CHAPTER XIII

GERMAN COUNTER-ATTACK

German attack on Givenchy—Sirhind Brigade lose trenches—Givenchy taken by the enemy—Counter-attack by 1st Manchesters—Counter-attack forced back—Heavy casualties—Arrival of 1st Brigade, 1st Division—Operations of the Secundrabad Cavalry Brigade under Brigadier-General Macbean—First attack unsuccessful—Second attack takes trenches, but forced to retire—Casualties—Causes of failure.

We must now turn to the rest of the Lahore Division front.

At 12.30 p.m. it was reported that the situation in the left section of the Sirhind Brigade was very serious, and that a counter-attack by at least a Brigade was necessary if the line was to be re-established. General Watkis was at the end of his resources in troops, having none left except the 34th Pioneers and the 59th Rifles, which latter battalion had on the previous day suffered heavy losses. The Corps Commander therefore placed the Secundrabad Cavalry Brigade, under Brigadier-General F. W. Wadeson, and the 2/8th Gurkha Rifles at General Watkis' disposal, the whole being under the command of Major-General Macbean. To these General Watkis added the 47th Sikhs under Lt-Colonel Gunning.

Shortly after 1 p.m. on the 20th December, news was received that the left battalion of the Ferozepore Brigade, the 129th Baluchis, had fallen

back, and that Givenchy was being heavily attacked. The retention of Givenchy was vitally necessary, as near this point the right of Lahore connected with the French left. General Carnegy, Commanding the Jullundur Brigade, was accordingly directed to turn his immediate attention to securing Givenchy and re-establishing the situation there. At the same time the General Officer Commanding the 10th French Army Corps placed two battalions at General Watkis' disposal. The 1st Manchesters and 4th Battalion Suffolks (Territorials), the latter of which had recently joined the Corps, were moved up to Pont Fixe on the La Bassée Canal near Cuinchy.

The main object was to get into touch with the right and left sub-sections of the Sirhind Brigade, and to counter-attack, as circumstances permitted, with a view to retaking our lost trenches. On arrival, General Carnegy found the position to be as follows:—

The Germans had occupied the whole of the Sirhind Brigade front, and the Brigade had fallen back to the Festubert road. The enemy had also occupied the left or northern part of the line held by the Ferozepore Brigade, while Givenchy village was itself also in the hands of the Germans. East of Givenchy, the 57th Rifles with one company of the 9th Bhopals were still holding their position, while south of the La Bassée Canal the 1st Connaughts and 4th Suffolk Territorials had also not moved.

The 1st Manchesters under Lt-Colonel Strickland, with one company 4th Suffolks, were ordered to attack Givenchy, and, pushing on through the village, to reoccupy the trenches vacated by the 129th Baluchis. The French Territorials on arrival

were to retake the trenches formerly held by the right of the Sirhind Brigade.

The Manchesters began their attack shortly after 3 p.m., and found on reaching the village that it was held in unexpected strength by the enemy. Rough and tumble hand-to-hand fighting of the fiercest description took place in the village, the Germans holding their position house by house, and they were not cleared out until it had become too dark to distinguish the features of the country, or to locate the position of the hostile trenches, which were the next objective. The further attack was therefore delayed until the following morning.

The desperate nature of the fighting can be gauged from the fact that only twelve prisoners were taken.

A curious incident marked the recapture of the village. Three of our Artillery observing officers had been cut off when the enemy took Givenchy, and had only escaped death or capture by hiding in a cellar. When our men entered, they emerged, none the worse for their exciting experience.

The village was held by us during the night, and another company of the Suffolks and French Territorials respectively was sent up to Colonel Strickland. Before dawn we made an attempt to locate the enemy's trenches, but were met by a very heavy fire, and sustained severe losses.

At 6.30 a.m. on the 21st, Colonel Strickland launched his attack, but immediately came under a withering fire from rifles and machine guns, which proved particularly deadly, as every movement of our men was clearly shown up by the blaze of two haystacks which were burning furiously behind us.

The Manchesters, however, are a regiment which takes a good deal of stopping, as the enemy to his cost has learnt on many occasions in this campaign. For over an hour they made desperate efforts to reach the German trenches, but against the torrent of bullets and shells little progress could be effected, and men were everywhere falling fast.

It was becoming evident that the attempt could not succeed, when at 11 a.m., after the village and our trenches had been vigorously shelled for 45 minutes, the enemy made a strong attack. The Manchesters held firm, and the attack was on the verge of being repulsed, when the French on the left were forced out of their position, leaving our flank in the air.

