

CHAPTER 24 THE GERMANS ATTACK

When, on March 21st, 1918, the long-expected German attack at last developed The Queen's Own had two battalions in the front line, exposed to the full weight of the terrific bombardment which ushered it in. For both the 7th and 8th Battalions March 21st began a time of severe trial; both were to suffer terribly, the 7th indeed was almost wiped out, both were to do splendidly and add greatly to their laurels. Before the fighting on the front of the Third and Fifth Armies died down in the middle of April two more battalions had become involved, the 6th coming down from the Lys Valley to stem the hostile advance across the Ancre, the 10th, newly returned from Italy, being thrown in at an earlier stage.

March 21st 1918
7th & 8th
Battalions

The 7th, as already mentioned, had returned to the "Forward Zone" in its Divisional sector South of St. Quentin two days before the attack. It had barely settled down before, on the afternoon of the 20th, the warning "Prepare for attack" came round. A raid on the front of the neighbouring Corps had revealed the fact that the enemy were massing near St. Quentin and must be on the point of attacking.

7th Battalion
See sketch 39

A night of anticipation was followed at 4.30 next morning by the outburst of the heaviest bombardment the 7th had ever experienced. At that hour it was still dark, but as dawn came nearer it became evident that the morning was going to be shrouded in the thickest of mists, under cover of which the enemy would be able to approach undetected to within 30 or 50 yards. The mist was the greater disadvantage because it presented the conditions which the new system of defence was least well adapted to meet. This depended on good

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visibility. The whole scheme of defended localities sweeping intervening spaces with crossfire was paralyzed by the all-pervading mist. The German tactics of "infiltration," pushing forward through weak points or gaps in the enemy's line and so outflanking the positions at which their advance was held up, could not have been tried under more favourable circumstances than on March 21st. Instead of the garrisons of the posts in the "Outpost Zone" having a good field of fire and supporting each other with enfilade fire they were practically blinded; and as the situation of most of the chief redoubts and defended localities and even of the supporting artillery was well known to the enemy, the mist was no obstacle to their being shelled by the map. At the Battalion Headquarters of the 7th all the overhead shelters were destroyed almost at once, the officers' mess being the first to take fire, and the accuracy of the bombardment was on a parallel with its intensity.

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7th Battalion

Shortly after the bombardment opened all wires were cut (1) and except for a few runners and wounded men hardly any of A and C Companies who were in the 7th's front posts got back even as far as Battalion Headquarters at Durham Post on the road from Moy to LyFontaine. Actually the German infantry attack did not develop till about four hours after the bombardment began, by which time heavy casualties and much damage had been inflicted by it. About 8 a.m. the platoon of C, which was in Moy itself, was ordered back to its Company Headquarters on the Western edge of Moy, but found German infantry swarming up the little valleys on both sides. A stout resistance was offered by the platoon, who found good targets for rifles and Lewis guns and inflicted many casualties on the enemy before it was overwhelmed. One of the few

1. Sergt. Hubble, the Signalling Sergeant, did splendid work, going out repeatedly, despite the intense shell - fire, to reestablish communication with the companies. He was cut off by the enemy and nearly taken, but ultimately got back to the British lines after dark.

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survivors, L/Cpl. Purdham, emptied twenty drums from his Lewis gun into the Germans during this fight. Captain Watts and the small party at C's Headquarters, finding the Germans working round both flanks, effected a retirement to Durham Post about 11 a.m. C's post at Le Vert Chasseur further to the right, which 2nd Lieut E. A. Thomas's platoon was holding, was attacked rather later. 2nd Lieut. Thomas was wounded at the outset, but the platoon sergeant took charge and put up a fine fight, holding the enemy at bay for some time; indeed it was only after he had been and the Lewis gun disabled that the post was finally rushed, only three survivors getting away. A Company on the left was also attacked in overwhelming force, but held out with magnificent devotion and tenacity, inspired by the fine examples set by Lieut. S.A. French and Sergt. Coleman, both of whom died at their post. It was overpowered in the end, but apparently rather after C, for at 11.15 a message from it reached Battalion Headquarters, timed 10.25 a.m., and reporting that the Germans had penetrated the line to its right.

