CHAPTER XI

THE BATTLE OF GIVENCHY: THE MEERUT DIVISION

An attack decided on—Raid by 129th Baluchis on German trenches—Saps taken, but evacuated—Casualties—Position of the Indian Corps—Orders for attack—Assault by 2nd Leicesters and 3rd Gurkhas—Enemy's trench taken—German attack on the "Orchard"—2nd Gurkhas bombed out—Take up line in rear—Leicesters withdrawn from captured trench—Casualties.

TOWARDS the middle of December, the moment appeared to General Head Quarters to be favourable for an attack by the Indian Corps, amongst other units.

A succession of orders was issued. On the 14th December, the Indian Corps was ordered to carry out "other local operations with a view to containing the enemy now in their front," in order to assist General Smith-Dorrien, who was then attacking near Messines.

On the 16th December, therefore, the Ferozepore Brigade under Brigadier-General Egerton delivered an attack, in which the 129th Baluchis behaved with great gallantry. The Brigade consisted of the 1st Connaughts, 57th Rifles, and 129th Baluchis, the 142nd French Territorial Battalion being attached for the time being.

The general idea was to attack two German saps opposite the trenches of the 15th Sikhs, which lay slightly to the west of Givenchy, and, after carrying the saps, to seize as much of the enemy's main

trench as possible. At 5.20 a.m. the 129th moved off, followed by the 57th, and took up position ready to assault at 8.30 a.m. The Connaughts remained in support with the French battalion in reserve. On the signal being given, Major Potter dashed with his company of the 129th across the twenty-five yards of open ground which separated our trench from the enemy's left saphead, while a second company attacked the right sap, which was about fifty yards distant.

The assault was carried out with great élan in the face of heavy fire, and was pushed home up both saps to within a few yards of the enemy's main trench. In a few moments nothing was to be seen from our trench except some fifteen of our men, who were lying dead or wounded round the saphead. A few of the less severely wounded tried to dive into the sap or run back towards our trench, but the fire was so heavy that none got through. In face of the storm of bullets, it was impossible to reinforce until a communication trench could be cut to join our trench with the sapheads.

At this moment it appeared that the right attack had failed. Under the circumstances, it seemed useless for Major Potter to attempt to go on; but the difficulty was to communicate with him. Eventually, it was solved by tying a message to a light weight and throwing it into Major Potter's sap. An hour later it turned out that, so far from the right attack having failed, two platoons had taken the sap and had almost reached the main trench.

To bring up supports under such heavy and concentrated fire was out of the question, and it

was evident that the communication trench could not be made before dark.

Matters grew worse and worse, and the men were gradually being bombed back into the sapheads. Major Potter was holding his own with his usual bravery, but Lieutenant Browning and the Indian officers of the party in the right sap were all wounded. The men had to give way until the remnant was collected in the saphead, where, in spite of all the efforts of the enemy, it held on till dark.

Under the orders of Lt-Colonel Hill, the working parties of the 15th Sikhs, ten in each party, had followed up the 129th, and had at once commenced to dig a trench back from the saphead to the Sikh trench. It was necessary to keep Colonel Hill informed of events, and Havildar Mastan Singh of the 15th Sikhs made two perilous journeys under a torrent of lead between the sap and our trench. He tried to get across a third time, but was shot dead.

Lieutenant Barstow, Adjutant of the 15th, happening to look through a loophole when there was a sudden burst of firing, spotted a German peering over a small parapet which commanded the sap, and firing into it. He seized the nearest rifle and shot ten Germans in quick succession. This stopped the firing into the sap, but the enemy now began throwing bombs into it. The sap was by this time crowded, but by the greatest good luck the fuzes of the bombs were too long, and our men were able to pick them up and throw them back.

In the meantime, parties of the 34th Pioneers and of the 21st Company Sappers and Miners under Captain Battye, R.E., were hard at work digging

the communication trenches towards the sapheads, of which the left trench was finished by evening The right communication trench was a more difficult matter, as it was longer, and, being open to a cross-fire from both flanks, a parapet had to be thrown up on each side, which made progress very slow.

By dusk, only some 12 yards remained to be dug, but the party in the saphead was *in extremis*, having been out all day without a British officer, and heavily bombed without the means to reply. They were unable to hold out any longer, and tried to get back across the open after dark; but every one of them was either killed or wounded in the attempt. The enemy then reoccupied the sap and fired down the shallow communication trench, rendering further work impossible. A barricade was hastily built, and operations ceased for the time being as regards the right sap.

