

Hubert Gante 1/7/16

1916]

STIFF FIGHTING

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By the time the leading platoons had reached the German side of No Man's Land they had lost 50 per cent of their effectives, and then were momentarily held up in front of the devastated hostile trenches by a machine gun. But the Battalion bombers got to work quickly and as the survivors of the leading platoons were now joined by the successive supporting lines, the machine gun was silenced and the attackers swept on and over the German front line. In the latter only a few of the enemy's machine gunners were found alive and these were bayoneted or shot down as they tried to escape. Heavy fire again met the Somerset men as they advanced on the German Support Line, and men fell fast. But again the bombers got to work and some stiff fighting took place before Ball Lane and Arrow Lane were cleared. Down the German communication trenches the men worked their way, bombing dug-outs as they went, then on to where the trenches had been battered out of all recognition, all that remained being a mass of shell craters. A Stokes mortar lent the Somersets timely assistance, but the officer and team were unfortunately knocked out: next a Lewis-gun team belonging to the Battalion was brought up and, under cover of fire from the gun, a further advance was begun. The Lewis gunners, who were commanded by 2/Lieut. Kellett, worked their way from crater to crater until they got into Lozenge Alley, "which," the records state, "had not been strafed by our artillery." Lozenge Alley was then consolidated, fire-steps having to be dug as it was only a communication trench. A heavy hostile shrapnel barrage prevented further advance.

8th Battalion
1st July

In Lozenge Alley 2/Lieut. Kellett's party joined up with 2/Lieut. Hall¹ and his men, the combined parties totalling about 100. With fine tenacity these hundred men and their officers clung to the position they had won, repulsing during the night a heavy bombing attack from the direction of Fricourt. At midnight the position of the 63rd Brigade was as follows: 4th Middlesex held Empress Trench from Ball Lane and Empress Support; 8th Somerset L.I. in west end of Lozenge Wood, Sunken Road and Lozenge Alley; 10th Y. and L. in Dart Lane; 8th Lincoln R. from Dart Alley to Lozenge Wood.

Meanwhile, north of the Ancre and of Beaumont Hamel the 1st Somerset Light Infantry, with other troops of the 4th Division, had attacked the German Quadrilateral.

The 1st Battalion (Lieut.-Col. J. A. Thicknesse) had marched out of Mailly Maillet at 10 p.m. on the previous night to take up positions in the assembly trenches. The Brigade, with the exception of the Bde. T.M.Bs., Bde. M.G. Coy. and Bde. carriers, marched to the assembly trenches in two columns—the Somersets being included in the right column—which moved forward in the following order: 2 Coys. E. Lincs, Somerset L.I., Hampshire Regt. From the starting points all Battalions marched across country; casualties were very small during the "move up."²

1st Battalion
30th June/1st
July

¹ Awarded the M.C. for conspicuous gallantry on this occasion.

² No details exist in the official diaries of the place of assembly of the Battalion, but the 4th Divisional front ran apparently from north of Beaumont Hamel to just south of the Serre Road.

1st Battalion

The 11th Brigade had been ordered to attack with three battalions in the front line and three in support; the 10th and 12th Brigades were to continue the attack through the 11th. Of the latter, the East Lancs R., Rifle Brigade and 8th Warwicks (in the order given from right to left) formed the front line; the Hampshires, Somerset L.I. and 6th Warwicks (also from right to left) were in close support. Battalions were to advance on a frontage of one company.

The three first Battalions had been ordered to assault, capture and consolidate the line Q.5.c.8.9.-K.35.c.6.2.-K.36.a.0.5., upon which the three supporting Battalions were to advance through the leading Battalions and in the same way assault, capture and consolidate the final objective of the Brigade—the line Q.6.c.5.3. (inclusive)-Q.6.a.3.9.-K.36.a.8.2. inclusive.

1st July

At 7.20 a.m. there was a roar as a huge mine under Hawthorn Redoubt, south of Beaumont Hamel, exploded. This mine was stated to have been the largest fired during the War: it was 80 feet below the surface and contained 20½ tons of explosive.