But even after the advanced companies had been overpowered the 7th continued to resist stubbornly. The support company, D, at Drummond Post, just East of the Vendeuil-St. Quentin Road, was attacked in great force about 11 a.m. The Germans got close up to the post under cover of the mist and poured in heavy machine-gun fire from both flanks at close range. The post had already been much damaged by the bombardment, and though the survivors of the garrison put up a good fight they were soon overwhelmed a few only escaping. (1) This left B Company and Battalion Headquarters manning Durham Post against which the Germans now pressed on.

1. Lieut. Eason, the Company Commander, was among them, managing to reach Battalion Headquarters.

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This was first attacked soon after 10 a.m., (1) but the enemy advancing across the open were driven off by rifle-fire. Renewing the attack they got into the post but were promptly ejected. By 11 o'clock, however, they had surrounded it, and a message reporting that the post was still holding out reached Brigade Headquarters shortly before midday. About 11.30 a large body of Germans massing in a sunken road before attacking were skilfully enfiladed by a section directed by the Adjutant, Lieut. Rapson. He was mortally wounded in doing this, but heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy and the attack was nipped in the bud. About the same time Lieut. Webb, the signaling officer, was hit, and Captain Vaughan, of B Company, was disabled by a wound received when clearing out some Germans who were creeping under the wire: and then at 12.30 Colonel Crosthwaite sent off his last runner down a sunken road with the message, "Boche all round within 50 yards except rear. Can only see 40 yards, so it is difficult to kill the 'blighters.' "

For some hours longer Durham continued its gallant resistance; repeated efforts by the enemy to get in were repulsed by rifle-fire or by bombers in a trench which Lieut. Eason was defending. Soon after 2 p.m. the Colonel was hit and rendered unconscious, and then when the mist lifted the survivors could see the Germans already a long way

in rear and realized that there was no hope that a counter-attack would extricate them. Under such circumstances surrender was inevitable.

So effective, however, had been the fight put up in the "Forward Zone" that at midnight the "Battle Zone" of the Eighteenth Division was still intact. If the 7th had been overwhelmed it had done its work and exacted a high price from the enemy. Losses had been heavy;

(1) It is some indication of the way in which the defensive system was disorganised by the fog that the reserve company should have been attacked before even the outposts had been overcome.

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of the 7th Captain McDonald, the second-in-command, who had been sent back to Brigade Headquarters about 9 o'clock, could collect less than 20, and the Buffs and Berkshires, if in slightly better case, were the merest fragments. But the Germans had been hard hit, too. Had they fared no better elsewhere than they did against the Eighteenth Division, March 21st would have been a black day indeed for them. It appeared from the accounts of prisoners that they had put four Divisions in against the Eighteenth but not even the whole of the objective assigned to the first of them had been reached. But the Divisions on both flanks of the Eighteenth had not managed to keep their "Battle Zones" intact, indeed on the left the Germans were well behind the line on which the Eighteenth were standing; the 54th Brigade, therefore, instead of being available for a counter-attack, had to form a defensive flank. Accordingly, at 1 a.m. on the 22nd, orders had to be given for the Division to conform to the movements of the Corps on the flanks and to fall back behind the Crozat Canal, where a stand was made from about North of Quessy past Menessis to Jussv.

