

## CHAPTER 5 THE FIRST WINTER

For the British Army the four months which elapsed between the end of the German offensive against Ypres and the opening of the British offensive of 1915 at Neuve Chapelle were a period of unremitting toil, in which it was contending almost more against the forces of Nature than against the Germans. There were intermittent outbursts of activity, each side in turn attempted local attacks, there was heavy fighting round Givenchy in December and again at the end of January, but the main problem was that of holding on to the trenches in conditions of almost indescribable difficulty and discomfort, especially in the wetter parts of the line, where the men had to stand knee or even thigh deep in icy cold water, endeavouring to prevent parapets from dissolving altogether into liquid slime. In the other winters of the war there may have been heavier shelling, the enemy may not have been handicapped as they undoubtedly were in 1914-1915 from the fact that their consumption of munitions had outrun even their preparations, there was certainly more trouble overhead from aeroplanes as well as underneath from mines, and in 1914-1915 there was at least no gas, but in the other winters it was known what a winter of trench-warfare meant, there had been time to devise means for rendering it more tolerable and to accumulate in advance supplies of all the varied trench stores that ingenuity could devise. Moreover, the relieving, refitting and resting of trench garrisons had by then been reduced to a system. Billets, baths, theatrical entertainments, a roster of leave, had been carefully organized. If wood was wanted for rivetting parapets, for making communication trenches passable, it was usually forthcoming in profusion. There were hardships to be endured in the

November  
1914 –  
March 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

78

---

other winters, at no time could the life in trenches be anything but one of slightly mitigated discomfort. Much was attempted even in 1914-1915 to render the conditions more endurable, but the methods of mitigating the discomfort had not progressed beyond the experimental stage. Moreover, in 1914-1915 the troops had to endure the discomforts far more frequently and for longer periods than they were called upon to do under normal circumstances in the later years. There were no months in reserve for a whole Division, for the simple reason that there were not enough Divisions in France.

November  
1914 –  
March 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

Thus on coming out of the Ypres salient the 1<sup>st</sup> R.W.K. had a bare week's rest, during which time Major Robinson—as already mentioned—joined and took over command, Captain Dunlop becoming Adjutant, while a big reinforcement arrived with which were Major Bonham-Carter and Lieut. MacNeece. Then on November 27th the battalion went back into trenches again, and from that day to the day before the attack on Hill 60 it was either in the front line, in support trenches, or in immediate reserve, except for about ten days at the end of December, a week at the end of January, ten days in the middle of February, two short periods of four or five days in March, and a week in April. At times the battalion was in trenches for as much as nine days on end, and further it proved necessary to hold the trenches in greater strength than need have been done had more artillery ammunition been available. It was said that the French held their trenches with their guns, the British had to hold them with men, and certainly the strain on the troops that first winter was very great. But it was wonderful how well they stood it. The almost unflinching cheerfulness of the men was really amazing, if it had not

been so thoroughly in keeping with the British soldier's habit of taking everything as it came as part of the day's work, something to

“grouse” about and to treat as a joke. The sick-rate was extraordinarily low considering the conditions, though “trench-feet” and similar ailments caused a large number of admissions to hospital until issues of whale-oil and gum-boots and other measures somewhat reduced the wastage from this cause. But the wastage was heavy: thus of seven officers who joined early in November only one, 2nd-Lieut. Walker, was still with the battalion at the end of February. In all about 50 company officers joined the battalion between the beginning of November 1914 and the end of April 1915: of these, sixteen were killed or died of wounds in that period, a dozen were wounded, as many invalided, and the average duration of their service with the battalion was under forty days. During this same period the casualties among “other ranks” amounted to 109 killed and 224 wounded, apart from sickness and the heavy losses at Hill 60 and on April 23rd, while the drafts received came to over 1,100. (1) This rate of wastage in trench warfare was far heavier than was to be experienced in subsequent years when defences had been greatly improved, notably by the provision in many parts of the line of dug-outs, which could withstand anything except a really heavy shell, and more especially by the introduction of the “shrapnel-helmet,” which did so much to reduce casualties. Through the Winter of 1914-1915 casualties through head-wounds were sadly frequent and many valuable lives were lost in this way. Thus on one day in February the battalion lost a promising young officer in 2nd.-Lieut. Pownall and a splendid N.C.O. in Sergt. Verrall, who, coming out as a private, had worked his way up very quickly, distinguishing himself greatly at Neuve Chapelle in October, and whose cheerfulness, calmness and resource had proved a great asset.

