

## CHAPTER 8

### LOOS

If the 7th R.W.K. reached the end of 1915 without taking part in any major operation, such was not the lot of the third Service Battalion of the Regiment to go overseas. The 8th Battalion's early experiences had closely resembled those of the 6th and 7th. It had to wait longer for its khaki uniforms, for rifles that could be used for other purposes than learning the manual—it was only issued with service rifles in July—for equipment of every variety. Until "K1" and "K2" were fully equipped the wants of "K3" could not be supplied, and its training was naturally not a little impeded thereby. And it would be absurd to pretend that in the matter of trained instructors "K3" battalions fared as well as the earlier-formed units. The Regular officers and N.C.O.'s left behind by the 1st Battalion or serving at the Depot were only a handful, and of the ex-officers and men who rejoined those with the more recent experience were naturally posted to the battalions first for service. Similarly very few of the newly appointed junior officers of "K3" had any appreciable degree of military training. It is all the more honour, therefore, to Colonel Vansittart and those associated with him in training the 8th R.W.K., and to the officers and men who had to prepare for service in face of such handicaps and discomforts, that when the battalion came to go overseas it was acknowledged to have become a really fine and efficient unit.

Jan – Aug  
1915  
8<sup>th</sup> Battalion

What Hythe and Aldershot had represented in the 6th Battalion's progress towards readiness for service, and Purfleet, Colchester and Codford in the case of the 7th, Shoreham-on-Sea, Worthing and Blackdown had been to the 8th. It had moved to Worthing at the end of November and stayed there till the end of

124

March, when it returned to Shoreham for another couple of months. The concentration in the Aldershot District at the end of June of the Twenty-Fourth Division had been hailed as the preliminary to the transfer to France, and this followed on August 29th after a peculiarly strenuous final preparation. (1) But the Division was not to go through the same gradual initiation into active service conditions as the Twelfth and Eighteenth had gone through. When it landed in France (2) <sup>preparations</sup> for the coming offensive by the First Army were already well advanced, and, together with another newly arrived "K3" Division, the Twenty-Fourth was allotted to General Haking's Eleventh Corps, which was to constitute the reserves for the attack. To criticise this use of raw and inexperienced troops is easy after the event, as it is also to overlook the administrative difficulties in the way of putting these new Divisions into the line at quiet spots and drawing out more seasoned units for employment in the attack. Certainly the conditions under which the 8th R.W.K. was to endure its baptism of fire demanded the highest qualities of skill and leadership, endurance and discipline.

September  
1915  
8<sup>th</sup> Battalion

The task before the Eleventh Corps was to support the advance of the centre which, covered by defensive flanks to be formed facing La Bassée on the left and Lens on the right, was intended to penetrate the German

See sketch 11

(1) The Division was now under Major-Gen. Sir J. Ramsay, the battalion being in the 72nd Brigade (Brigadier-Gen. Mitford).

(2) The officers who proceeded overseas with the 8th Battalion were as follows: Colonel E. Vansittart (commanding). Major L. Brock-Hollinshead (second-in-command), Captain C. de C. Middleton (Adjutant), Lieut. W. K. Tillie (Machine-Gun

Officer), Lieut. S. R. Paul (Transport Officer), Lieut. H. Evans (Quartermaster), R.S.M. A. Lee. A Company; Major A. H. Pullman, Lieuts. R. M. Old, H. S. Brown and L. Gibbs, 2nd-Lieut. C. D. N. Lawson. B Company: Captain R. W. Grant, Lieuts. P. T. Smith and N. B. Green, 2nd-Lieuts. O. Jones, E. A. Bigsby and V. G. Don. C. Company: Captains A. C. Edwards and C.A. Hutchinson, Lieut. H. L. Lewis, 2nd-Lieuts. D. H. Watts, M. S. Ell and A. N. Harris. D Company: Major J. C. Chillingworth, Captain P. M. Robertson-Ross, 2nd-Lieuts. H. O. Beer, R. F. T. Burrell, G. de L. Hough and D. W. Plant.