Ten minutes later the advance began: "The 11th Brigade advanced in magnificent style," records the Diary of the 1st Somersets: the latter in four lines as follows: 1st line, 2 platoons of A Company on right, 2 of B on left; 2nd line, 2 platoons of A Coy. on right, 2 of B on left; 3rd line, 2 platoons of C Coy. on right, 2 of H on left; 4th line, 2 platoons of C Coy. on right, 2 of H on left.

At the outset the advance was carried out in excellent style and an officer of the 1st Battalion said: "The sight was magnificent, line after line of men advancing at a slow trot towards the German line with hundreds of shells, ours for the most part, bursting behind the German line." With but little loss the attacking lines on the left and centre advanced to the first objective. On the right flank, however, heavy machine-gun fire swept the ranks of the East Lancashires and Hampshires, and these two Battalions were unable to get beyond the enemy's wire. The Somerset men, owing to the ridge which they should have crossed being swept by machine-gun fire, had to ease off to the left, and the Battalion found itself in the German trenches in the neighbourhood of the Quadrilateral. The Warwicks gained their objective but were unable to hold on.

From this point onwards all is confusion. The Battalion Diary states that "it is impossible to get a detailed account of the fighting that ensued, but the situation after the first hour or two was that men of various battalions in the Division were holding part of the Quadrilateral and were engaged in a fierce grenade fight. Our men were for some time severely handicapped by shortage of grenades, but these were afterwards sent up." Desperate fighting, indeed, went on in the German first and second lines throughout the day. Unfortunately some of the German front-line trenches which had been captured were not properly cleared of their defenders, who hid themselves in their deep dug-outs until the British troops had passed on towards the second line. The crafty Germans then came out of their first-line dug-

outs and, mounting their machine guns and using their rifles, shot down the advancing British troops from behind; hundreds of men were lost in this way. Heavy casualties were also suffered by all battalions from enfilade machine-gun and rifle fire from both flanks. For the 29th Division, on the right, had failed to take Beaumont Hamel, while the 31st Division, on the left, who had to form a defensive flank through Serre, had similarly failed to reach and hold its objectives. Thus the 11th Brigade of the 4th Division was out in a salient with both flanks "in the air."

Only two officers (Capt. Harington and Lieut. Greatham) now remained with the Somerset men, who with other troops were holding a part of the Quadrilateral. But about 1.30 p.m. both these officers, having been wounded, went back to have their wounds dressed and the command of men of the Battalion in the Quadrilateral devolved upon C.S.M. Chappell.

On the first day of the Somme Battles 1916 the casualties amongst officers were truly terrible, and all up and down the line platoons, companies and even battalions (as with the Somerset L.I.), were temporarily commanded by N.C.O.'s. And how well these splendid fellows "carried on!" Under a galling fire R.S.M. Paul crossed No Man's Land leading the Brigade carriers. Another gallant N.C.O. and a private (Sergeant Imber and Pte. Hodges), in the face of rifle and machine-gun fire, signalled message after message from the German trenches back to the old British line, asking for grenades and the assistance of the guns.

About 4.30 p.m. Major Majendie arrived with reinforcement officers and took command of the Battalion which had been collected together in assembly trenches by R.S.M. Paul.¹

After dark troops of the 11th Brigade, holding portions of the German trenches, were relieved by Royal Irish Fusiliers and withdrew to the old British line and, at 10 p.m., the Brigade was ordered to return to Mailly Maillet as Divisional Reserve; the 10th and 12th Brigades to hold the front line.

This sums up very briefly the operations of the 1st Somerset L.I. on the first day of the Somme Battles.