November  
1914 –  
March 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

November  
1914  
April 1915

(1) On January 1<sup>st</sup> it was noted that there were still present with the battalion 3 officers and 210 men who had come out with it in August, though these numbers included several who had rejoined after a short absence.

During the early part of these winter months the battalion was opposite the Messines-Wytschaete ridge, which portion of the line the Second Corps had taken over towards the end of November. The Fifth Division the right of this line, holding a frontage of about two miles running N. and somewhat W. from Douve. This was divided into two portions, known as the Neuve-Eglise and Wulverghem sectors, which were originally held by two brigades, with the third in reserve. Later on the 14th Brigade took over the Nueve-Eglise sector permanently, finding its own reliefs, while the 13th and 15th took turn and turn about in the Wuiverghem line, withdrawing to St. Jans Cappel or some other village West of the Kemmel and Scherpenberg hills for its turns of rest. It was not a good line, for it represented the final positions attained by the French efforts to recover the Messines ridge and was therefore the results of an accident rather than choice. For the most part it ran along a lower ridge opposite the main one from which it was overlooked. It was imperative, therefore to construct Communication trenches between the front line and the supports, and as the weather was extremely wet and keeping the trenches in repair was more than enough occupation by itself, the troops were never without employment. Mud was the outstanding feature of this part of the

November  
1914 –  
March 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

line. The continued rain reduced the country to a bog, communication trenches rarely existed and, if they did, were invariable impassible, (1) so that reliefs and ration parties had to go up to the front line across the open, and this often meant casualties from machine-gun fire. When not in the firing line battalions were fully employed on the support trenches or in preparing a second line some distance in rear. Active operations were impossible, quite apart from weather conditions, owing to the

(1) It was not till July, 1915 when the battalion was in the St. Eloi sector that it ever found a communication trench which could be used for the purpose.

shortage of the ammunition supply, though the gunners made the best use of the scanty daily allowance of shells. Snipers, too, were continually on the alert for targets, while good work was done at night by patrols, Lieut. Brown in particular distinguishing himself by careful reconnaissance and good reports. But, as a whole, December, January, and the early part of February were devoid of outstanding incidents, though the constant hard work put in gradually produced a distinct effect on the trenches, which before long were really quite formidable and even not uncomfortable.(1)

November  
1914 –  
March 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

But with the middle of February came a change. The 13th Brigade was resting at Bailleul in Army Reserve and the battalion had just been inspected by the new Brigadier, General Wanless O’Gowan, when on the 19th it received orders to proceed at once to Vlamertinghe, just West of Ypres, and to relieve the 83rd Brigade of the Twenty-Eighth Division in trenches S.E. of Ypres. This portion of the Allied line was just to the right of the trenches held by the battalion from November 13th-19th: the French had taken it over at the end of the battle of Ypres, but had handed it back to the newly-arrived Twenty-Eighth Division of the Fifth Corps at the end of January. This Division, which was composed of battalions drawn from India and other distant stations, had been going through a very bad time. Coming straight from the Tropics to the damp and cold and mud of Flanders, its men had suffered frightfully from sickness and had been succumbing to trench-feet and other complaints at an alarming rate. Moreover, they had opposed to them an active and aggressive Bavarian division, who had given them no opportunity to settle down to the new conditions and methods of warfare. It soon became evident that it

February  
1915

(1) Casualties in the Wulverghem area amounted to one officer (Capt. Mills) and 28 men killed and 49 men wounded; those from invaliding had been higher, and several officers had left to join the Flying Corps or take up Staff appointments, among the latter being Major Bonham - Carter.

was imperative to relieve the exhausted infantry of the Twenty--Eighth Division, and in the last ten days of February three seasoned brigades from the Second Corps among them the 13th, were sent up to take the place for the time of the brigades properly belonging to that - Division.

February  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

Thus it was that on the evening of February 20<sup>th</sup> the 1st R.W.K. found themselves taking over the left section of the 83rd Brigade’s line. This was to the SE of Zillebeke on the Northern side of the railway line from Ypres to Comines, which here ran through a deep cutting. The line extended for some distance to the left past the hamlet of