The enemy seized his advantage, and began to work round the Manchesters' left, which was compelled to retire through the village on to the road. At the same moment the Germans heavily attacked the centre and right. The situation appeared to be rapidly becoming untenable, and it was decided to retire the left supports to a position in rear, in order to cover the withdrawal of the centre and right.

The gallant Manchesters, a regiment of Ironsides, had, however, not yet shot their bolt. They held on so tenaciously that Colonel Strickland decided on a further attempt. By a splendid rush, the original trenches were reoccupied, the enemy being driven back on the left at about 2 p.m. ; but this was our last expiring effort.

Soon after 3 p.m. the Germans delivered a sharp attack from the front, while large bodies appeared on the right flank and in rear. At the same moment

machine guns opened on us, enfilading our line from the right.

There was now nothing for it but to retire; the casualties had been very heavy, and the men were utterly done. There were only three officers left with the companies, and in some companies there were hardly any non-commissioned officers.

The centre and right again held on with the utmost obstinacy, while the remainder, with whom were Colonel Strickland, the Adjutant, and a few non-commissioned officers, took up a position in rear, the firing line then falling back after a furious hand-to-hand fight on the road.

The retirement to Pont Fixe was conducted with the greatest steadiness, a quality for which, under all circumstances, this splendid regiment has always been known. Many wounded men were carried back under heavy shrapnel and machine-gun fire. By their wonderful staunchness the Manchesters had given time for reinforcements to be brought up, and the arrival of the Cameron Highlanders of the 1st Brigade, 1st British Division, righted the situation at this point.

The losses of the Manchesters were heavy. Captain Creagh, Lieutenant Norman, and 64 men were killed; Major Hitchins, Captain Rose, Lieutenant Lynch, and 123 men were wounded; while 46 men were missing. There was, however, the satisfaction of knowing that our mark had been left still more deeply on the enemy. Of this regiment it may be said once for all that none more devoted and none more valiant has passed in this war through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

We must now hark back to the operations of

the force under Major-General Macbean, which consisted of the Secundrabad Cavalry Brigade (dismounted) under Brigadier-General Wadeson, to which were added the 47th Sikhs and the 2/8th Gurkhas.

At 2 p.m. General Macbean moved up from Marais to the 2nd line trenches to the north, in readiness to counter-attack vigorously if opportunity offered. At 5 p.m. arrangements were made for a counter-attack by the 7th Dragoon Guards and 47th Sikhs under the command of Lt-Colonel Lemprière, D.S.O., of the 7th. These regiments moved up to the right of the Sirhind Brigade and established touch with the left of Jullundur.

For various reasons, considerable delay occurred in launching the attack, and at 11.45 p.m. General Macbean was ordered to advance at once with all the troops at his disposal and to support Colonel Lemprière, if, as was expected, that officer had already started. Colonel Lemprière attacked at 1 a.m. in two lines, the first consisting of A and D Squadrons 7th Dragoon Guards and half of the 47th Sikhs, the second line of C Squadron and the remainder of the 47th.

The attack moved steadily over the open ground, but met with heavy rifle and machine-gun fire, which caused a number of casualties. Both lines reached the support trenches about 600 yards east of Le Plantin, the 47th occupying an old communication trench on the left. The night was pitch dark, the ground in many places knee-deep in glue-like mud, and the whole country was intersected by trenches and ditches, which rendered it almost impossible to recognize the real objective. Colonel

Lemprière went forward with his Adjutant to try and locate the front line trench which he had to attack.

During this period the enemy was keeping up a heavy fire from the left, under which men were dropping fast. As Colonel Lemprière was returning, he was shot dead. Colonel Gunning, 47th Sikhs, then took command.

The prospects of a successful assault were hopeless. The position of the enemy's trench could only be inferred from the flash of rifles; we were enfiladed by rifle and machine-gun fire from both flanks; while to add to the difficulties, our own guns were plastering our probable line of advance with their shells, in their endeavour to wreck the German trenches.

Captain A. C. Ross, of the 20th Deccan Horse, who had throughout distinguished himself by his gallant leading, went out under heavy fire, with Duffadars Sardar Singh and Shanka Rao of the same regiment, and at great risk managed to carry in Risaldar Amir Mahomed, who was badly wounded. For this signal act of bravery and devotion Captain Ross received the D.S.O., and the Duffadars the Indian Order of Merit, 2nd Class.