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125

positions between Haisnes and Loos, push forward to the Deule Canal and cross it near Pont a Vendin. There, if all had gone well, it might hope to effect a junction with General Foch's Army, which, attacking South of Lens, was to work round that town and then swing leftward to meet the British. The first day's fighting saw the German defences penetrated on a wide front from Loos to the Hohenzollern Redoubt, and a defensive flank satisfactorily established on the right by the Forty-Seventh (London) Division. (1) In the centre, however, a check to the right brigade of the First Division had broken up the force of the attack, fragments only of the Division had reached Hulluch, and that important point had not been secured. Indeed, the Lens-La Bassée road had only been crossed by the First Division on its extreme right at Bois Hugo, and though the Fifteenth had taken Loos and pushed on over Hill 70 against the suburbs of Lens, its left flank was hardly secure.

Further to the left rather less success had attended the efforts of the First Corps; the Seventh and Ninth Divisions had begun well and in places had reached the enemy's second line, but it had proved impossible to take full advantage of the opportunity and before evening on September 25th counter-attacks had begun to press both Divisions back.

For September 26th it was proposed to utilize the Twenty-First and Twenty-Fourth Divisions of the Eleventh Corps, the former to take over Bois Hugo from the First Division and to push forward on the right of the Twenty-Fourth, which was to advance between Bois Hugo and Hulluch flanked on the left by a

(1) One unit of this was the 20th (Blackheath and Woolwich) Battalion of the London Regiment, which had been formed on the organization of the Territorial Force out of the old 2nd and 3rd Volunteer Battalions of the Royal West Kent; it had been allowed to retain the regimental badge, and was proud to recall its connection with The Queen's Own. This battalion distinguished itself greatly in the attack and earned several distinctions.

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126

renewed attempt by the First Division against Hulluch. But before these two Divisions could reach their assembly positions a brigade of each had been diverted, one of the Twenty-First to Hill 70, which was being furiously counter-attacked, one of the Twenty-Fourth to assist in the defence of the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

Moreover, all manner of difficulties had contributed to delay their advance to the front. The area behind the battle zone was congested with every kind of traffic, through which the battalions of the Eleventh Corps could only thread their way slowly and with many checks. The 8th R.W.K. had spent the first three weeks of September encamped near Montreuil, devoting most of its time to field-firing and divisional exercises, and had started to march to the battle area on the evening of September 21st. It was four days, or rather nights, on the road, for its moves were carried out during the hours of darkness, and though the marches were not long the congestion of the roads by the voluminous traffic moving in the same direction caused many delays and made progress slow and

September  
1915  
8<sup>th</sup> Battalion

September 21<sup>st</sup>  
1915  
8<sup>th</sup> Battalion

exhausting.

Early on September 25th the Division moved forward to Vermelles, where it spent a day of rumours and anticipation, listening to the guns and watching wounded and prisoners coming down from the front. After dark the 72nd Brigade advanced in artillery formation past the Lone Tree trenches, which had so long held up the First Division. The move was covered by the scouts of the 8th R.W.K., who carried their work out well, pushing across the Lens-La Bassée road and reaching Hulluch, which they found held by the enemy. On this, orders were issued to the battalion to capture the village, but they were almost immediately cancelled and the battalion finally moved back to some trenches about 1,000 yards West of the Lens-La Bassée road. It had come under some shellfire while moving up and rather more after reaching its halting-place, but had only a few casualties. But the men went

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127

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into action next morning with but little water or food and very short of sleep.

The ground over which the Twenty-Fourth Division was to attack sloped down gently for some distance to the Lens-La Bassée road, beyond which it rose gradually to a rearward system of wire and trenches running from East of Hulluch to the outskirts of Lens and about 1,000 yards from the Lens-La Bassée road. Bois Hugo, which jutted out Eastward beyond the rest of the British line, was the key to the situation as it flanked the approach to the German trenches. Unfortunately, sometime before the hour fixed for the Twenty-Fourth Division to advance, the Germans counter-attacked Bois Hugo, dislodged from this highly important position the brigade of the Twenty-First Division which was holding it, and filled the wood with machine-guns. The Twenty-First pushed reinforcements forward to recover Bois Hugo, but without any success, and the Twenty-Fourth's chances had already been imperilled when at 11 a.m., on the cessation of the bombardment, the 72nd Brigade advanced. It had been exposed since daybreak to a heavy artillery fire but had found enough shelter in old German trenches to escape heavy casualties, and the men went forward promptly and confidently. To the 8th R.W.K. had been assigned the left of the leading line with the 8th Queen's in support and the 9th East Surreys on the right supported by the 8th Buffs. At first all went well. Nothing could have surpassed the steadiness and regularity of the advance. Though under heavy fire from artillery and rifles from the outset, to which, as the advance progressed, was added machine-gun fire from their flanks, the 8th pressed on without wavering, the East Surreys keeping pace with them. At the Lens-La Bassée road, a natural range-mark for the enemy's gunners, they came in for exceptionally heavy and accurate fire, but still they pushed on. There were some Germans in advanced trenches who fell