Zwarteleen, which formed a salient. The trenches were in a bad state and required a great deal of work, while the enemy in this quarter had attained a decided supremacy and were very much on the aggressive. Their trench mortars in particular were to the fore, and as its tour of duty in the new trenches the battalion came in for a very bad time. On February 22<sup>nd</sup> part of B Company in the Zwarteleen salient were very heavily bombed by a heavy trench mortar which blew down large portions of the parapet. The Germans then turned machine-guns on to the gaps, making it necessary to thin out the garrison and eventually the survivors were forced for the time to evacuate what remained of their trench after Lieuts. Brown and Burbury had been killed and many other casualties suffered. For over two hours the bombing continued, but the battalion endured the ordeal steadily and hung grimly on. The Germans did not attempt to assault, and when with nightfall the damaged trench was re-occupied, the bombing ceased. All hands then turned on to repair the damages and restore the position, and when the Duke's arrived to relieve the battalion the line was intact. But the day had cost The Queen's Own over forty casualties, 2nd-Lieut Frost having also been killed and Captain Molony wounded. Lieut. Brown in particular was a

great loss to the battalion; he had shown himself an excellent officer and had been specially selected by Colonel Robinson for the responsible and dangerous post of Battalion Bombing Officer.

March – April  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

Throughout March the battalion continued in this quarter, relieving and being relieved by the Duke's every second day, except for two periods of rest spent at Ouderdom (March 11th- 14th) and Vlamertinghe (March 28<sup>th</sup> - 31st). Sometimes it held the Zwarteleen sector, sometimes that to the right, just North of the Ypres-Comines Canal. This sector contained a trench known as the International Trench, because the Germans held the Southern portion and the British its continuation Northward, a situation which may well have given rise to the legend of the loophole through which British and Germans took it in turns to fire. With the enemy at such close quarters and in an aggressive mood the situation was at times decidedly lively, but the 13th Brigade was not slow in redressing the balance, which on its arrival it had found heavily weighted against the British. Though greatly handicapped by the shortage of artillery ammunition, which prevented our guns, restricted to a maximum of three rounds a day, from replying effectively to the German shelling, The Queen's Own and the other battalions not only improved the trenches out of all recognition, but gradually wrested the ascendancy from the Germans, reduced their snipers to relative inactivity and put matters on a much more satisfactory footing all round. General Bulfin, the commander of the Twenty-Eighth Division, had told General Wanless O'Gowan when the 13th Brigade arrived in his command that he had never seen battalions with more go or spirit or that gave him more complete confidence. When, at the beginning of April, the Twenty-Eighth Division (1) moved to the left to relieve the French in the Broodseinde and Zonnebeke

(1) It had been reconstituted by the return of its original brigades from the Second Corps.

area, General Bulfin's report showed that his confidence had not been misplaced. "Their energetic and indefatigable work," he wrote, "greatly improved and strengthened the line: their steadiness under trying circumstances gave a sense of security throughout the Division, and their boldness in small enterprises diminished to a great extent the aggressive attitude of the enemy." The G.O.C. Fifth Corps, Sir Herbert Plumer, was not less emphatic in his praise. "The work they have done," was his verdict, "has been equal in value to the winning of many an engagement."

April 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion could therefore look on their six weeks under the Twenty-Eighth Division with some satisfaction. Deeds of gallantry had not been few in number; conspicuous among them was the action of Sergt. Dennington and Pte. Bunsell, who, when a portion of a trench had been blown in by shellfire, went to the help of man who had been buried in the debris. Working lying on their stomachs within 30 yards of the enemy, they dug and cleared for over an hour, and were at length rewarded by rescuing the man (1) It had been a difficult and trying time of constant hard work and endurance, in a way a severer test of a battalions quality than a big fight in the open. It cost the battalion heavily. Four officers and 65 men had been killed, three officers and 134 men wounded. Among those killed was C.S.M. File, who had come out with the battalion as Machine-Gun Sergeant, had been wounded on September 1st, and actually placed on a hospital ship under orders for home, but managed to get off the ship and rejoined the battalion. Wounded again in December, he had refused to go to hospital and had carried on, setting a splendid example of courage and devotion to duty.

The return of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Brigades to the command of their own Divisional General did not mean a

(1) They were subsequently awarded the DCM.

change of area. The Fifth Division merely took over the front which the Twenty-Eighth had been holding, and it fell to General Morland (1) to carry out a scheme which had been planned and prepared by General Bulfin. Opposite the right of the Zwarteleen sector there was a large mound formed by the excavation of the railway cutting through the Zwarteleen-Zandvoorde ridge and dignified with the name of "Hill Sixty." Though in itself nothing more than an inconsiderable hummock this mound was the highest point for some distance round and had no little tactical value as an artillery observation post. To deny its use to the enemy's artillery observing officers would be a distinct gain to the British, and the higher authorities had readily accepted the proposal to capture it. Preparations for an attack had been in progress for some time before the Twenty-Eighth Division handed over to the Fifth. Several mines had been excavated under the German trenches and additional artillery concentrated to give the necessary support.

