

CHAPTER 30

THE LAST BATTLE

By the end of October the victorious progress of the Allied armies had reached a point which brought the end of hostilities almost within sight. Decisive victory in 1918, which had seemed unattainable before August 8th, had been practically achieved. A series of undisguisable defeats had at last demoralized the German armies. Here and there a stubborn opposition was still offered but for the most part the rank and file were more ready to surrender than to resist to the last. Indeed there could be no prospect now of a successful stand by the Germans on any line short of the Rhine, if the Allies could continue the series of hammer-strokes which Marshal Foch and Sir Douglas Haig had been delivering for the past three months. That this might be rendered impossible by the difficulty of keeping the troops at the front supplied with food and ammunition was more to be feared than that the German resistance would stiffen up again to the standard it had reached in August and September. But in the damaged condition of the roads and railways a breakdown in the supply arrangements was highly probable and already the Third and Fourth Armies had had to let nearly a week elapse after the final success on the Selle before they could repeat their blow. However, by November 4th all was ready for what was to prove the last great battle of the war.

October 1918

November
1918

By this time the First Army had come up level with the left of the Third and its capture of Valenciennes had forced the Germans back almost to the junction of the Scheldt with the Condé canal. The frontage to be attacked came to nearly thirty miles, and on it were to be found three Divisions in which battalions of The

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Queen's Own were serving. Of these the Twenty-Fourth was almost on the extreme left of the Third Army, being just North of the Rhonelle river opposite the villages of Wargnies le Petit and Wargnies le Grand; the Fifth in the centre of that Army was in support to the Thirty-Seventh Division S.W. of Le Quesnoy, the Eighteenth on the left of the Fourth Army was at Robersart on the Western edge of the Forest of Mormal. Thus the 1st, the 7th and 8th Battalions lined up for the last round in the great encounter.

November
1918

Neither the 1st nor 8th, however, were to experience in this last engagement fighting of any severity. When the Twenty-Fourth Division attacked, using the 73rd Brigade as advance guard, the 17th in support, and the 72nd as reserve, it met surprisingly little opposition. Only at Wargnies le Petit was there real resistance and this was overcome without calling upon the 72nd Brigade. Indeed it was not till November 7th that that brigade passed through the 17th at St. Waast and swept on towards Bavai. Rear-guard parties with machine-guns tried to put up a fight but could not prevent the brigade passing Bavai and getting 2,000 yards beyond it. Here more serious opposition was met. Lieut. H. R. Smith and 2nd Lieut. Everson were killed in trying to push forward in the face of machine-gun fire and the battalion's advance was checked. But next morning the German rearguard had gone and the 8th pushed on with the North Staffords on its right and the 6th Dragoon Guards scouting ahead. There was not much opposition and the day's advance, which covered no less than four miles, was not brought to a stop till Feignies was reached. Here the Germans were standing in a strong position, and with all ranks dead beat from their exertions it was decided not to attack there and then. The soundness of the decision was vindicated next morning when, on the battalion pushing forward, the enemy vacated Feignies with speed; then, the village once cleared, other troops came forward

November 4th
8th Battalion

November 7th

November 8th

November 9th

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and passed through the 8th. It had fired its last shot in the war, for before its turn to lead the advance could come round again the Armistice had been declared. Since October 8th, when it had joined in the advance to victory, its casualties had not amounted to 200, mostly incurred in the fights for Awoingt and Haussy (for the last stage had cost it little), and its prisoners alone considerably exceeded its losses. If it had not been engaged in the earlier stages of the advance when the German resistance was at its stiffest, it had had sharp fighting enough, and at Haussy in particular had done splendidly.

November
1918
8th Battalion

Meanwhile the 1st Battalion, which had been in Corps reserve along with its Division at the beginning of the month, had come forward by Beaurain and Louvignies to Jolimetz (November 5th). The 15th and 95th Brigades had been exploiting the success gained by the Thirty-Seventh Division on November 4th and the line had been carried forward East of the Forest of Mormal. On November 8th the 15th Brigade moved forward, ready to pass through the 95th when the Avesnes-Maubeuge road should be reached. This move involved the passage of the Sambre, negotiated under considerable shellfire, and by evening the advanced line had been reached and the relief of the 95th Brigade was successfully accomplished despite pitch darkness and heavy rain. Almost the only casualty was Captain McClenaghan, mortally wounded near Pantignies while acting as Brigade Intelligence Officer.

1st Battalion

November 8th

The battalion was now on the left of the Division's line at the S.E. corner of the Bois du Quesnoy with the Forty-Second Division on its left, and the K.O.S.B.'s on the right, the Seventeenth Division being still further to the right. At 3 a.m. on November 9th the advance was resumed. Hardly any resistance was encountered; by 5 a.m. the Avesnes-Maubeuge road had been reached, and the battalion pushed on beyond to the

November 9th

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Beaufort-Le Pave road; then, instead of halting there as had been intended, it crossed the Solre river also and gained touch with the enemy near Ferriere La Petite three miles from Maubeuge. Here there was some sharp skirmishing and eventually the battalion took up an outpost line covering Marliere. It was the last stage in its advance. Next morning the Forty-Second Division took over and the battalion fell back to La Puissance Farm, whence it moved back next day, to receive the news of the Armistice on the road between Pontsur-Sambre and Harpignies, within 20 miles of the spot where it had first faced von Kluck's great host. There was hardly a man and not one officer present on November 11th, 1918, who had heard the first shots fired on August 23rd, 1914. Constantly wiped out, as constantly renewed, the battalion had crowded into those four years and a quarter experiences and losses which put into the shade all that the old Fiftieth had endured in the seven years of the Peninsular, in the Sikh Wars and in the Crimea. But despite all its losses and despite all that it had had to endure throughout the longest four and a quarter years on record it had nobly and fully sustained both the traditions of the old Fiftieth and the high standard which it had itself set up on that memorable August 23rd.