September 26<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
8<sup>th</sup> Battalion

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128

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back as the 72nd Brigade approached the road, suffering heavily from our men's fire, and the battalion swept on over these trenches, finding them full of German dead. On they went steadily and gallantly, up the gentle slope towards the German wire, though men fell fast as the machine-gun and artillery fire from the flanks increased in intensity. Still the 8th did not falter, and at last reached the German wire only to find it practically intact, for the bombardment, possibly because there had been no chance of effective registration, had been quite ineffective.

September 26<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
8<sup>th</sup> Battalion

The position was desperate. Some gallant but unavailing efforts were made to get through the wire, in which 2nd-Lieut. Don was conspicuous, but all that most of the men could do was to throw themselves on the ground and attempt to return the enemy's fire. For some time they hung on tenaciously, despite heavy losses, but to no avail. The East Surreys had been shot down wholesale from Bois Hugo, on the other wing First Division had achieved nothing against Hulluch and without support on the flanks the position was hopeless. Colonel Vansittart was wounded; one by one almost every other remaining officer was shot down; to hang on longer could only involve further useless sacrifices, and at last the remnants of the battalion had to fall back as best they could over the long space between them and the Lens-La Bassée road. It was then Lieut. Tillie, the machine-gun officer, distinguished himself greatly by the courage and resource which he displayed, and himself actually brought out of action the machine-gun which he had handled with skill and effect during the advance. Major Pullman, too, was conspicuous in this work; though wounded, he steadied the men by his influence and example and did much to extricate the survivors of the battalion in good order. (1)

(1) Major Pullman was awarded the D.S.O. and Lieut. Tillie the M.C., and the D.S.O. was subsequently awarded to Colonel Vansittart for his gallant leading, while 2nd-Lieut. Don was mentioned in despatches.

When the remnants of the 72nd Brigade were relieved and withdrawn to Mollingen it was evident that the task before the 8th R.W.K. was practically the reconstruction of the battalion. Of the 24 officers and 800 men who had actually gone into action only Lieut. Tillie and 250 men remained effective. (1) Colonel Vansittart, (x) Major Brock-Hollinshead, Major Chillingworth, Captain Middleton, (x) the Adjutant, Captains Edwards and Hutchinson (x) were all missing, along with Lieuts. Don, Old, (x) Smith, Gibbs, Harris, Burrell, Watts, Eli, (x) Bigsby and Plant; Captain Robertson-Ross and Lieuts. Lawson and Beer were known to be dead; Major Pullman, Captain Grant and Lieuts. Green, Lewis and Hough had been brought in wounded. To the survivors there were added those officers (2) and men who had been with the transport, but the battalion was clearly in no condition to go into action again until it had been completely reconstructed. The survivors were indeed to receive warm praise from the Brigadier, to be told that the 8th had "added glory" to the regiment to which it belonged, that it had been "an example in steadiness and determination ..... not only to the New Armies, but to seasoned troops," and to hear from the Corps Commander that even if the attack had failed to take its objective it had forced the enemy to divert large reserves from General Foch's front and thus had materially assisted the French. Certainly whatever the reasons for the failure to improve the First Army's initial success the 8th in its disastrous "baptism of fire" had done all that in it lay to achieve victory and had well upheld the name of The Queen's Own.

September  
1915  
8<sup>th</sup> Battalion

As the remnant of the 8th was withdrawing from the battle area the 6th was nearing it from the North, and on September 30th the Twelfth Division

6<sup>th</sup> Battalion

(1)The officers marked (x) were subsequently reported wounded and prisoners of war, the remainder were killed.