March 21st 1918
7th Battalion

See sketch 40

In the fighting of March 22nd along the Canal the remnant of the 7th R.W.K. played little part; it had been taken back to Frieres-Failloeuil, where another officer and 60 men, details who had not been in the line, joined Captain McDonald, whose detachment was now organized as one Company of a composite battalion along with the Brigade Trench Mortar Battery and the survivors of the 8th R. Berkshires. The Germans pressed their attacks with vigour, but a heavy price was exacted for such ground as they gained, and when they did get across prompt counter-attacks thrust them back. The Eighteenth had the satisfaction of maintaining its position throughout March 22nd, but when the enemy renewed his attacks next morning it was found that he had managed to get round both flanks and that a retire-

March 22nd

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ment was necessary. In this the 53rd Brigade's composite battalion, till then in reserve, came in for some sharp fighting before retiring to Villequier Aumont, where a stand was so successfully made that when a further retirement to Commenchon proved necessary late at night it was practically unmolested.

March 1918
7th Battalion

Next day saw the survivors of the 7th R.W.K. on the extreme right of the divisional line near Caillouel next the French. There had been time to dig in well and in consequence, despite the heavy shelling to which the line had been subjected, casualties were few and the enemy's advance was well held. But once again the troops on the flank gave, and the Division had to retire during the night through Mondescourt to the Appilly-Grandru road where another stand was made. This was a most successful effort. The high

March 24th

ground overlooking Mondescourt on which the composite battalion and the 8th East Surreys were standing was a good position, and the two battalions, though suffering severely from machine-gun fire, were able to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy and to fight a thoroughly satisfactory rear-guard action. Casualties were heavier this day, the R.W.K. having nearly 40; but the enemy were checked for several hours and the stubborn stand of the 53rd Brigade went far to prevent the Germans from intercepting the Division's retirement over the Oise. This was safely accomplished on the night of March 25th-26th, and the next day saw the little fragment of the 7th in billets at Pontoise.

March 25th

March 26th

But it was not to get a rest; although the French, who now interposed between what was left of the Third Corps and the enemy, had checked the German advance at the line of the Oise, the pressure on Amiens was such not even the exhausted and shattered Eighteenth Division could be given rest. It had, therefore, to start at once, and moving by Nampcel and Boves reached Gentelles, just S. of Arniens, on the 28th. Here the composite battalion took up a position

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S and E. of the village but moved forward in the evening to a new position between Hangard and Villers-Bretonneux with the French on the right. This brought it into the front line again and during the next day (March 30th) it was subjected to a heavy bombardment, as the Germans were attacking in force to the South, and it suffered several casualties. That evening it was relieved and taken back to Gentelles, where it was to be reorganized.

March 1918
7th Battalion

On the way round from Pontoise the 7th had picked up its transport at Mantebray and a few officers and men had rejoined from leave or employments, but the battalion as it had existed on the morning of March 21st had been almost obliterated. Sixteen officers, including Colonel Crosthwaite and Captains Watts and Godly, were missing along with the Chaplain (the Rev. G. C. R. Cooke) the M.O. (Captain Moore) and 577 other ranks; two other officers were wounded, and for the reconstruction of the battalion there was only the scantiest nucleus. But no time could be allowed for reconstruction. There was available as reinforcements a body of 20 officers and 500 men, known as the 12th Entrenching Battalion, and this unit was transformed there and then into three companies of the reconstituted 7th R.W.K., Captain McDonald's party, who formed the fourth company, B, serving as a link with the old battalion. Colonel W. Hodson, M.C., of the Cheshires, now took command, and on the evening of April 1st this new 7th R.W.K. was thrown into the fight. By this time the character of the battle had greatly changed; the great German offensive was in its last phase; if the Allied line was still to be pushed back in places the long retreat was over.

1st April 1918

The 8th Battalion's experiences in the great ordeal had been not unlike those of the 7th. March 21st had found it also in the "Forward Zone," it had been subjected to the same tremendous bombardment and had been attacked in great force and under the same

March 21st
8th Battalion

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disadvantageous conditions of weather. It added not a little to the strain upon its officers and men that they had just completed a period of ten very hard days and nights in the front line, in which there had been any amount of work and hardly any sleep, 6 officers and over 100 men had been on patrol every night in No Man's Land, which at

March 21st 1918
8th Battalion

this point was very extensive, and the whole battalion was very much in need of the relief which was its due.

