

CHAPTER 26

THE CHANNEL PORTS IN DANGER

While the 6th Battalion was struggling hard to keep the Germans back along the Ancre and the hastily replenished 7th was going back into the fighting line South of the Somme, the 1st R.W.K. was on its way "back to the war." Its time of quiet on the Italian front had ended on April 1st and on the 6th it was detraining in the Doullens area. Hence it moved to Barly, the Fifth Division being now in reserve under the Tenth Corps. It was thus available for immediate employment when, on April 9th, the second of the great German offensives of the year broke through the Portuguese near Neuve Chapelle. The rapid exploitation of the German success produced an almost more dangerous situation than their success in breaking through the Fifth Army. A comparatively short advance on their part either due West past Merville or North-West past Bailleul would have enabled them to intercept the main lateral communications of the Allied front in Flanders and have placed the all-important Channel Ports in the gravest peril. Reinforcements had to be hurried to the new danger-point. Divisions destined for the Amiens battlefield were hastily diverted Northward, among them the Fifth, which was placed under orders on April 10th to proceed to Thiennes, where it arrived during the night of April 11th/12th. At that moment the acutest danger spot was Merville, into which the Germans had forced their way late on the 11th, for the line just West of the little town was thinly held by an exhausted remnant and only the magnificent resistance of the 4th Guards' Brigade of the Thirty-First Division checked further advance into Nieppe Forest on the critical day of the 12th and

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gave the Fifth Division time to get into line at that point.

The 1st Battalion did not have a particularly prominent part in stopping the German attack. It was in Brigade reserve on the 13th and though next day it gradually was put in, first one company and then another, to support the 14th R. Warwickshires, by the time that it took over the front line from that unit, on the evening of the 14th, the German attacks had died away. The fresh troops of the Fifth Division had held their own with complete success, an Australian division, also fresh, had come into line on their left and the thrust at Hazebrouck had been definitely checked, henceforward the German efforts were directed further to the North towards the Wyischaete Ridge and Kemmel. Thus, though the battalion had an arduous and exhausting week strengthening the front line of the 13th Brigade, it was not called upon to beat off any attacks. Hostile artillery and aircraft were active, but its losses were slight and it was able to transform the defences into a really formidable line.

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The Forest of Nieppe was to become very familiar to the 1st R.W.K. From the middle of April to the beginning of August the Fifth Division held this important sector. It was a time of constant activity. The Germans were constantly shelling the front line and subjecting the support and reserve positions to gas shelling, their aircraft concentrated their efforts on night bombing, and their machine-guns were extremely active. But they got as good as they gave. The British guns plied them assiduously with retaliatory fire and the battalion's patrols obtained the upper hand in No Man's Land and brought in much useful information. May saw the battalion visited by the influenza epidemic which was raging on the Western Front; an enormous number of men went sick and one officer, Lieut. R. H. Clarke, who had only just come out, succumbed to it. But against

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this casualties were low, only

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5 men killed and 3 officers (1) and 30 men wounded for May, and 2 men killed and 19 wounded for the first ten days of June. A good many officers had joined in the meantime, including Captain Kay, one of the subalterns of the 2nd Battalion in August, 1914, and Lieut. Monypenny and Captain Winn, who rejoined after recovery from wounds. Drafts amounting to over 60 were also received.

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June was marked by a singularly successful operation in which the battalion distinguished itself greatly. After a week in front line from the 4th to the 11th, in the course of which a hostile raid was successfully beaten off, the battalion had another week in reserve and a similar period of special training near Steenbecque. By this time the dangerous German offensive against the British and French along the Chemin des Dames had been stopped, and at more than one point local attacks had won back some of the ground lost in March and April. Such a local attack had been planned in the Nieppe Forest sector and was to be carried out by the Fifth and Thirty-First Divisions, the former putting two brigades into the attack, the 13th on the right, the 95th on the left, with the Thirty-First Division beyond the 95th Brigade. The 13th Brigade had the 15th R. Warwickshires on the right, the R.W.K. in the centre and the K.O.S.B.'s on the left. The frontage assigned to the brigade was nearly three-quarters of a mile, and the objective was a line on the top of the slope leading down to the little Plate Becque.