(2)Lieut. Paul and Lieut. and Quartermaster Evans.

relieved the Guards in the trenches facing those against which the 8th R.W.K. had been shattered. But in the Division's first tour of duty in this sector the 6th did not have to take over the front line, remaining in support first at Vermelles, then at Mazingarbe, and suffering about 50 casualties from the shelling of its billets. But this period was marked by a sad loss to the battalion together with the whole Twelfth Division, that of the man whom the Division could least afford to lose, its commander, General Wing, killed by a shell near Lone Tree. It is not too much to say that not only did the officers, subalterns and seniors alike, feel that they had lost a personal friend as well as an inspiring and trusted commander, but General Wing was known to and loved by the rank and file as well. He was always in the front trenches; no one was ever surprised to find him crawling along some half-dug sap in close proximity to the German line. He had trained the Division well, had been its real maker and organizer, and it was prepared to follow him anywhere with zeal and confidence.

Oct 1915  
6<sup>th</sup> Battalion

When the 6th did go into trenches on the night of October 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> it took over a most curious piece of line. After the Seventh Division's initial success had carried it to the outskirts of Cite St. Elie counter-attacks had forced it back to Gun Trench, about halfway between the German front trenches and Cite St. Elie. Not only this, but the Germans had effected a lodgment in Gun Trench itself and were clinging on to about 150 yards in the centre of it. Thus when the 6th Battalion took over Gun Trench from the 2nd Scots Guards they found Germans between the two companies in the front line. Of these A, on the right, stretched from the Vermelles - Hulluch road Northward, having two platoons in a support trench 150 or 200 yards in rear, which, however, came to an end about level with the Southern end of the German lodgment. On the left C continued the front line N.W. along Stone Alley to within 120 yards of some quarries which

See sketches  
11 & 12

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formed an important tactical feature. D Company was in rear of A in close support, B being some distance further back. It was clear that the Germans must be promptly dislodged from Gun Trench, and after two days orders were received for an attack to be made on October 8th. These had been days of intermittent artillery fire, by which D in particular was considerably troubled, and of much bombing at the Southern end of the German part of Gun Trench, which together cost the battalion about a dozen casualties, including Lieut. G. W. Brown wounded, while one of the machine-guns was destroyed by an aerial torpedo; the battalion, however, had not been inactive and had taken its chances of replying effectively.

October 8<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
6<sup>th</sup> Battalion

This attack was to be preceded by two hours' shelling, but about noon on October 8th the Germans began an extremely heavy bombardment which became intense between 3 and 4 p.m., doing great damage and inflicting many casualties. This was in fact part of a general bombardment of the Allied positions from Loos round to the Hohenzollern, which was followed by violent counter-attacks on Chalk Pit Wood (West of Bois Hugo), on the Hohenzollern, and on the French positions in front of Loos, attacks which were everywhere completely repulsed. But naturally this counter-bombardment interfered seriously with the battalion's preparations for the attack; all signal wires were cut, and it was not certain whether the British artillery fire was mere retaliation or whether it was the bombardment arranged for and the attack was to be made as planned despite the unexpected element of the German bombardment. The plan was that while the two platoons of A Company not in the actual front line, under Captain Margetts, assaulted Gun Trench over the open, (1) bombing parties were simultaneously to work

(1) Gun Trench ran more or less in the shape of a crescent, so that the platoons which carried out the assault advanced in a slightly slanting direction, while the platoons of A Company in the front line were liable to be shot at from the rear by Germans in a short sap which projected from their part of the trench.

132

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inwards from both flanks, and B (1) was detailed to consolidate the position when captured and open up an old communication trench running from the trench held by D Company towards the section held by the enemy.