Major Potter held on with dogged pluck in the left sap until the communication trench got through to him at about 6 p.m., when he managed to withdraw his men to the Sikh trench. The 129th behaved throughout this very trying affair with the greatest gallantry, but their losses were heavy. Captain Ussher, Subadar Adam Khan, and 53 men were killed; Captain C. A. G. Money, Lieutenant C. Browning, Jemadars Nawab Khan and Imamdar, and 67 men were wounded.

The splendid leading of Major Potter was very conspicuous throughout. During the whole day, when heavily bombed and cut off from all assistance, he was perfectly cool and self-possessed. It was greatly due to his gallant example and bearing that

the sap was held for so long. It is sad to record that this brave officer was missing during the operations of the 20th December, and it is now certain that he was killed.

On the 17th December, the Corps was directed, in conjunction with the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Corps, "to attack all along the front on the 18th December." This was followed by a further order which was received after 10 p.m. on the 17th. To assist the French in their operations near Arras, the 3rd, 4th, and Indian Corps "will demonstrate and seize any favourable opportunity which may offer to capture any enemy trenches in their front." These last two orders were conflicting, and the first was also vague.

A demonstration is a totally different matter to an attack all along the line; the one is incompatible with the other. But even after this rapid succession of orders, a modification was issued, according to which the Indian Corps was "to demonstrate along the whole front, and to seize every favourable opportunity which may offer to capture any of the enemy's trenches."

This final order was received at 5.30 p.m. on the 18th December, and is open to the criticism that it was somewhat vague, in the absence of any indication that Sir James Willcocks considered the moment to be favourable for an attack.

Sir John French, in his despatch of the 2nd February, 1915, remarks:—

"In his desire to act with energy up to his instructions to demonstrate and occupy the enemy, the General Officer Commanding the Indian Corps decided to take advantage of what appeared to him

a favourable opportunity to launch attacks against the advanced trenches in his front on the 18th and 19th December."

Unless some explanation were offered, the inference might be drawn from this passage that Sir James Willcocks' judgment was at fault in considering the opportunity to be favourable.

To remove this impression, it is perhaps sufficient to mention, that so far from considering the opportunity to be favourable for an attack by the Indian Corps, General Willcocks had a short time previously reported that, owing to the strain of the preceding seven weeks of incessant trench warfare, practically without any relief, the Corps was urgently in need of rest, and had requested that it might be relieved. With this view Sir John French fully agreed, but owing to the exigencies of the moment, in place of rest the Corps was directed to extend its already thinly held line and to take in the village of Givenchy, that hotbed of trouble.

From this it is evident that Sir James Willcocks did not consider the moment to be favourable for an attack by the Indian Corps, which, as he had reported, was not in a condition to take the offensive.

However, it was of course necessary to obey orders, and the operations of which the story is now to be given were the result.

That Sir John French approved of the work performed on the 18th is shown by the orders received at 7 p.m. on the 19th December :—

"The operations undertaken yesterday were attended in several cases with marked success. Although the ground gained has not in all cases been

maintained, the balance of advantage rests with us and promises well for further progress.

"The 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and Indian Corps should continue until further orders to prosecute similar enterprises under Corps arrangements, taking every possible measure to consolidate and extend all successes achieved."

Moreover, at midday on the 18th December, an order was received from Sir John French to this effect—"The efforts of the 3rd, 4th, and Indian Corps should be concentrated only on such objectives as are reasonably favourable."

It was subsequent to this order that Sir John French, by his approval of Sir James Willcocks' action, stamped it as reasonable.

At this juncture the Indian Corps was disposed as follows:—

The Meerut Division, under Lt-General C. A. Anderson, held the left half of the defensive line, the Garhwal Brigade occupying the section from the cross-roads south of Neuve Chapelle to the cross-roads on the Rue du Bois.

Thence the Dehra Dun Brigade continued through the "Orchard," north-east of the cross-roads at La Quinque Rue, to the cross-roads half a mile south, near which point, on the extreme right of the Brigade, was the "Picquet House," held by the 1st Seaforths.