June 1918

For the attack the battalion employed two companies, C (2nd Lieut. Monypenny) and B (Captain Scott), as first wave, with A (Lieut. Lewis-Barned) as second wave, and D (Captain Dodson) as reserve. Major Kay was in command as Colonel Johnstone was on duty at Divisional Headquarters.

See sketch 46
June 28th

An important feature of the scheme was that in order to ensure surprise there was to be no preliminary bom-

(1) 2nd.Lieuts. Ouzman, Harrison and Harding.

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bardment. The wire in front of the British trenches had to be cut to facilitate the advance, but the enemy detected nothing and did not appear to be expecting an attack when, at 6 a.m. on June 28th, a heavy barrage was suddenly put down under cover of which the British infantry came dashing forward.

June 28th 1918
1st Battalion

C Company on the right was rapidly and extremely successful. It met scarcely any opposition at the front trenches and went on to the support line almost at once. Here there was more fighting; a machine-gun on the right flank gave much trouble, and the Germans offered a stout resistance. This was, however, overcome after several minutes' sharp fighting hand-to-hand, a special feature of which was the extent and effect with which the bayonet was used, one platoon accounting for no less than 36 of the enemy with that weapon in one farmhouse alone. With such vigour was the attack pressed that the German resistance collapsed completely and the company pushed on, driving the enemy before it and inflicting heavy casualties on them. At the final objective it halted and brought effective rifle and Lewis gun fire to bear on the Germans, now retiring hastily down the slope to the Plate Becque. Patrols were pushed forward to the stream and Sergt. Hirschfield, after posting his section so as to give covering fire, went forward under heavy fire, accompanied by a sapper, to demolish the bridges, and

succeeded in destroying three of them; one of them, a stone bridge, being only blown up after two abortive attempts. The company's casualties had been light, not much over a seventh of its strength, but included Lieut. Blott and 2nd Lieut. Aylett: the latter, though hit early in the advance, remained with his men till the final objective was reached and did good service in consolidating it.

The left company, B, had had equal success. At first the men kept so close to the barrage that they sustained several casualties from their own guns, while machine-guns to the left caused much trouble. The

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company commander, Captain Scott, and his second-in-command, Lieut. Smyth, were both killed and nearly 60 men were hit, but despite this the final objective was reached and taken to time, and touch with the K.O.S.B.'s was maintained. 2nd Lieut. Burden adroitly pushed his support platoon into a gap which had opened between B and C, thereby playing an important part in the capture of the final objective. He then took over command and organized the defence of the captured position with marked ability. Here, too, heavy casualties were inflicted on the Germans as they fled down to the Plate Becque; but all attempts to destroy the bridges were prevented by the enemy's machine-guns which put down a most effective barrage. Lieut. Ouzman did splendidly in organizing the consolidation and set a fine example of coolness and courage.

June 28th 1918
1st Battalion

A Company, following as the second wave, reached the German support line to find a party of Germans, wearing Red Cross brassards, throwing bombs at the backs of the wave which had gone on ahead. These men were given short shrift and the support line was occupied; Bonar Farm and other houses near were cleared and several more Germans disposed of in the process. There was some sharp fighting in this "mopping up," for the Germans fought hard, but A soon overcame all resistance. The company then pushed forward reinforcements to help the much depleted B, and all then settled down to consolidate. In this work most valuable assistance was given by two carrying parties of D, which 2nd Lieuts. Garbutt and Whitfield brought up through heavy shell-fire with ammunition and entrenching tools. They were up at the final objective within a few minutes of its capture; and both officers finding the companies in front very short of officers remained in the line, superintending its consolidation. 2nd Lieut. Garbutt was conspicuous for his disregard of danger and 2nd Lieut. Whitfield

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went across under heavy fire to take command of B Company.