Oct 8<sup>th</sup> 1915  
6<sup>th</sup> Battalion

The German bombardment notwithstanding, there was no thought of cancelling the attack. At 6.16 p.m. the British artillery fire lifted to the German support trench, and Captain Margetts and his men went over the parapet. They at once encountered a very heavy fire, for the bombardment had been very disappointing in its effects, having failed to silence most of the German machine-guns. The Germans were manning their trenches in strength and were also holding a support trench 20 yards in rear of Gun Trench in force; they seemed quite ready for the attack, and had no less than four machine-guns in the short length of trench to be attacked. Captain Margetts fell at once, badly wounded. Lieut. Yates was killed on the parapet of Gun Trench, and casualties were very heavy; only a few men reached the German trench (2) and joined up with the battalion bombers under 2nd-Lieuts. Carré and Friend, who were attacking the Southern end of the trench, while others took shelter in shell-holes just in

front of the trench and engaged the defenders with bombs and rifle-fire. Corporal Killick was conspicuous in this work and set a fine example; his own rifle was shattered by a bullet but he picked up another and shot down in succession one after another of the German bombers who were standing up on the parapet and hurling bombs at the shell-holes in which the survivors of the attack were sheltering.

The bombing party meanwhile had at first made headway, indeed they made their way

(1) B Company was now under Captain Towse, as Major Parker had just left on promotion to command the 8th Battalion.

(2) Several of these seem to have got into the sap which projected from the German line: this they cleared of Germans and then pushed on to the main trench.

133

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almost to C Company's block, only to find that fresh Germans seemed continually to be appearing. The truth was that instead of the portion of Gun Trench in German hands being, as it was believed to be, an isolated piece of line, it was joined up with the rest of their line by a trench running into it just beyond C's block, which, owing to the absence of any air photos by which to correct the maps, was quite unknown to the assailants (1) Hence all the gallant efforts of Lieut. Carré's party were frustrated; he himself was wounded but continued to lead and encourage his men. However, the failure of the main assault allowed the Germans to concentrate their counter-attacks on the Southern end of the trench, while unluckily C Company, being completely out of communication with Battalion Headquarters, had never received news that the attack was to go forward, and so failed to co-operate. Captain Francis, who was on his way up from Battalion Headquarters with orders and instructions, was knocked out by a shell, and it was not known till long afterwards that he had failed to reach the front line. B did what they could by passing up bombs and ammunition, Lieut. Heath being killed when leading his men forward, but in the end the Germans wrested from our bombers the ground they had gained; all that could be done was to re-establish the block and hold on to our

October 8<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
6<sup>th</sup> Battalion

original positions. 2nd-Lieut. Carré made his way down to Battalion Headquarters and asked for leave to make another bombing attack, but Colonel Venables would not allow it. 2nd-Lieut. Carré indeed was in no condition for further work; that same day he collapsed and was away from duty for some months. (2)

This unsuccessful effort had cost the battalion over

1 The existence of this trench became known to the platoons of A in the front line under Lieut. Hatton as it was occupied as a fire-trench and was held in strength, the Germans in it firing upon Lieut. Hatton's party who replied vigorously.

2 Lieut. Carre received the M.C. for this action and the D.C.M. was awarded to Corporal Killick.

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134

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100 casualties in addition to the five officers; 12 men were killed, 39 missing, 53 wounded—the loss falling ~ mainly on A Company. But to have made the effort after the heavy bombardment which the battalion had just endured involved no little courage and determination, and its conduct was highly commended by the Corps Commander, General Haking, who declared that it had shown “fine military qualities.” There seems reason, moreover, to believe that its attack on Gun Trench had anticipated and thrown out of gear a projected German effort to extend their holding at this point; certainly the German trenches were packed with men at the time of the attack, and it cost them not a little to retain their hold on Gun Trench.

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

However, the 6th was to taste of success as well as of failure at Gun Trench. After being relieved by the 7th East Surreys on the evening of (October 9th and spending a couple of days in support, it moved further back into Brigade Reserve, but was detailed to find one company to support the 6th Buffs in a renewed attack to be made on October 13th. In this the 7th East Surreys were to tackle Gun Trench, the Buffs on their left attacking a trench running S.E. from the Quarries, which were themselves to be assaulted by the 35th Brigade, the whole being part of a bigger attack comprising Hulluch and the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

The attack by the Buffs, though gallantly made, proved unsuccessful, and D Company, though busily employed in carrying up bombs and water and ammunition, had little actual fighting. C, however, had a much livelier time, and were able to get some of their own back on the Germans for the losses of October 8th. Two platoons went over the top with the East Surreys and assisted them to capture Gun Trench, and then, about 5 p.m., the East Surreys, who were being hard pressed to hold their gains, asked for reinforcements, and the rest of C was sent up under Captain Dawson.