Risaldar Badan Singh, of the Poona Horse, was very prominent during the attack, in which he led his party with great dash, receiving the Indian Distinguished Service Medal.

Colonel Gunning, recognizing the futility of any further attempt, decided to retire on Festubert, which was reached at about 4 a.m., and the force awaited further orders.

General Macbean then directed a second attack

to be made, the 2/8th Gurkhas on the left with the 47th Sikhs and 7th Dragoon Guards prolonging to the right, with a view to getting into touch with the Jullundur Brigade. As soon as the trenches were captured, the 7th and 47th were to work along to their right and the remainder to the left. As usual in those bad days, artillery ammunition was scarce, and our guns could only bombard for seven minutes.

Just as the attack started, the Ambala Cavalry Brigade arrived, and orders were given for them to link up the line with the Jullundur Brigade, but in the darkness the 8th Hussars lost their way, and the remainder of the Brigade was not collected until after the main attack had failed. The dawn was then approaching, and it was useless to send them in.

This second attack, under the command of Lt-Colonel Grant, 2/8th Gurkhas, started at about 5 a.m. on the 21st December, in two lines. In the first line were half of the 2/8th Gurkhas and 47th Sikhs. In the second line were the remainder of the Gurkhas, three squadrons 7th Dragoon Guards, and the Jodhpur Lancers. The rain was coming down in torrents. In the inky darkness it was impossible to keep any sense of direction, and the front line first went off too much to the left and then too much to the right.

The Germans kept up a moderately heavy fire from the front, but that of their machine guns on both flanks was incessant and of extreme intensity. The ground was pitted with shell holes full of water, into which officers and men were continually falling, and was cut up by ditches and the remains of old

trenches. Seldom has an assault been launched under more unfavourable circumstances.

On reaching the support trenches, a cheer was raised; the whole line charged the fire trench, which was occupied without much trouble, and as soon as things were sorted out, patrols were sent down the flanks to ascertain the position of the enemy. The right patrol speedily reported the trench to be held by Germans, who met them with a vigorous machine-gun fire.

During the advance, D Squadron 7th Dragoon Guards, under Captain Mansel, became detached, and, attempting to charge machine guns on the left, lost heavily. Shortly afterwards Major Edwards, 2/8th Gurkhas, reported that 500 yards of the trench on the left were unoccupied, for the simple reason that it was so full of water as to be untenable, two of his Gurkhas having already been drowned in it, and that it was enfiladed by machine guns from both flanks.

Captain Padday, 47th Sikhs, with a bombing party of his regiment, then made a gallant attempt to clear the enemy out, but the machine guns were merciless, and many of the party were killed, including their brave leader.

Day was now breaking; the position was untenable. To remain spelt certain disaster. A retirement of the whole line to Festubert was ordered, which was effected under a searching fire, the troops only reaching Festubert after daylight.

The casualties during this gallant but fruitless attack were as follows:—

The 7th Dragoon Guards lost their Commanding Officer, Lt-Colonel Lemprière, D.S.O., and Captain Mansel; Lieutenant Mann and 2nd Lieutenant

Bryce were wounded and missing; their total casualties being 43.

In the Poona Horse, Major Loring, 37th Lancers, who was attached, was killed, adding one more to the sacrifices which this soldier-family has made in the war; Captain Grimshaw and 2 Indian officers were wounded; the total being 49.

The 20th Deccan Horse had Major Tennant, Captain Jarvis, and Lieutenant Tinley wounded; Captains McEuen and Mackenzie missing; with a total casualty list of 81.

The 2/8th Gurkhas lost one Gurkha officer killed, with 22 casualties in other ranks.

In the 47th Sikhs, Captain Padday and 7 men were killed; Major Van Someren and Captain Brown wounded; while 120 of other ranks were wounded or missing.

The Jodhpur Lancers had 11 casualties.

Amongst the causes which militated against the success of this attack, the following are noteworthy:—

1. The troops employed (except the 2/8th Gurkhas) had no knowledge of the ground.

2. The weakness of the force and the length of front of the objective, about one mile, precluded an attack in sufficient depth to push home and remain there.

3. The extreme difficulty of attacking by night over water-logged ground, cut up by water channels and trenches.

4. Insufficient artillery support, due to want of ammunition.

For his services on this occasion Brigadier-General Wadeson received the C.B.