

CHAPTER V

THE CORPS TAKES OVER THE LINE HELD BY THE 3RD AND 5TH BRITISH DIVISIONS, 2ND CORPS

Arrival of the Meerut Division and Secundrabad Cavalry Brigade—Indian Corps now complete, except Sirhind Brigade still in Egypt—Corps takes over portion of line held by 2nd Corps—Description of existing conditions—2nd Battalion 8th Gurkha Rifles bombed and shelled out of their trenches—Very heavy casualties—Counter-attack partially successful—Casualties of 58th Rifles in counter-attack.

THE Meerut Division, under the command of Lt-General C. A. Anderson, C.B., the greater portion of which left Karachi on the 21st September, and was joined by the remainder of the Division at sea on the 23rd September, arrived at Marseilles, after a fine and uneventful voyage, on the 11th October.

Amongst the first arrivals were Their Highnesses Maharaja Sir Pratap Singh, the Maharaja of Jodhpur, and the Maharaja of Bikanir, who came to place their swords at the service of the King-Emperor.

The Division remained there till the 19th October, when it entrained for Orleans, where it was completely concentrated on the 22nd October.

The scenes at Marseilles and on the journey by train were very similar to those enacted during the progress of the Lahore Division. Nothing was too good for the troops, and the inhabitants of each town on the route flocked to the railway stations to welcome our men, who were almost overwhelmed by their kindness.

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The Division arrived at the front on the 29th October, followed a few days later by the Secundrabad Cavalry Brigade and the Jodhpur Lancers under Brigadier-General F. Wadeson.

The Indian Army Corps was now complete in France, with the exception of the Sirhind Brigade still in Egypt, and the moment had arrived for it to take its full share in the general scheme.

Orders were at once issued for the Corps to take over the portion of the line held by the 3rd and 5th British Divisions, the Corps being strengthened by $10\frac{1}{2}$ units of British infantry and artillery, pending the arrival of the Sirhind Brigade and the return of a portion of the Lahore Division from operations with the Cavalry Corps further north.

The line to be occupied extended from just north of Givenchy in the south, past the front of Richebourg l'Avoué, making a re-entrant round the rear of Neuve Chapelle, on past Chapigny to Fauquissart, and then eastward to Rouges Bancs just north of Fromelles. The order of Brigades from south to north was as follows:—

Bareilly, Garhwal, Dehra Dun, then the four British battalions temporarily attached from the 2nd Corps, and finally the Jullundur Brigade of the Lahore Division.

The relief of the 2nd Corps was successfully carried out during the night of the 29th October. A heavy downpour of rain made the whole country into a vast quagmire. Communication trenches in those days were practically non-existent. The troops had to reach the front line as best they could, crawling up any ditches which led in the required direction, crouching behind banks and sheltering behind trees.

By the time they arrived in the fire trenches they were soaked through and through, and caked with mud from head to foot. In spite of these drawbacks, there were few casualties, and the men were in high spirits at attaining the goal which they had sought from so far across the sea. The 2/3rd Gurkhas had to evacuate their Head Quarters during the night, as they were heavily shelled by way of a welcome to the front.

As has been seen earlier, our offensive towards Lille had been brought to an abrupt conclusion, and for some days the Germans had been attacking heavily along the whole line from La Bassée to Messines, keeping us in our turn pinned down to the defensive. The term "defensive" is, however, a little misleading when referring to the state of affairs which exists when two bodies of troops are entrenched within a few yards of each other, and both are straining every nerve and muscle to do the greatest possible damage to the opponent.

The line held by the Indian Corps from the time of its arrival at the front to that of its final departure for other theatres of war may be fairly described as one of the least attractive sections, either from the picturesque point of view or from that of comfort. On taking a hasty survey from our trenches, the eye was met by a vast expanse of low-lying cultivable land, cut up by innumerable roads and lanes, and dotted with small villages and isolated farms. During a great part of the year, as far as the eye could reach there stretched a dismal sea of mud, almost the only break consisting of suspicious-looking pools of water, proving, on further investigation, to be flooded shell holes, with which the ground was

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thickly pitted. The only prominent objects, to some extent relieving the eternal monotony of the scene, were a few copses or woods, amongst which was the Bois de Biez, so long a stronghold of the enemy, and in the distance the Aubers ridge, so near and yet so far.

The fields were interspersed with orchards and the roads fringed with trees. In consequence, extended observation was impossible except by means of aeroplanes, of which, at that period, we possessed relatively very few. The short distance below the surface at which water was found rendered the digging of deep trenches impossible in places, while even a moderate fall of rain reduced the inhabitants of the trenches to a state of discomfort quite indescribable.

The chief industry of the natives of this forlorn district is the cultivation of beetroot for sugar. The beets are stacked in a kind of silo, the aroma from which has often seriously perturbed men who could endure the proximity of a dead German without flinching. In winter the beet fields became morasses, over which any rapid movement was almost impossible. The outlook in summer, when No Man's Land was carpeted with poppies and daisies and the mud of winter had given place to straggling self-sown crops, was not unpleasing, but on a typical winter's day, with a steady cold down-pour converting the fire trenches into fetid water-logged ditches, and the communication trenches into bottomless muddy streams, the drear and chilly discomfort of the whole scene was enough to appal the stoutest heart.

