CHAPTER XIV

GERMAN COUNTER-ATTACK—*Continued*

The "Orchard"—Attack on 2nd Seaforths—Loss of trenches by 2nd Gurkhas—Gallantry of Seaforths—1st Division, 1st Corps brought up to relieve pressure—Givenchy retaken by 1st Brigade—Seaforths and 58th Rifles relieved—Heavy casualties—Indian Corps relieved—Sir Douglas Haig takes over command of the line—Successful stand of 57th Rifles—Appreciation of Indian Corps by Sir John French in despatches.

It is now necessary to retrace our steps to the neighbourhood of the "Orchard."

On the night of the 19th, the attack contemplated by the Dehra Dun Brigade had perforce to be abandoned, and the 2/2nd Gurkhas were compelled to retire to a retrenched position slightly to the west. By this retirement the left flank of the 1st Seaforths, under Lt-Colonel Ritchie, who were on the extreme right of the Meerut Division, was much exposed.

At about 9 a.m. on the 20th, there were heavy attacks on the Seaforths and Gurkhas, and about the same time the right of the Seaforths and the left of the Sirhind Brigade were for the moment separated by the explosion of the enemy's mines.

The first portion of the Seaforths to be attacked was B Company, which was having a frugal breakfast when the onslaught began. Taken by surprise, the Company made two determined stands and killed about fifty Germans before they lost the trench.

The enemy rushed down the fire trench, hiding their advance under smoke balls, and bombing as they came. At the same time the Germans bombed from the saphead in front of our trench, while snipers were picking off our men from the Festubert road.

Captain the Hon. C. St Clair, who was in command of B Company, threw back his men into the communication trench, which he lined, facing to the right, but was himself shortly afterwards shot dead.

Meanwhile the 2nd Gurkhas had been faring badly. At about 9 a.m. there was a terrific explosion, which shook the whole neighbourhood. The Germans had evidently exploded a mine under the parapet of the "Orchard." This was followed for a few minutes by a perfect tornado of shrapnel, high-explosive and machine-gun fire, the crescendo ending in a rush by the enemy from his trenches into the "Orchard."

Captain Bethell with No. 1 Company was in the right trench, but immediately got his men out of it into a trench in rear, in order to avoid being overwhelmed by numbers. Here, as usual where danger was, the Sapper was found in the person of Lieutenant Bird, R.E., with a few of his men. The second trench was too deep to hold, and Captain Bethell with about half of his men got out of it into a communication trench known as "the Strand." The remainder of his men were overpowered, and the survivors captured by the enemy, who were pressing on in ever-increasing numbers.

In "the Strand" Major Boileau was met, and a small rearguard action was fought until a third trench was found, in which a final position was

taken up by Majors Boileau and Watt, Lieutenant Bird managing to get through to the Seaforth trenches to see if he could help there. The attack was stayed at this point, but a considerable portion of the trenches had been lost.

At this juncture the 58th Rifles came up in support of the Seaforths' left, and filled the gap caused by the retirement of the Gurkhas. At the same moment the 1/9th Gurkhas under Lt-Colonel Widdicombe reported their arrival as further supports, and half of them were sent up to Major Boileau, the rest remaining with the 6th Jats on the left.

The senior officer on the spot was now Lt-Colonel Roche, of the 6th Jats, who at once set to work to retrieve, as best he could, a desperate situation, and with the aid of reinforcements which streamed up during the 20th and 21st, in the shape of the Black Watch, 4th Seaforths (Territorials), 41st Dogras and 30th Lancers, he succeeded in establishing a fairly formidable hedge of steel facing the captured trenches.

Meantime the enemy had been busy with "hair-brush" bombs, and had driven the Seaforths out of about 100 yards of trench as far as "Piccadilly," wounding Lieutenant Baker and a number of men in the process. Here, however, they were held up until a fresh supply of bombs reached the Seaforths.

At this moment about forty Germans appeared in rear, and Captain Laing promptly went for them with a bombing party, succeeding, after a grim struggle, in clearing them out and retaking ten traverses in the Gurkha trench. Here the dashing little party had to pull up, as they were not really strong enough to hold the captured section. However,

once there, they built a barricade and stayed there. In this trench alone, 22 dead Germans were counted, while our small party had 13 casualties.

In the evening the Seaforths, worthy comrades of the Manchesters and the Black Watch, were heartened by messages of congratulation from the Brigade and Divisional Commanders on the splendid behaviour of the battalion under such trying circumstances.

By 6 p.m. the 58th Rifles were supporting the Seaforths on their left, as well as in their fire and support trenches. It was again the old tale, however—shortage of bombs against an enemy abundantly supplied with them.