April 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

See sketch 9

Among the battalions of the 13th Brigade it was The Queen's Own who had the honour of being selected to assault the hill, and during their stay at Vlamertinghe they had carefully rehearsed their task. All arrangements had been carefully thought out and on the evening of April 16th the battalion took its position in the trenches ready for the assault. The hour selected for the attack was 7 p.m. on April 17th, which involved the battalion being placed in position under cover of darkness on the previous night and

April 17<sup>th</sup>  
1915

having to lie quiet all day waiting for the hour to come. Aeroplanes patrolled up and down to keep the enemy's aircraft from discovering what was coming, but otherwise the day passed without special signs of activity. The actual storming party, C Company (Captain Moulton-Barrett (2) ), lay in the

(1) He had succeeded Sir C. Fergusson in November.

(2) He had rejoined on February 3rd, on recovering from his wound received at Neuve Chappelle

---

86

trenches 39 and 40, immediately opposite the hill, with: B (2nd-Lieut. Walker) in close support in dug-outs and support trenches. D (Captain Tuff) was in the communication trench further back ready to replace B directly it took C's place in trenches 39-40. A (Captain Lynch-White) was further back in reserve near Battalion Headquarters. A party of R.E. was attached to each of the eight columns into which the stormers were divided, and a strong working party of the K.O.S.B.'s had been detailed to push forward directly the hill was taken and assist in consolidating it.

April 17<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

At length the long day of waiting came to its close: at 7 p.m. the mines were fired and simultaneously the seventy guns collected to support the attack opened a tremendous bombardment of the German trenches behind and on either side of the hill, of the woods in rear, and the railway cutting. "There was not much noise ;" writes one account, "but the whole ground shook as if there was an earthquake and a few minutes later bricks, Germans and all kinds of debris were hurtling through the air in all directions." Then C Company leapt forward out of their trenches and dashed for the hill. In a couple of minutes they had swarmed up the slope and fallen upon the Germans who had survived the explosion. The bulk of the garrison of the hill had been wiped out and only some 50 or 60 stood to meet the assailants, but, dazed and shaken, they offered no organised opposition and were for the most part bayoneted: about 20 were taken, and of those who endeavoured to escape many were bombed or shot down as they fled down the communication trenches in rear of the hill, Sergt. Fisher doing most effective work with his machine-gun. The hill had been taken with but seven casualties among the stormers.

To retain the captured position was bound to be more difficult; once the Germans had recovered from their surprise they were sure to counter-attack in force.

---

87

B Company had joined C on the hill directly after the assault and with it came the two companies of the K.O.S.B.'s detailed as working parties. Consolidation was at once started, for there was much to be done. The explosion had completely demolished the top of the hill, in places the trenches had altogether disappeared and in their place were great craters 20 yards across. The largest of these were on the left flank, though there was another group at the other end. These craters were quickly put into a state of defence by the R.E.'s and K.O.S.B.'s while a firing-line was taken up along the far edge of the hill, which position Major Joslin, who commanded the assaulting party,

April 17<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

considered better than the line of the enemy's trench on the crest. Communication trenches back to our old lines were started, one from each flank, and about an hour after the assault it was reported that these were "nearly through," so vigorously had the working parties plied pick and shovel.

At first the consolidation was but little impeded by the enemy. The precautions for concealing the intention to attack had been successful and the German failure to counter-attack with any promptitude showed how completely they had been surprised. About half-past eight a counter-attack was reported to be threatening, but at 9 p.m. the report was "no attack yet: two companies and four machine-guns ready for it," and though shortly before midnight the enemy's artillery opened on the new trench the message was "firmly established." But when at last the attack came there was no mistake about it. Soon after midnight the K.O.S.B.'s were ordered to relieve B and C Companies, but before the relief had been completed the Germans started pushing forward in force over the open and from the railway cutting, on our right, and at the same time began to press up the communication trenches and to throw bombs into the craters on the left. Their artillery fire had now become very heavy and the support and

April 18<sup>th</sup>  
1915

---

88

communication trenches came in for a tremendous shelling, but the garrison held on unflinchingly and fired with deadly effect. Three times the Germans swarmed forward like great waves, each time they were beaten back, at the third attempt a few gallant men persevered only to be shot down on our parapet. On the left the Germans had more chances of working up close to the British line, and round the craters there was hand to hand fighting and constant bombing. Casualties were now becoming heavy on the hill, the removal of the wounded was made very difficult by the bombardment of the rear of the hill, and many were hit again as they were carried back to the First Aid post in the railway cutting. The brunt of this attack fell on the K.O.S.B.'s, but the portions of B and C Companies under 2nd-Lieuts. Poland and Walker had remained on the hill and continued to share the defence with the K.O.S.B.'s, notably in the left-hand craters, where 2nd-Lieut. Walker did splendid work. Just as he was handing over command on the hill to Major Sladen of the K.O.S.B.'s, Major Joslin was hit and killed, the fourth of the Regiment's field officers to fall since the beginning of the war. He had, as already mentioned, come to France with the Indian Corps, but had managed to get away from his post on the lines of communication and joined the battalion at the front in February in time to play a leading part in one of the most brilliant and successful of all its exploits.