The enemy had been taken by surprise, but he soon recovered enough to develop a very heavy bombardment, which interfered greatly with the consolidation. However, Major Kay hearing of the heavy losses in officers, came up to the front and by his coolness and cheerful example did much to inspire the men with his own resolution. Pte.. Hewitt distinguished himself by going forward into the long grass in front and shot down a number of snipers, who were interfering with the consolidation, and Sergt. Norman, who cleared several dug-outs in which German machine-gunners were sheltering, did most useful service. Thus the consolidation was pushed on steadily, though during the next two days the battalion had the misfortune to have Lieut. Monypenny killed, 2nd Lieut. Garbutt wounded, and several casualties among the rank and file, bringing its total losses up to over 120, about a third being killed or missing. But the position was

June 28th 1918
1st Battalion

June 28th 30th

maintained, despite shelling, machine-gunning and the persistent attentions of hostile aircraft, and on the evening of June 30th the battalion was relieved by the 15th R. Warwickshires and marched back through the forest.

The attack at the Plate Becque was a really effective blow, one of the first successful counterstrokes of the summer, an earnest of the reversal of the roles of attacker and defender which the next few months were to see. The Germans had suffered heavily, over 500 prisoners were taken and 30 machine-guns, and the capture of 6,000 yards of their line not only effected a marked improvement in the local tactical situation, but was a great encouragement to the troops concerned. A minor operation in such a war, Plate Becque is a noteworthy episode in the story of the troops who shared in it. The 1st R.W.K. had carried out to the letter its share of the scheme. Major Kay, who had shown marked skill and ability in his handling of the battalion,

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received the D.S.O. and 2nd Lieuts. Burden, Garbutt, Ouzman and Whitfield were awarded the M.C., while Sergt. Hirschfield got the D.C.M., and M.M.'s were given to Sergt. Norman, L-Sgt. Carter, Corpls. Collett and Flint, L/Cpl. Taylor, and Ptes. Saunders, Webster, Lidbury, Bailey, Healing, Brooks, Field and Bunker.

June – July
1918
1st Battalion

After this exploit the battalion had only a short spell of rest: by July 4th it was back in the line. July proved a lively month: the German aircraft were active and troublesome and their guns devoted themselves to maintaining a harassing fire, to which the British guns replied vigorously. A good deal of work was required to make the new line secure, but the battalion was lucky in escaping casualties, and the arrival of three drafts, one of 73 men and two smaller, and half-a-dozen officers, filled the gaps in the ranks which June 28th had made. At the end of July the battalion came out of the line, going back to a rest area behind Hazebrouck till the middle of August.

To the 6th Battalion the summer of 1918 brought a long spell of trench warfare in the line just North of Albert, varied by periods of rest in villages behind the front line like Acheux, Puchevillers and Herissart. These, though beyond the normal attentions of the enemy's artillery, were well within the zone which his aircraft worried with night-bombing, but only one of the periods in the line was marked by any outstanding incident, and though the influenza epidemic did not spare the battalion, casualties in action during May and June did not total more than 40. Against that drafts amounting to some 280 joined with a dozen officers, among them Captain A. E. W. Thomas, who had been wounded at Cambrai, and several officers attached from the A.S.C. In June Colonel Dawson rejoined, though as usual barely recovered from his wounds, and took over command from Major Peploe, who had succeeded to it on Colonel Cook going sick in May. But though by the end of June the numbers "on the strength" of

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the battalion had reached very respectable figures, so many were detached on various duties, courses and employments that the "trench strength" was low, especially when the usual "battle surplus" of officers and specialists had been left out: thus on June 21st those present with the battalion only mustered 23 officers and 582 men, no less than 12 officers and 225 other ranks being also "on the strength" but away from the battalion. The more recent drafts had included a large proportion of very young soldiers of little training, and the task of keeping battalions up to their old level taxed the energies and

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1918
6th Battalion

devotion of the officers and of such experienced N.C.O.'s as were available.