November 9th
1918
1st Battalion

November 10th

November 11th

Unlike the 1st and 8th the 7th Battalion's last encounter with the Germans brought it serious fighting. It had taken over the left portion of its brigade's frontage on the Western edge of the Forest of Mormal on the evening of October 31st and remained there till the attack started on the morning of the 4th. Patrolling was actively carried out, but cost the battalion one officer, 2nd Lieut. Debenham, in an encounter with a German post. 2nd Lieut. Debenham was mortally wounded and the N.C.O. who accompanied him was also hit, but the Germans, after wounding them, surrendered, and the N.C.O. succeeded in escorting his prisoners in, despite his injuries.

7th Battalion

November 4th

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In the attack of November 4th the battalion had as its first objective the village of Hecq, assigned to C and D companies, after which A and B were to go through to the second objective, a road 500 yards ahead. The attack started in thickish weather at 6.15a.m., C and D advancing close behind the three tanks detailed to assist them. At a sunken road on the outskirts of the village stubborn resistance was encountered and two platoons of each company had to be left to clear up this area while the rest pressed on into the village. Here also there was hard fighting, particularly for D Company on the right; the tanks were put out of action but the crew of one got out and, pushing forward on the left, did effective service with their machine-guns. In the end C and D made good their line and then A and B, coming forward, carried on the advance at a great rate. Resistance was lessening now, many Germans surrendered, many were shot as they endeavoured to get away through the forest, and the objective was reached and consolidated, the 8th R. Berkshires passing through to continue the advance. For the rest of the day companies remained in the positions reached; the work of consolidating was suddenly interrupted by a party of some 30 Germans who emerged from the wood and attacked A Company in rear with machine-guns and trench-mortars. But A proved equal to the occasion, faced about and shot down the two officers who were leading the party; with their fall their followers' zeal for fighting evaporated, and the rest were easily rounded up, increasing the total of prisoners taken to nearly 200. As against this the battalion had just fifty casualties, including 2nd Lieuts. Pegler, Bolton, and Fuller killed, the last two of whom had only joined in October, while 2nd Lieut. Hewett was wounded. Next day the 7th withdrew to billets in Hecq, moving thence to Le Cateau, where it was still lying when the news of the Armistice reached it.

November 4th
1918
7th Battalion
see sketch 56

November 5th

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It was the junior Service battalion of The Queen's Own to whom it fell to be the last portion of the Regiment actually in action in the war. The 10th had had nearly a week's rest, mainly at Courtrai, before, on the night of November 4th, its brigade took over the line on the left bank of the Scheldt below Avelghem; the battalion itself not being in front line but at Langestraat. Here it was heavily shelled, the neighbourhood of some 60 pounders being the main reason for the attentions of the German gunners, but it escaped extremely lightly and then on the 9th pushed forward across the Scheldt, the passage of which had been effected on the previous day by the 11th Queen's by means of a small boat, being supported by C Company of the 10th under Captain Waterman, who crossed in the same way. Passing through the line reached by The Queen's the 10th pushed forward steadily all that afternoon, reaching the Nukerke-Renaix road practically without opposition, the only people encountered being Belgian civilians by whom the advancing British were cordially welcomed. Outposts that evening ran along the Renaix-Nukerke road. From this line the advance went forward next day, first to the Renaix-Oudenarde railway, which was reached unopposed. Thence the battalion pushed on, still unopposed, to a line East of Kerkhem; but just as it passed its third objective, Schoorishe, resistance was encountered. But a field-gun had been detailed to accompany the battalion and this, firing over open sights at 800 yards, was mainly instrumental in suppressing the German machine-guns and in letting the battalion reach its final objective near Roovorst just as evening was closing in.

November
1918
10th Battalion
November 4th
See sketch 58

November 9th

November 10th

At this point the battalion stood fast next morning and shortly after the 124th Brigade had passed through came the intelligence that the Armistice had been concluded and would come into force at 11a.m. that day.

November 11th

That the news of the Armistice was received with a kind of bewilderment, almost incredulity, rather than

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with demonstrations of enthusiasm, was perhaps only natural. The diminishing resistance which the Germans had offered in the last few days, their ready abandonment of positions which earlier on would have been stubbornly defended, their readiness to surrender, the unmistakable evidence of the declining efficiency of their administration and the deterioration of their equipment, all these had to some extent prepared officers and men for the approach of the end; but the cessation of hostilities when it came meant so complete a change that it carried with it an air of almost unreality. It was some time before it was possible to realize fully what the Conclusion of the Armistice meant, that victory, which in March and April had seemed almost too much to hope for, at any rate infinitely further off than it had been months earlier, had at last been achieved. The abrupt change from being constantly in the presence of danger and sudden death to the practical security of peace conditions had hardly become familiar before a new question began to loom large on the horizon of each individual, the whole collection of problems concentrated in the word "demobilization."

November 11th
1918