April 18<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

When the K.O.S.B.'s relieved the original stormers A and D Companies remained in readiness to support them, and almost at once D was called up to reinforce as the Germans were renewing their attacks more vigorously than ever. Several officers fell, among them Captain Tuff, but there were not wanting N.C.O.'s like Sergt. Markham, who took command on his platoon commander's fall and acted with great coolness and resource, directing his men's fire and maintaining their

---

89

resistance. (1) About 4.30 a.m. the enemy made a most determined effort and managed to get close up, especially on the left, where the two big craters were desperately contested. A. then went up, taking with them a large quantity of ammunition of which the K.O.S.B.'s were running short. 2nd-Lieut. Doe taking up his platoon to the left craters about 5 a.m., found 2nd-Lieuts. Walker and Borland with a few of B Company still there, helping the hard-pressed Borderers to maintain the position. 2nd-Lieut. Walker was hit almost immediately after the reinforcements from A. arrived, but 2nd-Lieut. Doe's party carried on the defence, keeping the German bomb-throwers effectively at bay by a well-directed rapid fire until their overheated rifles began to get out of action. Sergt. Young won the D.C.M. for conspicuous gallantry in this fighting; he picked up German grenades, threw them back at the enemy, and set a splendid example. Sergts. Weston, Botting and Rabbit were all conspicuous for their gallantry and good leading, while Pte. Hissey took command of a small party, no N.C.O. being available, and established it in a position on the flank of the line so as to cover a weak spot most effectively. Some relief was given to the defenders at a critical moment by a British aeroplane, which hovered over the German lines and caused most of their batteries to cease fire in order to avoid detection. But the trench on the edge nearest to the German lines proved very hard to maintain and the defenders were gradually pressed back to the crest. However, at 8.5 a.m. Captain Lynch-White's message was "still holding the hill," and when half-an-hour later the Duke's came up and relieved the remnants of A and D and of the Borderers the defence had not been seriously shaken.

April 18<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

On relief A and D withdrew to some dug-outs in the railway embankment near Zillebeke Lake, to which B

(1) He was awarded the D.C.M.

---

and C had already retired, and in the evening the whole battalion marched off to huts between Ouderdom and Vlamertinghe. They met with a tremendous reception from the other troops in the rest camp while congratulatory messages from persons in authority, from the Commander-in-Chief downwards, testified to the general recognition of their gallantry. A few days later Sir John French, addressing the battalion along with the K.O.S.B.'s and other battalions which had shared in the later stages of the desperate fighting for the hill, spoke in the warmest terms, declaring that "nothing ever required greater tenacity or courage" than what these troops had had to endure.

April 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

"Hill Sixty" may have been only a minor incident in a war of such extent and intensity, but nevertheless it is a source of most legitimate pride to the regiments represented there. After the long and trying months of winter in the mud and marshes through which the Second Army's line ran, this successful attack seemed to mar a new era. It was followed, it is true, by a struggle which dwarfed "Hill Sixty" altogether, and instead of the advance it had seemed to promise the Second Army was desperately pressed to maintain its ground, was forced to give up most of the "Ypres salient," and even Hill 60 itself. But it was only the use of a weapon they were pledged not to employ that won the Germans these successes, and when hardest pressed the Second Army could brace themselves up to their struggle with the thought that the storming and retention of Hill 60 showed that, barring gas, they were better men than the Germans. "Eye Witness" was not far out when he classed the attack and defence of Hill

60 as “among the finest exploits performed by British troops.”

But once more the battalion had to take the field again just as a well deserved rest seemed assured. Hill 60 had cost it dear; in addition to Major Joslin, Captain Tuff and 2nd-Lieut. Walker, it had lost Lieut.