The feelings of Orientals coming from fierce

sunshine to surroundings like these cannot be described and can hardly be imagined. Those who saw them in the trenches in these months will never think without emotion of the shining courage and the superb devotion which they never ceased to display.

At the outset, the Allies laboured under a heavy handicap. The Germans, with the foresight and thoroughness which have throughout marked their conduct of the war, had provided themselves with every description of apparatus necessary for such close-quarter siege warfare as this. They possessed bombs, trench mortars, rifle grenades, searchlights and "sausage" observation balloons, and, looking still further ahead, they were, as we found to our cost, even then preparing their devilish gas and flame throwers.

We had none of these things, and for quite a considerable period our only bombs were those manufactured locally from empty jam tins. Under such conditions, and considering the thinness of our line, it is marvellous that it was kept intact during all those weary months. The Germans were to learn that the fine-drawn khaki cord was whipcord: it strained; it bent; but it never broke.

The enemy was not long in greeting the Corps, for shortly after midnight of the 29th-30th October, he attacked the 2/8th Gurkhas in a half-hearted manner, and three times during the night delivered a burst of fire on our trenches, each burst being preceded by shelling and an exhibition of fireworks. The Gurkhas were in a most unenviable position. They had only just arrived in their trenches, which

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were already half full of mud and water, while the pitiless rain showed no signs of ceasing. But far more serious than the weather was the fact that the trenches had been adapted for taller men, and the little Gurkhas were unable to fire over the parapet. Steps were at once taken to remedy this defect, but the constant shelling and rifle fire gave the men little chance of effecting any material improvement.

The position held by the Gurkhas was in the triangle formed by the Quinque Rue and the road from Festubert, the line being extended southwards towards Givenchy by the Devons. The trench was merely a ditch which had been adapted, the original brick culverts still existing in some places. By daylight on the 30th the telephone wires had all been cut by shell fire, and shortly afterwards the Germans made a determined attack which was beaten off.

The shelling went on all day, and culminated in a concentration of heavy guns and howitzers upon the Gurkha trenches. This continued without the slightest pause for about four hours. The enemy had got the exact range of the trench occupied by Major Wake. Shell after shell dropped right in the trench, burying many men and blowing others to atoms. Still the Gurkhas held on and drove back several attacks between 8 a.m. and noon. At this moment the supply of ammunition began to run low, but Lt-Colonel Morris was able to get a message through to General Macbean, to say that he was all right, except as regarded ammunition.

Affairs, however, had not yet reached the climax. At 1 p.m. the enemy in great force attacked the trench held by Captains Hayes-Sadler and Wright,

who succeeded in keeping them at bay for over an hour. To add to Colonel Morris's anxieties, a message came from Major Wake that he was very hard pressed and in urgent need of reinforcement, followed by an appeal from the Devons on the right, who were also being heavily attacked, had used up all their supports, and were badly in need of assistance.

The position was extremely critical. In many places the parapet and trench had been obliterated; numbers of the defenders were buried beneath the debris, and the ammunition was nearly exhausted. Colonel Morris, gallant officer as he so often proved himself to be before he met his death at the battle of Loos in September, 1915, was determined to hold on at all costs. He sent an urgent appeal to General Macbean for assistance, at the same time telling Major Wake and the Devons that they must at all hazards hold out till dark. Shortly afterwards, Major Barlow, himself already thrice wounded but still carrying on in the way the British officer does, sent Captain Davidson over to help Major Wake, closely followed by Captain Stack, who was immediately wounded in the neck, but managed, mortally hurt as he was, to stagger back to ask for more men. Captain Davidson was also wounded, and was last seen firing at the oncoming enemy with his revolver, as he lay on the ground.

Major Barlow sent fifteen men, and himself moved up to the right, whence he succeeded in driving the Germans back; but it was too late. The enemy had managed to work round the right trench, in which there were now only ten survivors, and Colonel Morris had himself to move hastily to the left to avoid being captured.

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At the same time Major Barlow, being unable to leave the front line and having no combatant officer left, despatched Captain MacWatters, I.M.S., to report the situation, and to get the guns turned on to a red farmhouse situated about 300 yards to the right front of our line. This house had been occupied by the Germans, who, from the upper and lower stories, kept up an infernal fire which commanded and enfiladed the right of our trenches. As the latter were completely blocked by the debris of the parapet and by dead and wounded, any reinforcements moving up from the left were compelled to get out in the open, when they at once became targets for a storm of bullets. It was in this manner that Major Barlow had been twice hit, the bullets entering his right shoulder within a couple of inches of each other and inflicting terrible wounds.

Owing to reinforcements being held up by the fire from the farm, the Germans were eventually enabled to break through the right and take the remainder of the defenders in the rear. Otherwise the surviving officers felt convinced that the trenches would have been held, however vigorously they might have been shelled.

