

CHAPTER 7 TRENCH WARFARE 1915

On a really broad view of the story of the British Army on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918 the most notable features of May 1915 was not the bitter and protracted struggles to keep the Germans out of Ypres, nor the repulse of the Aubers Ridge attack of May 9th, from which so much had been hoped, but the arrival in France of the first instalment of the "New Armies." This marked a real turning point in the story of England's effort. The "Old Army," sustained by the Special Reserve and reinforced by the Territorials, had kept up its end in the face of appalling difficulties and odds; the tide must now begin to flow Eastward.

May 1915

If at first some had feared that the New Armies would never get a look in, when the "New Army" Divisions did begin to appear they came too late for that immediate reversal of the fortunes of war for which some had fondly hoped. With the situation as thoroughly stabilized as it had become in France in the early summer of 1915 a sudden change was out of the question; it wanted a very big force to achieve even a small success. At the Aisne on September 14th, 1914, the reinforcement of the First Corps by the Sixth Division might have driven back the whole German right, and greatly altered the entire course of the war; in June 1915 such chances were a thing of the past. Still the arrival in quick succession of the Ninth, Fourteenth and Twelfth Divisions was an earnest of a mighty force to be reckoned with seriously by the Germans.

Included in General Wing's Twelfth Division was the senior Service battalion of The Queen's Own. After spending the mid-winter months at Hythe, during which period Colonel Even had left the battalion

Jan – June
1915
6th Battalion

for the War Office and had been succeeded by Major Venables, on which Major Beeching became second-in-command, the 6th R.W.K. had moved to Aldershot at the end of February. Here the remaining portion of its training had been passed, a period of hard work and of many rumours both as to the probable date of the battalion's departure for active service and still more as to its destination. Ultimately it was June 1st before the main body left Aldershot for Folkestone, (1) whence a night passage carried it to Boulogne. It was a good augury for the 6th that the Commandant of the Base Camp should have been a former C.O. of the 1st Battalion, Colonel Maunsell, who had been in command at the Depot earlier in the war. On June 3rd the battalion entrained again, finding on the train the transport party, machine-gun section and other details under Major Beeching, who had preceded the main body by one day, travelling by Southampton and Havre. A long night journey took it to its detraining station at Wizernes, from which a couple of marches, rather trying to those who were making their first acquaintance with French roads in very sultry weather, brought it well within sound of the guns at Meteren on June 6th. A fortnight in billets followed, then came a week in which the battalion was attached by platoons and companies to the 19th Brigade for instruction in trench-warfare, after which it took over reserve trenches from the Warwickshire Territorials of the Forty Eighth Division in the famous Ploegsteert Wood. On

Jan – June
1915
6th Battalion

(1) The officers who went overseas with the battalion were :—Colonel F.Venables, in command; Major H. C. W. Beeching, second-in. command: Captain G. E. Wingfield Stratford, Adjutant; Lieut. L. de B Barnett, Machine-Gun Officer. A Company: Captains E. Hudson (commanding), and H. G. Margetts, Lieut. G. A. L. Hatton, 2nd-Lieuts. G Brown, A. B. Francis and W. J. Alderman (Transport Officer). B Company: Captains J. C. Parker (commanding), and C. H. Towse, Lieut. M. L. W. Matthews, 2nd-Lieuts. A. G. Heath, H. C. Harris and J S. Mann. C Company: Captain A. B. C. Francis (commanding), and W R A Dawson, 2nd.Lieuts. K. Dykes, W W Pye and L. C. R. Smith. D Company: Captains R. P. P. Rowe (commanding) and E. T. Williams, 2nd-Lieuts. M. H. Carré, W. B. Hodgson-Smith and J. Langlands also Captain Logan, R.A.M.C. (attached).

the last day of June, the 6th moved up to relieve the 6th Buffs and found itself actually holding part of the British front line, and with the enemy only 150 yards away.