But though at less critical times a battalion which had suffered as much as had the 6th might have expected time to train and assimilate its drafts, the summer of 1918 allowed few chances for rest or quiet. Opposite the British lines in the Bouzincourt sector there was some high ground astride the Bouzincourt - Aveluy road, the capture of which would greatly improve the tactical situation. An attack on this ridge was therefore resolved upon and the 6th was selected for the attempt. It had the left of the line with the 6th Queen's on its right and a battalion of the Eighteenth Division further to the right again. The plan was that the leading waves, A and D Companies, were to push forward beyond the line selected for consolidation and while A raided three areas on the left flank D, with the assistance of a platoon each of B and C, was to hold a forward position well in advance of the line it was hoped to secure. This was to be consolidated by B and C, the advanced troops having orders to maintain their forward position until the line of main resistance had been rendered defensible.

See sketch 47

The evening of June 30th had been selected for the enterprise and at 9.35 p.m. the battalion went over the top behind a heavy barrage of artillery, trench mortars and machine-guns. The front line was rushed without

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much difficulty, but as the attackers pressed on towards their further objectives more resistance was offered and there was sharp fighting. But the 6th was not to be denied: the men pushed on to the road which had been chosen as the forward position and after some sharp fighting could report that all the objectives had been gained. The three raiding parties carried out their tasks successfully, though a machine-gun among some old Nissen huts on the left somehow escaped detection and the party detailed to reach a sunken road to the East of the huts had to fight really hard. But heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy, three machine-guns were taken and over 20 prisoners; and The Queen's proved equally successful, though their right flank was exposed by the failure of the battalion of the Eighteenth Division to secure the whole of its objective. By midnight consolidation was well advanced, and about 2.30 a.m. the covering parties fell back as ordered to the main line: they had just previously beaten off a somewhat feeble attempt at a counterattack.

June 30th 1918
6th Battalion

July 1st proved a fairly quiet day: there was intermittent shelling by the Germans, and casualties, which in the earlier stages had not been heavy, began to mount up. Much trouble was caused by the overlooked machine-gun among the huts, and a German post in front of the centre proved such a hindrance to the wiring and consolidating parties that an attempt was made to rush it, though without success. Better fortune attended an effort to capture the machine-gun among the Nissen huts, and a strong German counter-attack was decisively repulsed. But though at midnight the 6th R.W.K. still held their line intact, The Queen's had been even harder put to it: they had been attacked several times and the gap on their right proved a source of weakness and they lost a certain amount of ground. During the night the Buffs relieved them.

July 1st

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July 2nd saw the same sort of thing intermittent shelling all day followed by attacks at night. At 6.30 p.m. 2nd Lieut. Walthew and 20 men of C Company made a gallant

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attempt to rush the troublesome post in the centre. 2nd Lieut. Walthew, who had distinguished himself in the original attack by himself killing three Germans who were holding up one of his sections, again displayed great courage and leadership and his men followed him well but the post was too much for them: all but 6 of the party were hit and the effort failed. Then at 9.30 p.m. there came down a heavy barrage, followed this time by a counter-attack pressed with real determination and force. The battalion put up a stout resistance, but was forced back to the old British line, and the Buffs had also to come back. Early on the 3rd the Buffs took over the whole front line and the 6th were withdrawn into support, retiring that evening to a camp West of Senlis. The casualties had been heavy, eleven officers and 230 rank and file. Captain Catmur (1) and Lieuts. Hart, (1) Hartmann, Stilwell and Elliott were killed, Captain G. W. Hill, 2nd Lieuts. Guess, Standring, Billingham, Walthew and Death wounded.