See sketch 41

Of the two companies in its advanced positions B, on the right, was first attacked by infantry about 5 a.m., when parties of the enemy began attempting to penetrate between the strong points in the "Forward Zone." None of these met with any success, but about 8 a.m. matters became acute, for the next battalion on the right was rushed and overcome, and almost at once the enemy developed an outflanking movement along the Omignon Valley. B were warned just in time to blow up a bridge over the Omignon and to arrange for the defence of the threatened flank. Before long the enemy were pressing hard in front and were well established on the right flank, while simultaneously they began to work down the Bellenglise-Vermand Road and to threaten the company's left also. Nevertheless B put up a splendid fight, beat off all the attacks on its front, and had the satisfaction of punishing the enemy heavily. Not till ammunition failed did B give way, and even then made a desperate effort to cut its way with the bayonet through the Germans who had by this time completely surrounded it. Captain Allworth and most of the survivors were taken, hardly any getting back to the main position.

D Company, on the left, had a similar experience. The mist enabled the enemy to penetrate unperceived between its posts, which were overwhelmed one by one, and by 11 o'clock the last of them had gone. But the time which the stubborn defence of the "Outpost Zone" had secured proved invaluable. Had the outposts been

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rushed at once the garrison of the main position at Vadencourt must have been caught like rats in a trap, and had Vadencourt gone the Division would have stood but a poor chance. The delay the outpost companies imposed on the enemy, four hours at the lowest computation, meant that the defenders of the main position were able to deal with the attack in broad daylight and with the mist gone. Some time before 11 a.m. an attack had developed against the main position on the second ridge. It came mainly from the right up the road from Maissemy which had evidently been taken. But the steps which had been promptly taken to destroy the bridge over the Omignon and to form a defensive flank enabled the defence to hold the Germans at bay; the left was secure enough, for the 3rd Rifle Brigade were holding on well, so the enemy had no alternative but to deliver frontal attacks and presented targets of which full advantage was taken, for before mid-day the fog had cleared away. Once a whole battalion came diagonally across the front and was extremely heavily punished, and all the afternoon the 8th maintained its position unshaken, beating off a succession of attacks in force. About 7 p.m. the Germans overcame the resistance of the post at Cooker Quarry on the left, and then began to threaten the 8th from the higher ground on that flank. Nevertheless, until dark the battalion hung on, though both its flanks were now "in the air," keeping the enemy at bay, and then got away covered by a rear-guard under Lieut. Goulden and 2nd Lieuts. Pfeuffar and Tiley. Thanks to this party's determined stand the retirement to the "Battle Zone," the so-called "Brown Line," was carried out unmolested and the new line was satisfactorily taken up and organized, the rear-guard itself managing to get back, to the general satisfaction and surprise. But it was not really very surprising if the Germans should have been incapable of pursuing; the heavy price they had paid for the "Outpost Zone" of

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the Twenty-Fourth Division had clearly taken all the sting out of the attacking Divisions. Sir Douglas Haig's despatch of July 20th 1918 has spoken of the "vigorous resistance of the Twenty Fourth Division," and the Division had done splendid service by its determined defence of the ridge North of the Omignon.

March 21st 1918
8th Battalion

Next morning the German attack was renewed in great force and once again it was favoured by mist. The defence was handicapped by the losses which its artillery had sustained on the previous day, but again the Twenty-Fourth made the Germans fight hard and pay dearly for trifling gains. More than once their attacking waves reached the wire, but none got through in front of the 8th R.W.K., and many who had taken refuge in trenches and shell-holes in No Man's Land were dislodged by rifle-grenades and shot down as they sought to escape. All through the morning the defence held, but bad news came in from the flanks. The enemy was exploiting his advantage at the points where, like Hargicourt and Templeux le Guerard, he had been most successful on the previous day, and by mid-day he was reaching Vermand and Bernes and was round both the Twenty-Fourth's flanks.