Back in Mailly Maillet the 1st Battalion "called the roll"; it was a mournful task for death had laid a heavy hand upon the Somerset men. The C.O. and Adjutant (Lieut.-Col. J. A. Thicknesse and Capt. C. C. Ford) "were both killed before our trenches were passed," records the Diary. Fourteen other officers were also killed;² one was missing and nine were wounded, one of whom died of his wounds on 6th July.³ While, to the deep regret of all Somerset men, Brigadier-General C. B. Prowse (late of the 1st Battalion Somerset Light Infantry and G.O.C. 11th Inf. Bde.) was wounded and died

¹ It is assumed that a portion of the Battalion, under C.S.M. Chappell, was still in the Quadrilateral.

² Capts. R. J. R. Leacroft and G. H. Neville, Lieuts. E. C. MacBryan and V. A. Braithwaite, 2/Lieuts. G. P. C. Fair, J. A. Hellard, J. A. Johnson, A. V. C. Leche, R. E. Dunn, W. H. Treasure, F. A. Pearse, G. S. Winstanley, H. E. Whitgreaves and T. M. Doddington.

³ 2/Lieut. H. L. Colville.

1st Battalion
1st July

of his wounds later in the day.¹ Thus no less than 26 officers of the 1st Battalion had become casualties whilst, in other ranks, the losses were 438 killed, wounded and missing. In what a plight was the Battalion for, though they had died gloriously or had fallen wounded in gallant fighting, nothing could recompense the survivors for the loss of their heroic comrades.²

8th Battalion

The story now turns to the 8th Battalion, still holding their somewhat precarious position in the German lines north of Fricourt. The night of 1st/2nd July (as already stated) was an anxious time for the small party of 100 men and officers (representing the 8th Battalion). They had bloodily repulsed one attack coming from the direction of Fricourt, but when dawn broke on the 2nd July the enemy had made no further attempt to turn the Somerset men out of their hard-won position. About 8 a.m. Captain Campbell arrived with a party of reinforcements, carrying rations, having previously found Lieut. Ackerman and about 30 men in Brandy Trench and given them rations. At 11 a.m. the whereabouts of Major R. H. Huntingdon and his party of reinforcements (which included two subalterns) was located and they were guided to Lozenge Alley.

2nd July

Throughout the morning the Battalion awaited an expected counter-attack from Fricourt, but none came. Orders were also received to be prepared for an attack from "either direction," which apparently meant from east and north as well as from the south. "We arranged the trench accordingly," records the Diary, "and remained in the same position all day and throughout the night of the 2nd."

During the night three more subalterns arrived and the condition of the Battalion at this period may be gathered from the fact that all four Companies were commanded by Second-Lieutenants, i.e. A Coy. by 2/Lieut. F. G. Adlam, B Coy. by 2/Lieut. S. Baker, C Coy. by 2/Lieut. Kellett and D Coy. by 2/Lieut. G. A. Ham.

3rd July

During the morning of the 3rd July three officers went out on a reconnaissance with a view to occupying Crucifix Trench in support of an attack to be launched by other troops from that position on the line Shelter Wood-Bottom Wood. But apparently the attack did not take place as the Battalion Diary records that "The Battalion was not ordered to take up this position."

About 2 p.m. a message was received from 63rd Brigade to send a senior officer to Brigade Headquarters. Capt. Campbell was sent and was given instructions to reconnoitre Patch Alley and, if it was unoccupied, move the 8th Somersets up there, as aeroplanes had reported enemy columns marching in a S.W. direction towards Round Wood, and a counter-attack was expected. This move was completed by 5 p.m., and in this position the Battalion remained

¹"At about 9.45 a.m. the General decided to move his Headquarters into the German line, thinking that it had been cleared of all Germans. Just as he was getting out of our front-line trench near Bret Street he was shot in the back by a machine gun in the Ridge Redoubt and died in the afternoon."—The late Capt. G. A. Prideaux, 1st Somerset L.I.

²Capt. A. J. Harington received a bar to his M.C., 2/Lieut. B. J. Corballis the M.C., and R.S.M. E. Paul and C.S.M. P. E. E. Chappell the D.C.M. for their conspicuous gallantry on 1st July.