Hence the Lahore Division, under Lt-General H. B. Watkis, continued the line with the newly arrived Sirhind Brigade, running, with an indentation on the west, more or less parallel to the Festubert road, to near the north-east exit of the village of Givenchy.

The left of the Ferozepore Brigade lay just east

of the eastern extremity of Givenchy, and continued south to the La Bassée Canal. Further south, across the Canal and slightly to the front of Givenchy, were the 1st Connaughts. The point of junction between the Lahore Division and the French was on the Béthune—La Bassée road.

On the left, it was intended that the Meerut Division should take by surprise the portion of the German line opposite the left of the Dehra Dun Brigade, *i.e.* near the "Orchard," during the night of the 18th–19th, and consolidate the captured position. This attack was to be carried out by one and a half battalions of the Garhwal Brigade, which joined with the left of the Dehra Dun Brigade, and was to be supported by artillery fire, by activity in other parts of the Divisional line, and further, by an attack in the neighbourhood of the "Orchard" by the Dehra Dun Brigade, in the event of the effort of the Garhwal Brigade being successful.

On the right, the Lahore Division was to attack the enemy's trenches opposite the point of junction of the Sirhind and Ferozepore Brigades, on a front of 300 yards. This attack was to be undertaken by one battalion from each Brigade, supported by Sappers and Pioneers to consolidate the ground gained.

The assault was to be preceded by a short but heavy artillery preparation, the 47th Sikhs from the Corps reserve being attached to the Lahore Division, with a view to following up any success which might result.

To simplify the account of the operations, it is as well to divide the action into three phases.

1. Operations under the orders of Sir James Willcocks.

2. The enemy's counter-attack.

3. Operations of the 1st Division, 1st Corps, under Sir Douglas Haig.

The orders were clear enough as regards the first phase, but the action which followed as a result of the German counter-attack was both obscure and complicated.

The night of the 18th–19th December was stormy, with a high cold wind, and rain which chilled the men to the bone, so the order to move silently out in front of our trenches was a welcome break in the dreariness of waiting under such conditions.

At 3.15 a.m. on the 19th December, the 2nd Leicesters, under Lt-Colonel Blackader, crept out with scarcely a sound until they had cleared the front of our trenches, and at 3.30 a.m. advanced with two companies in the front line and two in support, each accompanied by a bombing party. The left company under Captain Romilly had barely advanced twenty yards when a machine gun opened on them from the right, but they pressed on, men beginning to fall, until a few yards further on they were stopped by a hedge with a ditch in front of it protected by barbed wire. This held them up for a few minutes, but they eventually got through, only to find themselves harassed by a second machine gun.

With the dash which has distinguished this splendid regiment throughout the campaign, they rushed the trench with the machine guns playing on them. The guns were captured, but the enemy had fled while our men were climbing over the parapet. Captain Romilly came to the conclusion that there must be another trench close in rear, and got his men out for a second advance. Machine guns

immediately opened on him from both flanks. He at once charged, but arrived in the ditch from which the left gun had been firing only to find it gone.

The company then reformed to attack the other gun, but at this moment our artillery began firing, and their shells were bursting over the Leicesters in the German trench. Thinking he had got too far on, Captain Romilly retired to the first trench, where he found the supporting company. As dawn was breaking, the trench was consolidated, and Captain Romilly held on where he was.

In the meantime, two double companies of the 2/3rd Gurkhas, under Major Young, with Major W. L. Dundas, had been working in support of the Leicesters. The party under Major Dundas followed up the rear company of the Leicesters until a gap occurred on the right, which the Gurkhas, rushing across the open ground, quickly filled up. Having joined hands with the party of Leicesters which had become detached, Major Dundas tried to extend along the trench to his left, to link up with the rest of the Leicesters, but found that this section of the trench was still held by the Germans, whom he at once attacked, driving them with some loss out of the nearest portion. He then tried to get along the German communication trench, but found that it had not been completed. Not to be denied, he tried again to advance along the main trench, but was at once met by enfilade fire, at a range of about ninety yards, which caused heavy casualties, Major Dundas himself being slightly wounded. He quickly improved a traverse into a barricade with sandbags, and thus to a certain extent kept off the enfilading fire. The bombing party was sent for to clear the

enemy out, but was found to have gone on with another detachment.

As soon as it was light enough Colonel Blackader took stock of the position.