91

---

Payton, (1) and 2nd-Lieuts. Poland, Craston and Job, the last of whom had only joined the battalion three days before the fight. Four officers, 2nd-Lieuts. Doe, Westmacott, Liebenrood and Borland, were wounded and the casualties among the rank and file exceeded 300. It was an attenuated battalion, therefore, which moved off to relieve the 15th Brigade in the sector between Hill 60 and the canal on the afternoon of April 22nd. But when the head of the column reached Vlamertinghe it became clear that something had gone very much amiss. Transport of every description was pouring into the village from the Eastward along with a crowd of fugitives, mainly French African troops. The wildest rumours were prevalent, and even at that distance from the battlefield a curious smell could be detected. The road was blocked and the battalion found further progress impossible. It had barely halted before orders came cancelling the relief and diverting the 13th Brigade to a position of readiness in fields just West of Ypres, where it remained all night.

April 22<sup>nd</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

Early next morning fresh orders were received and the brigade moved off N.E. to a position near Brielen, the R.W.K. coming second in the column and following the K.O.S.B.'s. After a short halt at Brielen the Brigade pushed on and crossed the Ypres-Yser canal North of Ypres. As to the position of the enemy little definite information was available, nor was much known as to the general situation, except that the Germans had broken the French line running N.W. from the St. Julien-Poelcappelle road and had completely outflanked the British left where the Canadian Division, commanded by an old officer of The Queen's Own, Lieut-Gen. Alderson, was putting up a splendid fight. The object of the counter-attack which the 13th Brigade was now to

April 23<sup>rd</sup>  
1915

(1) This officer had been for some years in the 3rd Battalion and was in Government service in the Straits Settlements, but had hurried home at once and had reached the front early in February.

92

---

deliver was to drive back the Germans, whose advance into the gap between St. Julien and the canal menaced the whole of the British troops in the salient. To stop them was imperative; any further advance would make the position of the Fifth Corps absolutely untenable, and it would be doubtful if the bulk of it could be extricated and drawn back to the Westward of Ypres. The extreme urgency of the situation, therefore, required the immediate launching of the counter-attack, even though there had been no time for proper reconnaissance, and the artillery support available was wholly inadequate. Other troops were to co-operate, French on the left and some of the reserves of the Fifth Corps on the right, and the attack was timed for 3 p.m. It was already 2 p.m. when the battalion received its orders and there were 2½ miles to go to reach the position of deployment near St. Jean.

April 23<sup>rd</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

The march was carried out under shell-fire but the position was reached in time and the brigade deployed; the K.O.S.B.'s on the right of the first line with their right on the La Brique-Pilckem road, the R.W.K. on the left with the K.O.Y.L.I. and 9th London <sup>(1)</sup> in support. By deploying in a hollow the battalion managed to get some shelter, and escaped casualties during its deployment. For the attack it was organized in three lines with one platoon per company in the firing line, of which Captain Moulton-Barrett was in command. Almost directly it started to advance the French began to crowd in upon its firing line and even crossed its front. This made it necessary to hold back the supporting lines under cover and only push up a platoon at a time as required. Partly owing to this, partly because the ground over which the battalion was advancing gave a little cover, it managed to push forward without the crippling casualties which the K.O.S.B.'s suffered, but even so it could not get to close quarters with

(1) This battalion had been added to the 13th Brigade at the end of November.

---

93

---

the enemy, whose exact position it was impossible to ascertain. "None of us had any idea where the Germans were," one officer writes; "to this day I don't know whether they were on top of the hill, in front of us, or at the foot of it." They gave no targets to the firing line, which eventually came to a standstill after advancing about 800 yards. On that line it dug in, holding on till dark, when a withdrawal was made to a better line 100 yards further back. It may have seemed that the 13th Brigade had accomplished nothing but its advance had closed up the gap between the French and the Canadian Division which had been so grave a danger to the whole British position. One eyewitness described the Brigade's advance with the utmost enthusiasm: "They went up," he wrote, "in broad daylight, in skirmishing order, in face of the most awful shell-fire ..... I am thankful for the privilege of having been a witness of their heroism."

April 23<sup>rd</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

On this new line the battalion entrenched; the supports came up on the left and prolonged the firing-line in that direction, but before dawn the 4th Rifle Brigade arrived and allowed the battalion to be withdrawn a couple of miles to a field where the welcome battalion-cookers were met. The losses, Lieuts. Bradley and Daubeny killed, 2nd-Lieuts. Maunder and Cobb wounded, 101 other ranks killed, wounded and missing, had not been heavy considering the severity of the shelling and the tremendous rifle-fire to which the battalion had been exposed, <sup>(1)</sup> but they amounted to nearly a quarter of those in action. Two days' comparative rest followed, mostly spent along the canal bank in support and marked by the arrival of a big draft of 370 men under Captain Knox, recently released from his Territorial Adjutancy, with 2nd-Lieuts. Littleboy and Gross. The battalion was thus fairly up to strength when, in

April 24<sup>th</sup>  
1915

April  
24<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup>  
1915

(1) One officer wrote that the action was an admirable example of "the little real harm shells and bullets make on a properly extended line .... 25 per cent. casualties, are heavy, but it was nothing compared to the amount of ammunition expended."