Captain MacWatters had a difficult and dangerous task to perform, for he had to get out of the trench and cross the open under heavy fire, and, crawling through a hedge, to reach a farmhouse in which Head Quarters had been established. By the time he had overcome the dangers, it was too late. The fire from the farm had done its deadly work. Major Wake, Captains Hayes-Sadler, Hartwell, and Wright had fallen victims, and the regiment was the poorer

NARROW ESCAPE OF MAJOR BARLOW 73

by the loss of four splendid British officers and many good men.

The 2/8th Gurkhas were fortunate in embarking on this war in possession of a particularly fine body of officers, and it was by the cruellest of bad luck that the regiment at the very outset suffered the loss of no less than nine of their small number.

Major Barlow was now in a most perilous position, for his men had to fire both to front and rear to keep the enemy off, while he himself was too weak to stand. However, game to the end, he ordered a few men to try and hold some adjacent farm buildings, and then he fainted from loss of blood, just as another attack was commencing. He fell, luckily, into a ditch, where he remained unobserved by the Germans, until, recovering consciousness, he managed to crawl back, being shot at several times on the way. By this time there were no unwounded officers on the right, and it was impossible to hold on any longer. The trenches were blotted out; many of the brave defenders were buried; the enemy was all round, and still coming on in overwhelming numbers.

Colonel Morris, still undefeated, although badly wounded in the leg, tried to bring up reinforcements, but, unable to keep up, lost his way and was challenged by Germans. To escape, he threw himself into a ditch, and knew no more till he found himself being put into a stretcher by his own men.

Major Cassels, who had been holding his own most gallantly on the right centre, was pushed out by sheer weight of metal and numbers, and narrowly escaped being captured. A part of the battalion succeeded in reoccupying a section of their support

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trenches, and remained in them, reinforced by half of the Bedfords and the whole of the West Ridings, except those who reinforced the Devons on the right.

So ended a terrible night and day, an experience which, as an eye-witness testified, would have shaken the moral of any troops, however seasoned. Much more trying was it, then, to the Gurkhas, newly arrived, fresh to the work, handicapped by imperfect and unsuitable trenches, by the failure of ammunition, and, above all, by the heavy losses suffered by their British officers, on whom the Indian soldier, be he Sikh or Gurkha, Pathan or Dogra, is dependent (and most generously owns it) for leading and control.

The casualties of the 2nd Battalion 8th Gurkha Rifles on this occasion were :—

Killed: Major Wake, M.V.O., Captains E. R. Hayes-Sadler, Hartwell, Wright and Stack; 2 Gurkha officers; other ranks, 37.

Wounded: Lt-Colonel Morris, Major Barlow and Lieutenant MacLean; 1 Gurkha officer; other ranks, 61.

Missing: Captain Davidson, 2 Gurkha officers, and 109 other ranks, of whom many were doubtless buried by shell fire.

A counter-attack was at once organized, consisting of the following troops :—

Half Battalion West Ridings and Bedfords respectively, with the 58th Rifles and half of the 107th Pioneers in support, Lt-Colonel Griffith of the Bedfords being in command.

The enemy was still keeping up a heavy fire, but the attack pushed steadily through it, with

COUNTER-ATTACK BY THE 58TH RIFLES 75

slight casualties, to within reach of that portion of the Gurkha support trenches which was in the hands of the Germans. At this point it was necessary to make a close reconnaissance of the enemy's trench—a dangerous task which was undertaken by Captain W. Black, Adjutant of the 58th Rifles, who succeeded in getting up close to the trench, but was then killed.

Meanwhile the 58th were ordered to move up through the firing line, with a view to retaking the trenches. At 2.30 a.m. the position was rushed, the Gurkha support line was captured, and two farmhouses, which had been occupied by the enemy, were also taken. The casualties of the 58th were slight during the assault, as the enemy fled without offering much opposition.

The position was at once consolidated against the expected counter-attack, but the Germans contented themselves with a heavy shell and rifle fire, which speedily increased our casualties. Just as day was breaking, the commanding officer, Lt-Colonel Venour, was killed, as was shortly afterwards Lieutenant Craig of the 57th Rifles, who was attached to the 58th.

During the whole of the 31st, and until the 58th were relieved at midnight, the trenches were deluged with rifle and shell fire, varied by mortar bombs and hand-grenades, which destroyed the parapet in many places and caused a number of casualties.

These trenches were striking examples of what trenches should not be. They were badly sited, varied in breadth from 12 feet to 25 feet, and were entirely without traverses. The result was that the

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enemy's shells and bombs frequently fell into the trench, and the full force of the explosion was felt, owing to the absence of traverses.

In spite of all, the 58th held their ground until relieved. Their casualties were 3 British officers and 5 other ranks killed, 4 Indian officers and 79 other ranks wounded.

Havildar Karam Singh gained the 2nd Class, Indian Order of Merit by his fine display of endurance and pluck in continuing to command his men, although dangerously wounded, until he was removed at night.

The net result of the counter-attack was that while the Gurkha support trenches and two farm-houses were retaken by us, three of the advanced trenches still remained in the hands of the Germans.