and Kerr (2) arrived a couple of days earlier. At the end of September, therefore, the battalion was practically up to strength.

During this period communication with the left bank, where the battalion transport remained at Sermoise, was maintained by a pontoon bridge established by the R.E. just below Missy Bridge, but less in view of the enemy. Across this rations and ammunition had to be brought up and wounded evacuated, entailing much work on the Quartermaster and his staff. But the transport which had had a dozen casualties from a couple of shells on the 13th was lucky in escaping very lightly from its nightly journeys down to the river, and never failed to carry out its tasks.

At length, on October 1st, came the welcome tidings that relief was at hand, and that evening the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, of the Fourth Division, turned up to

October 1st
1914

(1) These include the losses suffered on September 12th – 14th in the passage of the river.

(2) From the R.M.C.

(3) Of the 2nd Battalion

(4) Of the 3rd Battalion.

41

take over the position. The first of the many “relief’s” the battalion was to carry out was completed without incident in the small hours of October 2nd, and, thanks to a fog, the battalion was well out of range of shellfire before daylight. After so many days cramped up in trenches with little chance of exercise marching was painful; many men found their feet and legs so swollen that they had difficulty in keeping up. Reaching Couvrelles by 8.30 a.m. the battalion had hardly had time for more than a wash and change of clothes before the prospect of a week's rest with which it had been indulging itself were dispelled by orders to be off again. That evening it started on the move which was to take it to even heavier fighting than it had yet experienced.

October 2nd
1914

42