The company of the 107th Pioneers set to work to convert the communication into a fire trench with traverses. The captured trench on the right was found to be commanded and enfiladed by the enemy's main trench. Being narrow and without traverses, it was very difficult to work in it.

Shortly afterwards, the enemy began to bomb this trench, and, pushing up a machine gun, blew the barricade down. Our small party was steadily pushed back until it only held some thirty yards of the trench. At this point Captain Bamberger, R.E., was killed while directing with the utmost coolness the building of a new barricade. Two machine guns now opened in front to enfilade the communication trench, and the parapet had to be rebuilt again and again. As fast as it was put up, the stream of bullets brought it down.

It now became evident to Major Dundas that he could not push on further to his left, and at that moment the platoons of the Leicesters who were with him received orders to rejoin their company. This so weakened his small party that he was forced to retire, taking with him his casualties, which amounted to 26 out of the 55 men engaged.

The remainder of the Leicesters, although heavily bombed and suffering under enfilade fire, clung throughout the day to the three hundred yards of trench which they had captured.

The enemy, having failed to turn our men out by fair means, attempted one of the many ruses peculiar

to the children of "Kultur." A party of Germans advanced up a communication trench with their hands up in token of surrender. As they got nearer, we discovered that behind them were machine guns ready to fire on any of our men who might show themselves. This enterprising party met with a suitable reception.

At about 10 a.m. aviators and artillery observers reported that the enemy was massing in considerable strength to the south of the "Orchard" and east of La Quinque Rue, evidently with the intention of making a formidable counter-attack. The 41st Dogras were at once ordered up from the Divisional reserve to support the line near the captured trench.

It soon became clear that unless pressure was brought to bear upon the enemy, the Leicesters would be unable to hold out in the trench which they had taken so gallantly. An attack by the Dehra Dun Brigade was accordingly ordered to take place from the front held by the 6th Jats and 2/2nd Gurkhas. The enemy, however, anticipated this move, and from shortly after noon the "Orchard" was subjected to very heavy trench-mortar bombing.

The first intimation of the enemy's intentions was received when two monstrous bombs dropped in the "Orchard," and the shattered bodies of several Gurkhas were hurled high into the air amidst the debris of the parapet. These were closely followed by about twenty more bombs. A number of the Gurkhas were killed and wounded, and the eastern face of the "Orchard" position was completely obliterated, the south face also being badly knocked about. The Gurkhas were very

severely handled, and, in view of the evident strength of the German counter-attack, it became necessary to retire to a new line slightly in rear of the "Orchard."

This unfortunately rendered it imperative to abandon the proposed attack and to withdraw the Leicesters from their exposed position. The retirement was successfully carried out after dark without a single casualty, but the evacuation of the "Orchard" caused a dent in the front of the Dehra Dun Brigade which could not be filled up during the current operations.

The enemy, unaware that the trench had been evacuated by the Leicesters, wasted much good ammunition on it in a bombardment which lasted throughout the next day.

The right of the 6th Jats, who were on the left of the Gurkhas, was now completely in the air, but the right company of the Jats, under Captain Ross, at once set to work, and under a heavy fire succeeded in consolidating a new right flank, and effectually barred the German advance, if any such movement was really intended at the time, which seems doubtful. The arrival of the 1/9th Gurkhas, under Lt-Colonel G. Widdicombe, shortly afterwards rendered the position reasonably secure.

So ended the first phase of the attack by the Meerut Division, a marked feature of which was the gallantry of the detachment of the 2nd Leicesters, a quality of which this splendid regiment has throughout shown itself to be possessed in the highest degree. The 2/3rd Gurkhas also distinguished themselves by the tenacity with which they held on to the section of trench which was captured.

The Corps Commander showed his appreciation of the work done by the following message to the Division :—

"I congratulate you on the good work done last night, which shows what can be done by enterprise and care. Please send my hearty congratulations to Major-General Keary, the Leicesters, and the 2/3rd Gurkhas, for their gallant behaviour."

The casualties were comparatively small, owing to the skill with which the operation was planned and carried out.

Killed : Captain Bamberger, R.E.

2nd Leicesters:—Wounded : Major Knatchbull, D.S.O., Lieutenant J. E. Harris, and 44 men. Missing : Lieutenant H. A. Tooley and 6 men.

2/3rd Gurkhas:—Wounded : Major Dundas and 16 men. Missing : 10 men.