March 22nd

Thus about 2 p.m., after what has been described as "a really satisfactory morning," the 8th and two companies of the 13th Middlesex, who had reinforced it, had to go. Their line of retirement lay to the S.W. towards Monchy Lagache, and the move was carried out most successfully, the punishment which the Division had inflicted on its opponents proving once again its surest safeguard. On the rearward way it passed through one of the few Divisions available in reserve, the Fiftieth, deployed on the line Happencourt-Villéveque-Boucly, and under its cover Monchy Lagache was reached and the battalion was gratified to find its transport and a meal. But the enemy's pressure was still so heavy that a further retirement was inevitable; and next day saw the Twenty-Fourth Division on its

March 23rd

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way back to cross the Somme at Falvy, covered by the 72nd Brigade and some hastily collected reinforcements. At 10 o'clock the 8th received orders to withdraw and reached the bridges without much difficulty, though the rear party, the 3rd Rifle Brigade and some 9th East Surreys, were more severely pressed. But that day's trial for the 8th came later; after reaching Licourt, four miles West of the river, it was suddenly recalled to the Somme, as the position was reported to be unsatisfactory. It arrived, however, to find it was not required and could go back to Licourt, so the men, already utterly spent with nearly three days of fighting and marching with little rest and scanty rations, had the extra eight miles for no purpose. Still the spirit which the 8th showed was really extraordinary. The battalion kept together in wonderful fashion. Time after time the strength was checked and it was proved that there was not a single man unaccounted for; once three men got cut off, joined another unit, and after wandering all night managed to rejoin their own battalion late next evening. Badly wounded men insisted on keeping with their companies and were with difficulty induced to go to the ambulance, though in the days of ordinary trench warfare they would no doubt have quite welcomed a "blighty" and been off to hospital with promptitude.

March 21st 1918
8th Battalion

March 24th saw the 8th moving backward again, this time to Chaulnes, only to be ordered off South to Fonches, as the enemy had forced his way over the Somme between the Eighth and Twentieth Divisions and was pressing on. Accordingly, after as speedy a march as was possible, a position was taken up along the Fonchette-Hattencourt road, the 8th now having the remnants of the 1st North Staffords attached to it. Great efforts were made to improve the position, of which work the battalion was

March 24th

See sketch 42

to reap the benefit next day, when it was fiercely attacked early in the afternoon. This was one of the hardest fights of the whole

March 25th

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period. The 8th were under heavy fire and the enemy came on in force. The troops on the left were forced to throw their flank back almost at right angles and the position in this quarter was very insecure till the 73rd Brigade managed to push forward to the line of the Fonchette-Omiécourt road. But despite the danger to its flank the 8th stuck resolutely to its trenches and beat off repeated attacks in force, though these were backed up by many machine-guns and by field-guns pushed up to point-blank range. Casualties were heavy. More than one officer fell who had come unscathed through the thick of the earlier fighting. Captain Ewen was killed, 2nd Lieut. Cryer, the acting Adjutant, though badly wounded, remained at duty, setting a fine example and actually assisting in a counter-attack, and the position was held. One wave of the attack left a high-water mark in a party established in old trenches 20 yards from A Company's line, but a prompt and dashing counter-attack led by 2nd Lieut. B. Stephens dislodged them and sent the survivors flying. The 8th had been in many hot places, but undoubtedly Fonches Cross-Roads must rank among the hottest, and the tenacity and determination with which the men fought was infinitely to their credit. It would have been good in fresh troops, after all the 8th had been through it was marvellous.