June-September
1915
6th Battalion

“Plugstreet Wood” in the summer of 1915 was not a particularly active quarter. Shortage of artillery ammunition was necessarily restricting to a minimum the offensive activities of the B.E.F. and the local tactical situation presented no exceptional features. Thus the two-and-a-half months which the 6th spent in this sector, or in the one immediately South of it, were marked by few outstanding incidents. But they were far from being a time of idleness or without value as training. The maintenance and improvement of the trenches involved constant work, vigilant patrolling had to be carried on, in the course of which Captain Dawson distinguished himself by daring and successful reconnaissances, and the battalion found it no easy job to establish an ascendancy over the enemy’s active and enterprising snipers. But by the middle of August it was noted that there was a marked diminution in the enemy’s rifle-fire, and though his expenditure of trench mortar ammunition had increased no great damage had resulted. On the whole casualties had been low; for July they amounted to 50 all told, 6 men being killed, and one officer, Lieut. Heath, and 43 other ranks wounded; for August they were lower, 5 men killed, two officers, Lieut. Hodgson Smith and 2nd-Lieut. Mann, and 28 men wounded, and as three drafts had joined and the sick-rate had been remarkably low the battalion was well up to strength. A noticeable incident was that which won for the battalion its first D.C.M., the first indeed won by any member of any Service Battalion in the war. This occurred on the morning of July 19th, when Sergt. Cresswell went out from the trenches under very heavy rifle-fire and brought in a wounded officer and a man of the next battalion, who had been hit while patrolling in “No Man’s Land” and were lying

nearly 50 yards out from the line. The usual tour of duty in trenches was six days, following by six out, during which large working parties had constantly to be found. In these periods out of the line several inspections took place. On August 18th the battalion was inspected by Lord Kitchener and commended for its healthy appearance and hard work, while a little later the G.O.C. Second Army, General Sir H. Plumer, expressed himself highly satisfied with what he had seen, and held up to the battalion the glorious example of the 1st Battalion, declaring that he” never wished to have a better battalion under him.”

July – Sept
1915
6th Battalion

September saw the 6th entrusted with its first active enterprise. Between Monmouth House on the right and Essex Farm on the left there was an awkward re-entrant in the line which it was decided to straighten out by constructing a breastwork across the chord of the arc. After dark one evening a strong covering party was pushed out in front

and, thus protected, working parties threw up during the hours of darkness a line over 100 yards in length which was connected up with the old line by a communication trench called Sevenoaks Tunnel. The work was carried out without interference from the enemy and was a very satisfactory and useful performance, greatly improving the line. One more tour of duty in these trenches followed, costing the battalion its first officer, Lieut. Bingham Stevens, killed on September 17th, a day of more than usual artillery and trench-mortar activity, and then the 6th moved away from Ploegsteert, passing Southward to the area South-East of Bethune, where, on September 25th, the First Army had delivered its attack on Loos. Its apprenticeship was over, (1) a severe test was before it.

(1) The 6th's losses in action up to the end of September came to just 100: 1 officer and 13 other ranks killed, 4 officers and 82 other ranks wounded. It had received drafts amounting to 2 officers and 140 other ranks, and at the end of September it mustered 27 officers and 996 men, of whom 1 officer and 43 men were detached on various employments.

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By this time two more Service battalions had followed the 6th to the front, the 7th and the 8th. The 7th, which had moved from Purfleet to Colchester in April for Brigade training and then to Salisbury Plain for Divisional training, had had experiences not unlike those of the 6th, much hard work compressed into a short space, training not a little delayed by the want of proper weapons and equipment, changes in officers and N.C.O.'s, the most notable being that Major Stevenson, the second-in-command, was not passed for active service. Major Stevenson had done admirable work in building up and training the new unit, and the battalion parted with him with regret. His place was taken by another Regular officer of The Queen's Own, Major J. T. Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes, who had till then been detained as a Company Commander at the R.M.C., where Major Stevenson succeeded him, while another link with the pre-war Regiment was provided when Colonel Martyn, who had taken the 1st Battalion out to France, took over command of the 55th Brigade. Various dates had been provisionally fixed for its departure, but it was July before the Eighteenth Division got its orders for France and not till the end of the month did the 7th Battalion set foot in France, landing at Havre on the 27th. (1) It was not destined for any of those parts of the "front" with which the B.E.F. had become familiar, for the Eighteenth Division had been allotted to the newly-formed Third Army which began relieving the French on the right bank of the Somme at the end of July. To Bray, therefore, the 7th

April – July
1915
7th Battalion

August 1915

(1) The officers who proceeded overseas with the 7th Battalion were:

Colonel A. W. Prior (commanding), Major Fiennes (second-in-command), Captain Anstruther (Adjutant), Lieut. Hackett (Transport Officer), Lieut. Rich (Signal Officer), Lieut. Maloney (Quartermaster), Lieut.-Col. Ryall (D), Captains Phillips (B), Snelgrove (A), Summers (C) (Company Commanders), Captains Webber (D), R. B. Holland (B), Waddington (C) and Latter (A) (Second Captains), Lieuts. Russell, Heaton, Skinner and Warren, 2nd-Lieuts. Dennis, Mackenzie (Machine - Gun Officers), Tindall (Sniping Officer), Emden, J. B. Matthews, Pymm, Johnson, Cross, Proud, Lucas, Lewin, D. S. Freeman, C. S. Stevenson and Longley (Platoon Commanders).

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made its way, and August found the battalion under-going its initiation into trench warfare at Bois Français in the neighbourhood of Carnoy.

Aug 1915
7th Battalion

It was not the only representative of The Queen's Own in that district, for the 1st

June-July
1915
1st Battalion

Battalion had recently preceded it to the Third Army's area, having reached Corbie by train on July 31st, and had relieved French troops in front of Carnoy on the first anniversary of the declaration of war. Since " Hill 60" the 1st Battalion had had a quieter time. After a short period of rest it had gone into the trenches again near St. Eloi at the end of May. Here it spent the next two months, tours of duty in the trenches alternating with periods in huts at Dickebusch. The Germans opposite the battalion were fairly lively and there was much trench mortaring and sniping, varied by occasional bombardments. On June 15th, for example, the British guns developed heavy fire as a diversion in favour of the Third Division's attempt to recover the Bellewarde Ridge near Hooze, while a month later the Germans opened a bombardment which seemed to prelude an attack in force. Actually the German infantry did begin to leave their trenches, but despite the bombardment The Queen's Own were ready for them and promptly opened a rapid fire which sent them packing back to cover and nipped in the bud anything serious that may have been intended. The battalion again was fortunate in missing by a bare half-hour the explosion of a mine under one of the trenches in its sector, an explosion which inflicted 120 casualties on the K.O.Y.L.I., who had just relieved it. As it was the total casualties from May 8th to the end of July came to just over 160, (1) and as several drafts had arrived and a good many officers had joined, the

(1) One officer (2nd-Lieut. Richardson) and 30 men killed or died of wounds, 2 officers (Captain Knox and Lieut. Carpenter) and 135 other ranks wounded.

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battalion was well up to strength⁽¹⁾ when the Fifth Division was transferred to the newly formed Tenth Corps, under its old Divisional Commander, General Morland, in the Third Army. Before leaving Flanders for the Somme it was reviewed by the Army and Corps Commanders under whom it had been serving and was warmly praised for its splendid work. "You are handing over the line," said the Corps Commander (General Sir C. Ferguson), "to those who succeed you in a very different and improved condition from what it was when you took it over. It remains as a very fine record of the good work you have done." Indeed, the battalion could look back with legitimate satisfaction on its work in the Ypres Salient. If "Hill 60" had been its most brilliant and outstanding exploit, its counter-attack on April 23rd had been in some ways of even greater importance, while to hold to trenches, as it had so often had to do, under severe punishment to which no effective reply could be made had been in reality an almost more searching test of courage, discipline and endurance.

July 1915
1st Battalion

The 1st and 7th Battalions were to find the new line which the British had taken over a somewhat peaceful part of the war. In the five months of 1915 which the 1st spent in the Carnoy sector its total battle casualties came to 56, including 3 officers wounded and 11 men killed or died of wounds, a striking contrast even to the "trench-warfare" losses of the winter of 19 14-1915. The losses of the 7th similarly amounted to well under 100. This was partly to be accounted for by the strategical situation. Shortage of munitions was still sufficiently pronounced to preclude any major operation on the British side except the attempted break through

Aug - Dec
1915
1st and 7th
Battalions

(1) During this period Colonel Robinson was made a Brevet Lt.-Col. and Captain Moulton-Barrett awarded the M.C. in recognition of the " Hill 60 " operations. Captains Buchanan-Dunlop and Moulton-Barrett were both invalided home in May, Captain Lynch White taking over the duties of Adjutant, but in July Captain Buchanan-Dunlop rejoined and became second-in-command, being in temporary command for a month as Colonel Robinson was away on sick leave.