October 13<sup>th</sup>  
1915

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135

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On reaching Gun Trench he took over the left of the captured position with two of his platoons, setting the others to work to dig a communication trench back to the British trench in rear. C Company made the most of its chances; it not only maintained and consolidated the position, despite heavy shelling and machine-gun fire, but cleared and filled in about 50 yards of a German communication trench running back to Cite St. Elie, and in the early morning had the satisfaction of beating off by heavy and accurate rifle-fire a strong and determined counter-attack. 2nd-Lieut. Pye was killed while setting a fine example of coolness and courage to his men, but the Germans were heavily punished and fell back after losing severely. Altogether C's share in the

October 13<sup>th</sup>  
1915  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

successful defence of Gun Trench was no small one and carried no little credit for the battalion.

October 14<sup>th</sup>

October 14th proved a busy day. C remained in position, while before dawn B was sent up to take over the trenches on its left from the Buffs. There was much to be done to the line, wounded and dead had to be removed or buried, and as the Germans, who were also busy on similar work, exposed themselves somewhat freely snipers and machine-gunners got many chances. That evening the battalion was relieved by the 11th Middlesex and withdrew to Vermelles, moving thence to Verquin on the 19th, where a real rest could be enjoyed. The battalion came out from this first experience of serious fighting with the satisfaction of having acquitted itself well in a really severe trial; it had shown gallantry in attack and steadiness and tenacity in defence. Its total casualties came to 220; three officers and 38 men had been killed; 44 men were missing; 5 officers and 130 men wounded, Lieut. Langlands having been wounded on October 11th and Lieut. L.C. R. Smith in the defence of Gun Trench. But drafts amounting to 130 other ranks had been received on the 11th and 12th and ten young officers joined in the course of the month, so that the battalion was not

136

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far below strength when, after a week's well-earned rest at Verquin it relieved the 1<sup>st</sup> Grenadier Guards in trenches W. of the Northern end of the Hohenzollern on October 26th.

Oct – Nov  
1915  
6<sup>th</sup> Battalion

At this moment the Germans were believed to be preparing to attack, so active reconnaissance was enjoined by the Brigade, but all the patrols sent out by the battalion found the enemy hard at work on his defences, adding to his wire and apparently in a state of nervous tension, expecting to receive rather than to deliver an attack. This tour did actually pass off without any German attack, but the shelling was often very heavy and the persistent rain made it extremely difficult to keep trenches in repair. The line too was in a terrible state: it had been much knocked about in the fighting and was very wet. It was in this period that Captain Towse was killed by shellfire in the front trenches, and other casualties were numerous. All November the weather continued indifferent, so the turns in the line—all in the Hohenzollern region—which fell to the battalion's lot were extremely arduous and exhausting and resulted in a rapid increase in the sick rate, 33 men went sick after one three days' tour in the front line, and 1 officer and 88 men after another. When it reached Ecquedecques on November 22nd for a rest and refit, the battalion had fallen to barely 750 "present." But its rest was not to be protracted, for early in December the Twelfth Division received orders to move to Bethune and to take over trenches North of Givenchy.

November had been marked for the 6th by the loss of Colonel Venables: he had been wounded in the foot by a shell-splinter on October 8th, but had refused to report sick, and actually remained at duty till November 15th. He had commanded the battalion for ten months, and had been largely responsible for the high level of discipline and efficiency of which it had given proof, and all parted from him with regret. He

137

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was succeeded by Major C. S. Owen, of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, who joined on November 29th and quickly established himself firmly in the confidence and regard of officers and men. About the same time Major Beeching also left the battalion; his departure was much regretted and his part in its history is no small one; he had done fine work in building it up and knitting it together into an united whole, he had been in a very special degree a link between the young battalion and the old Regiment to which it was proud to belong; he had enjoyed the confidence and respect of his brother officers, and in action, notably on October 8th, he had been a tower of strength to less experienced comrades. The 6th owed him no small debt for his example and his influence.

Nov - Dec  
1915  
6<sup>th</sup> Battalion