March 25th
1918
8th Battalion

That evening orders were received for yet another retirement, this time to Hallu. To withdraw with the enemy at such close quarters seemed almost impossible, but it was done; and by 3.30 a.m. the battalion was at Hallu, exhausted but refreshed by a meal, and that a hot one which the Transport Section, under the indefatigable Captain Arnaud and his resourceful assistants, Sergt. Shepherd and Corpl. Verrall, (1) managed somehow to produce. But even here there was no long stay. Renewed German attacks once again broke through

March 26th

(1) The N.C.O.'s subsequently received the M.S.M., a well-merited reward.

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beyond the right of the 72nd Brigade. Then just as a retirement in echelon from the right was being started the Germans broke through further to the left and threatened envelopment. They were within 200 yards of the 8th but were so hotly received that they could not close, and thanks to a devoted party of the 9th East Surreys, who sacrificed themselves to hold the enemy up, most of the 72nd Brigade got away again.

March 26th
1918
8th Battalion

On reaching Warvillers that evening the 72nd Brigade was re-organized as a composite battalion under Colonel Wenyon, A and C Companies of the 8th still retaining their existence, and this unit took up a position N.E. of Rouvroy, which it maintained for some time next day, despite the loss of Rouvroy. All the German attempts to debouch from the village were stopped, and the ground was held long enough to allow yet a new line covering Vrely and Warvillers to be taken up. Here the composite battalion was on the right in front of Warvillers and gave the enemy a bad time when he attacked next morning. Once again the 8th was tried to the utmost; it was fighting at the tip of a very long and very attenuated salient and the men were utterly spent and exhausted. Still their resistance was as determined as ever. Repeated efforts of the Germans to advance were stopped by rifle-fire, but with ammunition at last beginning to run short—most of the survivors of the 8th had fired thousands of rounds by this time—full

March 27th

March 28th

advantage could not be taken of targets, so a further retirement was necessary, first to the line Caix-leQuesnel and then when the right of this was turned to the Bois de Senecat N.W. of Moreuil.

Amiens was now unpleasantly near and must have gone had the retirement had to continue, but the determined resistance of the troops had done its work. The last retirement had brought the Twenty-Fourth Division back through the so-called "Amiens Defence line," and it was now in second line behind the

March – April
8th Battalion

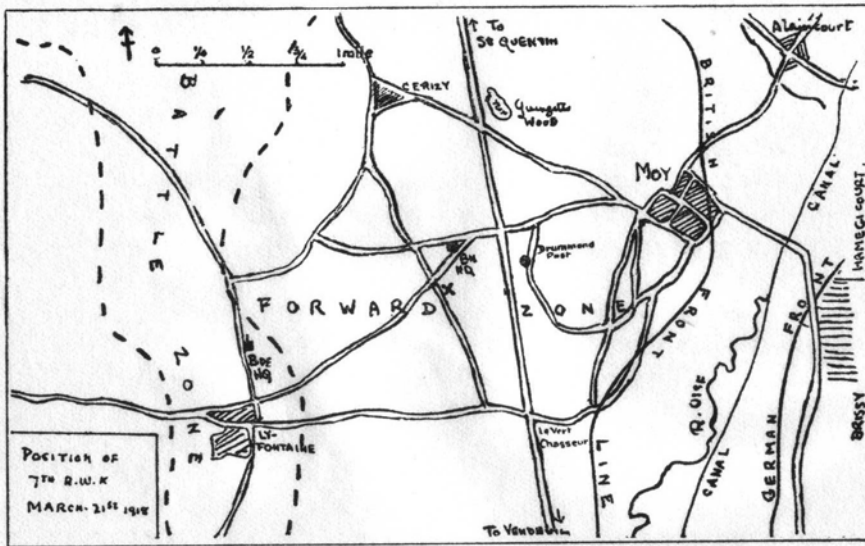
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Twentieth Division, holding from Thezy on the Moreuil-Amiens railway to the Domart-Amiens road. Here it remained until April 4th when it side-stepped, still in second line, to the left to Bois l'Abbe behind Villers-Bretonneux