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of the First Army at Loos in September. Had that offensive gone really well the Fifth Division was to have attacked the Pommiers Ridge which faced the Carnoy sector, but this had to remain a paper project, and the Third Army remained inactive. It was this same shortage of ammunition which prevented the practice of “raiding” from being as extensively followed as it was to be in the summer of 1916 and in the following winter, when for a raid by one or two companies almost as much heavy artillery and ammunition was available as had been vouchsafed to three whole Divisions at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915. Only towards the end of 1915 did the Third Army begin to raid, and then only on a small scale.

Aug – Dec
1915
1st Battalion

But the Germans opposite the Third Army were equally unaggressive, and when they did indulge in an occasional “hate” in the shape of a bombardment by heavy artillery or more often by trench mortars, casualties were much reduced by the well-developed state of the trench system. The ground in this district being largely chalk, the work of cutting out trenches and, in fine weather at any rate, of keeping them in repair was much easier than in the mud and swamps of Flanders, while in the construction of dug-outs, communication trenches and various contrivances to make life in trenches rather less uncomfortable, the French had done much, assisted thereto by the somewhat pacific attitude adopted by both sides. When the 1st Battalion took over the Carnoy trenches the thickness of the parapet was not up to its standard, but this was soon remedied and the parapet made bullet-proof, while other improvements were put in hand, fire-steps were rivetted, trenches deepened and drained, the wire in front of the line repaired. As far as ammunition supply permitted the pacific attitude was abandoned. If there was no major offensive and little artillery activity, snipers and trench mortars were usually busy and the acquisition of an elephant gun warranted to penetrate the enemy’s

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loop-hole plates and of a catapult capable of throwing hand-grenades across No Man’s Land were hailed with satisfaction. Patrols went out frequently but the enemy seemed disinclined to venture much into No Man’s Land, and our patrols found little to report. A couple of the 1st Battalion’s daily Intelligence Reports will give some idea of the daily round —

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1915
1st Battalion

“Enemy’s working parties were seen apparently rivetting parapet in their front line trenches at 6 a.m. in front of 60 Trench. Enemy fired two T.M. (trench mortar) bombs just in front of 52 at 7.45 p.m. last night; our howitzers replied. About midnight working parties were noisy in front of 53. Enemy has been very quiet and done little sniping. They had the wind up last night about 9 p.m., firing a good deal and sending up a number of lights. They apparently imagined we had a patrol out. Enemy refrained from replying in any way to our Catapult Battery this morning.” —(November 4th, 1915.)

“45 T.M. bombs fired this afternoon elicited a response of four rifle grenades, three of which were “duds” It seems to be impossible to upset the equanimity of the Germans opposite us.” — (November 27th, 1915.)

In September Colonel Robinson was promoted to command the 112th Brigade, on which Major Buchanan-Dunlop obtained command of the battalion and Captain Newton became Adjutant, and later in the month Major Lynch White received a Staff appointment.

The 7th Battalion found the last five months of 1915 comparatively quiet. In the second week of August it went into the Fifth Division’s trenches for instruction, A Company

Aug – Dec
1915
7th Battalion

having the good fortune to have its own 1st Battalion as its instructors. Individual instruction was first given, officers, N.C.O.'s and men being shown their duties by the corresponding individuals in the instructing unit. In the next stage the new hands went in by platoons and finally by companies, in each case replacing an equivalent unit. This over, the battalion assumed responsibility for a section of the line on August 23rd. The Eighteenth Division's trenches were to the left of those held by the Fifth and faced the Pommiers Ridge between Fricourt and Montauban. Here the advantage of ground lay with the Germans,

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whose trenches were higher up the slope, and as the defences required much work, parapets not being bulletproof, shelters and dugouts being most inadequate, communication trenches and parados out of repair, the 7th had a busy time. The Germans were fairly active, and on August 23rd they blew a mine under the left of the battalion's line but found the 7th so much on the alert that they were unable to occupy the crater thus formed or to prevent the battalion occupying and consolidating another crater formed four days later by the explosion of a British counter mine. The 7th came out from its first tour very cheerful and confident. It had suffered a dozen casualties but had fully held its own with the enemy, and had accomplished any amount of useful work.