These losses, however, were soon made good: a draft of 43 men joined on the 3rd, another of two officers and 218 men arrived before the battalion moved on the 10th to Rubempré, where it rested till the 14th, receiving another reinforcement of three officers and 50 men before it moved away to an area S.W. of Amiens, where it remained till the end of the month, training and resting. During this period nine more officers appeared with 86 men, among the officers being Captain Henderson-Roe and Lieut. Scott-Marten, both of whom had so distinguished themselves at Infantry Hill. Thus, when on July 30th the battalion moved back to the fighting line, it mustered over 850 officers

(1) Attached from the A.S.C.

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and men "present," though it had fallen well below 500 after the June 30th - July 2nd fight. It was now in the Third Corps which formed the left of the Fourth Army and lay just North of the Somme and S.W. of Albert.

July 1918
6th Battalion

The fortunes of war had brought the 6th Battalion once again, as in May 1917, into the same area as the 7th. The latter had not, since its hard fighting in April, taken part in any operation comparable to the attacks delivered by the 1st and 6th. It had been in and out of the line opposite Albert all through May, June and the beginning of July. This had given time to weld the battalion together, and under Colonel Hickson's influence it had again become a homogeneous unit ready for hard fighting. None of its tours in the line produced either striking incidents or heavy casualties, and some substantial drafts had arrived, including quite a strong leaven of old hands who had already seen much service with the 7th. A good many officers also joined, among them Captain Maltby, formerly of the 11th Battalion, and Captain McDonald, who had made a quick recovery from his Hangard Wood wound. The last three weeks of July the battalion spent training at St. Pierre a Gouy, the Eighteenth Division being then in G.H.Q. Reserve, and finally on July 31st it arrived at La Houssoye North by West of Corbie, where its brigade was in Divisional reserve.

The 8th, on the other hand, during this period of strategical inactivity on the British front came in for a good deal of local activity. It had a short rest at the seaside near St. Valerie after leaving the Amiens front and then at the beginning of May went back to its old familiar haunts near Lens. Here the line had altered little since the Twenty-Fourth Division had left the sector. No Man's Land in the St. Emilie sector just North of Lens, which the Twenty-Fourth Division took over from the Canadians, was a mass of tangled ruins on the right, rather more open on the left. A

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8th Battalion

see sketch 52

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big draft had joined the 8th along with 160 men who had been on leave in England on March 21st and the battalion was well over 800 strong again, while Captain H. S. Brown came back after six months' duty in England to become Major and second-in-command. The battalion at once started patrolling vigorously and before long could report as the result of several brushes with the enemy's patrols that it had established a mastery over No Man's Land, besides repulsing three or four minor attacks.

May 1918
8th Battalion

It, on its part, carried out more than one raid. In May an attack was planned against the enemy's trenches near Conductor Sap, to be carried out in conjunction with a projector attack, a combination which had not been tried before. Actually the gas cylinders fell short; their fumes incapacitated several of the raiders and caused so much confusion that they returned to their trenches. Major Brown then took control, restored order and confidence, and himself laid a tape across No Man's Land which guided the raiders when he launched them to a second attack. This time things went much better: the two parties, led respectively by 2nd Lieuts. Piggott and G. A. E. Wallis, got well into the enemy's trenches and pushed right and left, bombing dug-outs, securing some prisoners and inflicting many casualties. Major Brown meanwhile, having taken up a position on the German parapet near the point of entry, conducted his operations very skilfully and the two subalterns seconded him well, extricating their parties in safety and with few losses. The raid brought well-deserved M.C.'s to all these three officers, and the M.M. to Ptes. Warford, Baker and Bowes, while the prisoners taken proved most valuable for identification purposes. Shortly after this the battalion had the misfortune to lose R.S.M. Rankin, killed by the Germans bombing a football match when the battalion was in reserve. He had been an invaluable

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asset to the battalion, notably in the March retreat, and his place was very hard to fill.