During these days the enemy's attacks South of the Somme still continued, but without the overwhelming numbers and vigour which had marked his earlier strokes. The line fluctuated, but if ground was lost in places as a whole the German progress was stayed. The remnants of the 8th, now only five officers and little over 100 other ranks, did not have to go into the front line during this week, and though occasionally shelled, so that they had a few casualties, they got some chances of rest and clean clothes. At last, on April 5th, they were relieved and taken right back to St. Blimont, near St. Valery, to be brought up to strength again. It had been a strenuous and terrible fortnight, of heavy casualties and heavy fighting, of tremendous exertions with hardly any rest; but the battalion had never lost its fighting spirit. Indeed the 8th had surpassed itself. What it had been through before, even in Delville Wood, was insignificant in comparison with what it had gone through in this time. In the words of one of its officers "every man was putting out the greatest he had in him to do," and the battalion's record in these days is beyond praise. It had turned repeatedly to smite the enemy hard every time. If it had given ground it had exacted a full price and overflowing for every yard it yielded. What it owed to Colonel Wenyon's leadership during this time of trial every survivor will emphatically acknowledge, and the bar to the D.S.O. which he received, was richly earned, as were the bar to R.S.M. Rankin's D.C.M., the M.C.'s awarded to Captains S. G. Thompson and Arnaud, Lieuts. Bowen and Goulden and 2nd Lieuts. Cryer, Tyler and Stephens, and the D.C.M.'s bestowed on Corpl. Cherriman and Pte. A. E. Smith.

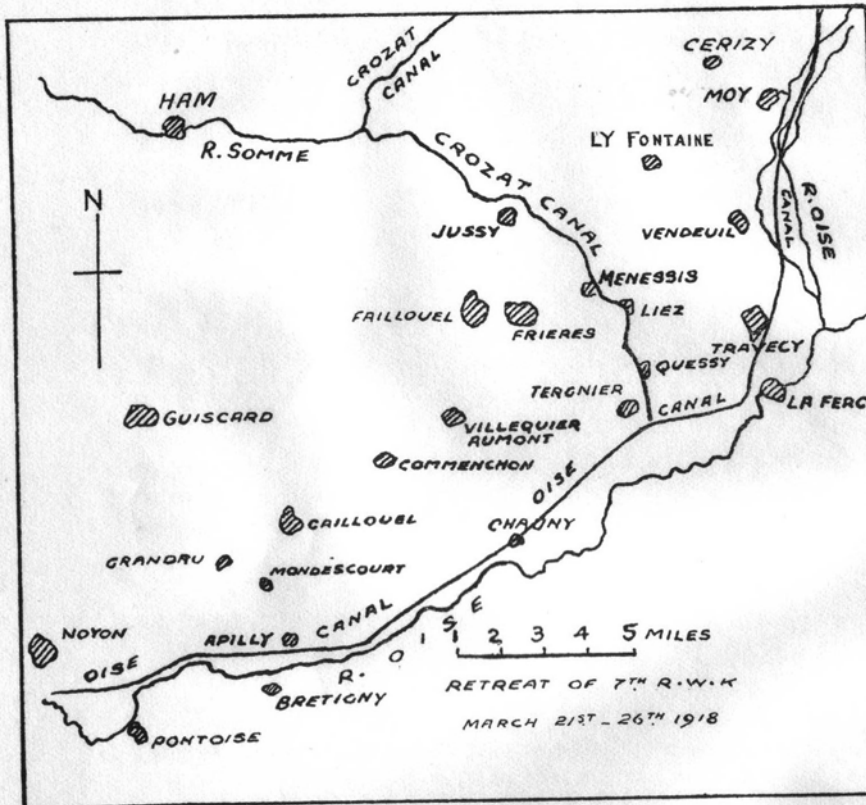
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SKETCH 39.



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SKETCH 40.

OPERATIONS OF 8TH R.W.K. MARCH 21ST. 1918

1 1/2 0 1 2 3 MILES