Aug – Dec
1915
7th Battalion

Until the end of the year the 7th continued in the same area, generally holding the same sector, known as E.I., and relieving and being relieved by the 7th Buffs. The sector had the reputation of being "quiet," but when the 7th first went into it the German snipers were so much in the ascendant that their working parties exposed themselves unhesitatingly, expecting their snipers to keep the British rifle-fire completely under. This situation could not be tolerated, and the 7th set to work to put things right. Fortunately before the battalion had left Salisbury Plain a special squad of snipers had been organised by Major Fiennes, and these men, who had been specially trained and equipped, soon proved their value. The squad was commanded by Lieut. C.G. Tindall, and was composed of 24 picked shots of good physique and intelligence, including, it is to be noted, several men who had in civil life been gamekeepers. These snipers worked in pairs, one man observing, the other shooting. Special positions were chosen and carefully protected and concealed. On the left of the sector the ground rose a little and good positions could be found in old trenches from which the German line could be observed and even enfiladed; on

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the right places were harder to find, and finally they had to be constructed in the parados of the fire-trench. The men went to their posts just before dawn and remained till dusk, keeping a sharp watch on everything that went on in the German lines and combining intelligence duties with their sniping. So well thought out and executed were these measures that the battalion had soon got the Germans in hand; within two days their snipers had had to move their posts, and before long the Germans were so completely dominated that it proved necessary to forbid our men to sit on top of the parapet, a thing they could not have done with impunity when they first went into the line. (1)

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1915
7th Battalion

In the same way the machine-gun officer, Lieut. McKenzie, and his detachment set about their work with great zeal and skill. Great care was taken in selecting the sites of the machine-gun emplacements and in controlling their fire. Systematic shooting was practised at points where working parties had been observed or suspected and the intelligence furnished by Lieut. Tindall's snipers enabled the machine-gunners to record several successes. More than once when a fog lifted they found themselves presented with good targets, and the battalion soon acquired a reputation throughout the Division.

Before the end of the year the 7th saw several changes in its senior officers. On October 12th Colonel Prior was forced to relinquish command. He had been a most capable and efficient commander and the battalion was not a little indebted to his instruction and example, but his health proved unequal to the strain of active service. Major Fiennes succeeded to the command, and Captain Phillips became

(1) At a meeting of the National Rifle Association in 1916 special reference was made to the success with which a battalion of The Queen's Own had got the upper hand of the Germans in sniping by careful and systematic measures and by developing the science of sniping; it was evidently to the 7th's achievements that the reference was being made.

second-in-command; Colonel Ryall also went home about the same time, Captains R. B. Holland and Waddington taking command of B and C Companies respectively. About the same time the 7th parted regretfully from General Martyn, who was transferred to a brigade in the Twenty-Second Division, which had just been ordered to Salonica. (1)

Aug – Dec
1915
7th Battalion

Thanks largely to the good work of all ranks on the defences and to the efficiency in offensive work of its machine-gunners and snipers the 7th's total losses up to the end of 1915 were, as already stated, under 100 killed and wounded. A mine explosion on December 21st, at the Tambour, a salient in the British line 50 yards from the German trenches, saw several officers and men gassed, but afforded the battalion its first distinctions; Captain Waddington, who, though himself gassed, not only directed the work of rescue but went down a gallery and brought out three men himself, was awarded the M.C., while D.C.M.'s were awarded to Sergt. Levy, Corpl. Hillyard and Pte. Moore, who were all conspicuous in the work. It was at this same danger spot, the Tambour, that the battalion lost its first officer, Captain Summers being killed there on December 29th while in charge of a "mining fatigue," in which work Lieuts. Russell and Innocent were wounded about the same time. But if neither the battalion nor the Eighteenth Division as a whole had been put to any severe test in their first five months of active service they had been sufficiently tried to prove their worth and give good promise of solid achievements to come, and the end of the year found them steady and efficient soldiers.

(1) General Martyn had previously served in the Balkans with the Gendarmerie and was an interpreter in Turkish, which was the reason for his transfer. The climate of Macedonia, however, proved too much for his health, and he was soon invalided. He subsequently recovered enough to be given the command at the Cape, which he held for over a year.