---

94

---

the small hours of April 26th it relieved portions of the 2nd D.C.L.I., 1st York and Lancaster and 9th London in front-line trenches, about a mile and a quarter N.W. of Wieltje and joining on to the French near Turco Farm. These trenches, which were to the right of the line reached on the 23rd, represented the high water mark of an advance

April 26<sup>th</sup> –  
May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

by a scratch brigade collected from the reserves of the Fifth Corps; they were shallow and gave little cover, but companies had brought up 50 shovels apiece and so could improve them considerably. This was just as well, as the battalion was subjected to a very heavy shellfire, against which it found itself fairly well protected, though this could not be said of the gas from which it suffered considerably during the next five days. The only protection available was strips of flannel which were dampened and tied on over the mouth and nose but proved a rather inadequate expedient. During these days the battalion did not have to advance, its task being to retain its position and do what it could with covering-fire to assist other troops who attacked on its flanks, but neither the Lahore Division, who made two determined attacks, nor the French on their left, achieved any substantial success, and when the battalion were at last relieved by the Fourth Division on April 30th, the German position was unaltered. But these attacks had at any rate stopped the German advance and removed the principal danger that had threatened the Ypres Salient; if The Queen's Own seemed to have achieved little for all the losses they had suffered <sup>(1)</sup> they had shared in a negative result of real importance, the Salient was still tenable, even if the advanced positions had to be evacuated. Even now the battalion was not to get the rest it so much needed. After getting, on May 1st—2nd, its

(1) The casualties of April 25<sup>th</sup>—30th came to one officer (2nd Lieut. Croucher) and three men killed, 26 men missing, two officers (2nd Lieuts. Sharpin and Hilder) and 42 men wounded and gassed.