To the 10th Battalion the summer months had not brought any very conspicuous or important experiences. After being withdrawn from the front between Arras and Amiens it had been transferred to Flanders, but to a part North of that included in the fighting which began on April 9th. Actually the battalion had to take part in the withdrawal on April 16th from the advanced positions round Broodseinde and Passchendaele to a shorter line some distance in rear. The withdrawal was unmolested by the enemy and the rear parties whom the 10th had left to cover the retirement came back in safety. A serious explosion of an ammunition dump at the camp where its details had been left cost the 10th nearly 50 casualties, including Lieut. Anderson and 17 other ranks killed, and destroyed nearly all the battalion records, but it gave 2nd Lieut. Shrimpton a chance of distinction. Though badly shaken he at once organized rescue parties, got soldiers and civilians out of burning buildings, saved a large number of valuable horses, and all this under heavy shelling; for this work he was subsequently awarded the M.C., while C.S.M. Byrne, who had also been most assiduous and resourceful, received the D.C.M. Next to the explosion of this dump the chief feature of the Ypres Salient at this time was the constant gas shelling: the battalion had over 200 casualties from gas in May alone, but despite this and the influenza epidemic from which it, like other units, suffered severely, its numbers were well maintained. In the influenza conspicuous service was done by the M.O., Captain Montgomery, R.A.M.C., whose promptness and resource not only prevented the epidemic spreading, but kept down the numbers evacuated to hospital and consequently lost to the battalion.

May 1918
7th Battalion
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1918
16th Battalion

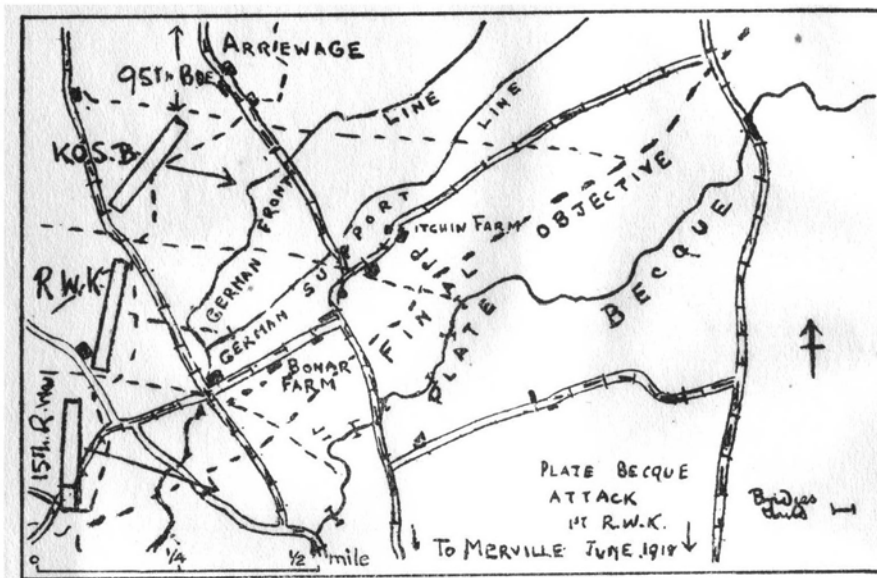
Among the officers there were many changes. During this period some old members of the 10th and 11th Battalions reappeared, like Captain Rooney,

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Major Stallard and Lieut. Lindsay, but Captain Kerr was transferred to the Staff and was succeeded as Adjutant by Captain Holden, who later on gave place to Lieut. Tatham on being shifted to a battalion of The Queen's as Major. The command which had been held by Major Wallis since March 23rd was given in May to Colonel Thesiger, of the Surrey Yeomanry, Major Wallis becoming second-in-command. At the beginning of July the Division, which had been out of the line for three weeks' training near Hazebrouck, relieved the French near La Clytte and remained in that region nearly all August, the chief incident being the attachment to the battalion first of American officers and then of two companies of the 106th American Regiment for instruction and training. September saw the 10th back in the line near Dickebusch, waiting for the extension to its front of that forward movement which had begun on the Amiens front on August 8th.

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SKETCH 46.

ATTACK OF 6th R.W.K. BOUZINCOURT, JUNE 30 1918