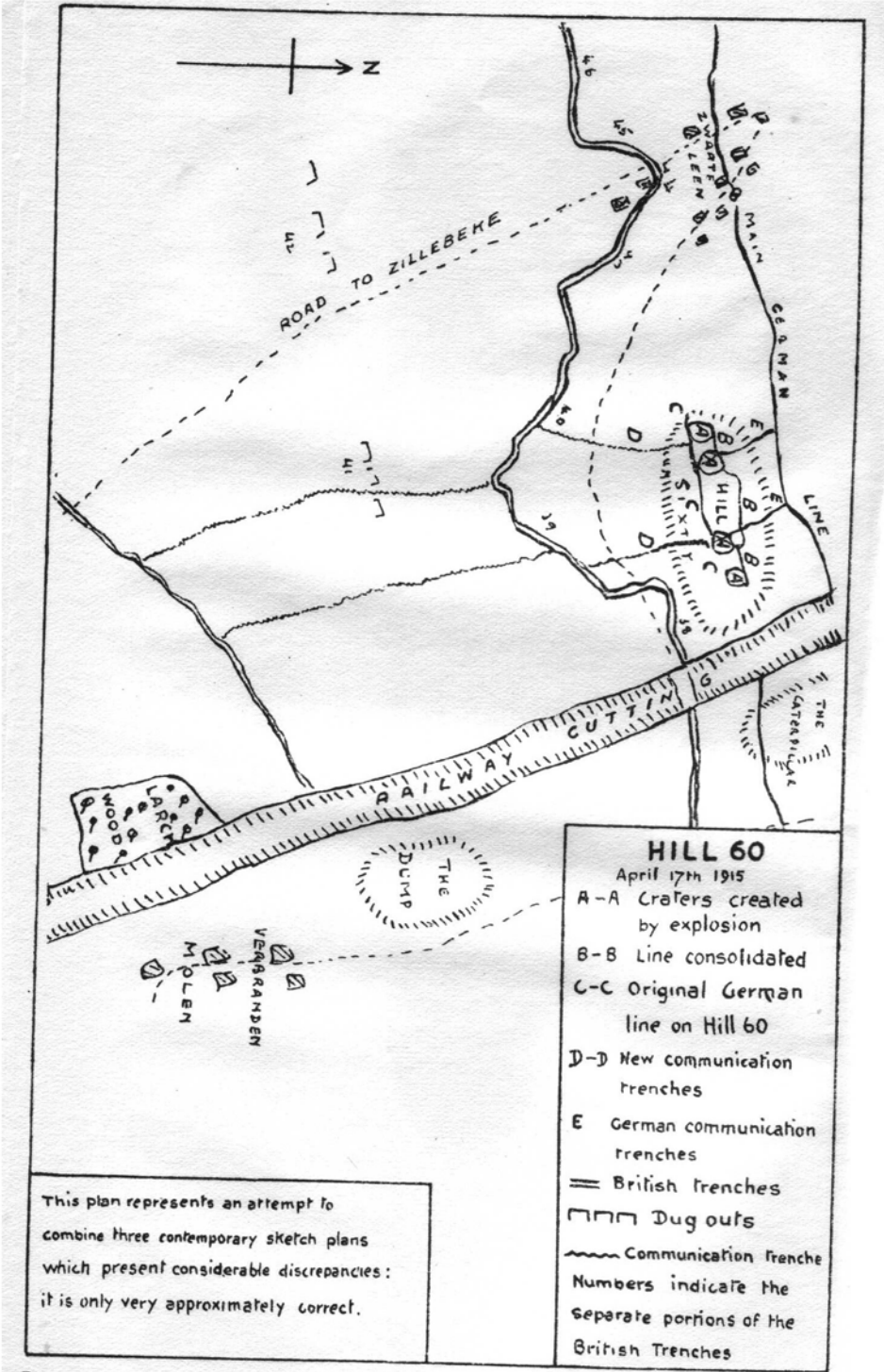
first night's real rest since April 21st, it was turned out two nights running owing to alarms East of the canal, and then on the 5th it had to hurry back to Zillebeke as the Germans were again attacking Hill 60. They had had a try on May 1st, but despite their use of gas they had been beaten off by the Dorsets. This time, however, the wind had greatly favoured the gas, and thanks to it they had overwhelmed the Duke's and retaken the hill. On reaching the headquarters of the 15th Brigade, therefore, the battalion were ordered to counter-attack. As on April 17th, it was associated with the K.O.S.B.'s, who were to attack on its right, advancing against Hill 60 itself, while the battalion made for the trenches North of the Hill. A Company was to lead, with D in support, B and C being in reserve. However, the enemy's fire was extremely heavy, the night was dark, the ground unknown and very difficult, owing to wire, old trenches and shell-holes, and the net result was that most of the battalion lost direction, and the advance was unsuccessful. Eventually 2nd-Lieut. Littleboy and about a platoon got into Trench 40, now once again the British front line, but the Hill was not re-taken. Sergt. Robinson, the Signalling Sergeant, almost the only man in the battalion who had been over the ground in daylight and knew it, did splendid work in going round and ascertaining the position of the companies, for which he later on received the D.C.M. Pte. Cork also, one of the stretcher-bearers, obtained the same reward for going out under heavy fire in broad daylight to the help of a wounded man whom it seemed impossible to reach; he not only took him food and water but crawled back 300 yards with the man on his back and safely brought him in to shelter. Eventually as it was clear that there was no chance of a successful attack the battalion was withdrawn just before daylight to support trenches at Larch Wood. C Company was left on the right of the Bedfordshires to protect that battalion's flank should the

May 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

May 6<sup>th</sup>  
1915

enemy try to advance from the Zwarteleen salient which they had captured along with Hill 60. No such attempt, however, was made and eventually the battalion was reunited in reserve at Ypres on May 8th. Its casualties during the last four days had been over 100 including 2nd-Lieut. Wild wounded, making its total losses since the beginning of the attack on Hill 60 nineteen officers and nearly 600 men. But the unsuccessful counter-attack on Hill 60 was to be the last severe fight for the battalion for many months to come. No blame can be attached to it for the failure, which merely emphasized the lesson that if a counter-attack is to succeed it should be launched either before the enemy have had time to consolidate and get ready for it or after very careful preparation. Still, it was an unsatisfactory ending to three weeks in which the battalion had earned great distinction and had shown that if but few of the men who had stood in its ranks at Mons on August 23rd were still with it, they had transmitted to the recruits who had replaced them their fighting spirit and powers of endurance, and that The Queen's Own's traditions were safe in the keeping of the successors of the "Old Originals."

May 8<sup>th</sup>  
1915



This plan represents an attempt to combine three contemporary sketch plans which present considerable discrepancies: it is only very approximately correct.

- HILL 60**  
 April 17th 1915
- A-A Craters created by explosion
  - B-B Line consolidated
  - C-C Original German line on Hill 60
  - D-D New communication trenches
  - E German communication trenches
  - == British trenches
  - Dug outs
  - ~ Communication trench
  - Numbers indicate the separate portions of the British Trenches