Nevertheless, heavily attacked as they were by fire and bombs, their trenches battered to bits, the Dehra Dun Brigade kept their front intact, maintaining connection with the 6th Jats on their left. Major Wauchope, commanding half the Black Watch on the Seaforths' right, succeeded in establishing communication with that battalion during the afternoon, and before midnight with the Sirhind Brigade on his right. A continuous line thus existed throughout the Meerut Division front, although it was badly indented at the "Orchard."

The Indian Corps, which, at the end of October, had in the nick of time come to the relief of the 2nd Corps under General Smith-Dorrien, had now for two terrible months held with indomitable tenacity and never-failing courage the long line which had fallen to its share. During this period it had been constantly subjected to shell fire of a type quite novel to it. It had been assailed by a ferocious enemy by day and by night, with weapons such as

bombs and hand grenades, with which our troops were not then provided. The weather conditions had been terrible enough to damp the courage of the stoutest heart. As a final test, the Corps had now for over thirty hours of most sanguinary fighting been confronted by an ever-increasing concentration of the enemy.

The men were rapidly becoming worn out, and it was evident that an immediate and substantial reinforcement was imperative, if the situation was to be restored and the future assured. The 1st Army Corps, under Sir Douglas Haig, was in Army reserve and available for this purpose.

During the night of the 20th–21st December, the 1st Division, 1st Corps, under General Haking, arrived on the scene. The 1st Brigade, after a short rest, was sent on to Givenchy. The 2nd Brigade was sent to support the Dehra Dun Brigade, while the 3rd Brigade moved up to the trenches evacuated by the Sirhind Brigade.

A detailed account of the operations of the 1st British Division does not come within the scope of this history, but a brief sketch is necessary for a proper understanding of the operations as a whole.

The attack of the 1st Brigade on Givenchy, so lately the scene of the gallant exploits of the 1st Manchesters, and the assault of the 3rd Brigade on the Sirhind trenches commenced about 3 p.m. on the 21st December. The 1st Brigade succeeded in consolidating their position round Givenchy and on the left of the Ferozepore Brigade, but were unable to keep touch with the attack of the 3rd Brigade on their left. The 3rd Brigade advanced through a line held by detachments of the Sirhind, Bareilly,

and Jullundur Brigades, as well as by the Secundrabad and Ambala Brigades.

By nightfall, however, the Brigade had not succeeded in reaching the Sirhind trenches, nor had it established permanent connection with the right of the Meerut Division, to which we must now return.

At about 3 a.m. on the 21st, the Germans were reported to be massing in front of the Dehra Dun Brigade. By 8 a.m. it was evident that the attack by the left Brigade of the Lahore Division had failed, and that the enemy were in considerable strength. The Seaforths were now in a perilous position, and half of the 107th Pioneers were sent up to support their flank.

All other reserve troops available, *i.e.* the rest of the 107th and the 4th Cavalry, were brought up to a position in the Rue du Bois, from which they could act, in the event of the situation changing for the worse before the 2nd British Brigade could arrive. This Brigade was intended to attack about noon, on the arrival of General Westmacott, but two of its battalions were delayed en route, and the assault was not launched till about 7 p.m.

The Loyal North Lancashires were ordered to attack with their left on the "Orchard," the Northamptons prolonging to their left with the 2/60th Rifles in reserve. The 2nd Royal Sussex were detailed to relieve the Seaforths in the trenches.

By 10 p.m. the support trenches of the "Orchard" had been carried, and preparations were made to advance on the original fire trenches, but these had been so completely destroyed by bombs that they could not be reoccupied, a fact

grimly eloquent of the gruelling to which the 2nd Gurkhas had been subjected. The support trenches were therefore held.

At 9 a.m. on the 22nd December, the enemy suddenly attacked the centre section, and the Loyal North Lancashires were bombed out, vacating several of the trenches which they had taken during the previous evening.

Lieutenant Macandrew of the Seaforths on the left of his support trench, finding his left unprotected and the Germans advancing up the trench, rallied some of the North Lancashires, and with them bombed the Germans back. He then found that, having only eleven men with him, he could not occupy such a length of trench. He dug himself in along the Brewery road facing north, and went back for more men. While returning, he and eight men were killed by machine-gun fire.

The 41st Dogras and half of the 2nd Black Watch were now brought up, as also were the remainder of the Northamptons from the reserve. By 1 p.m. the line was again continuously held throughout.

By 3 p.m. the Seaforths and part of the 58th Rifles had been relieved. They had been fighting practically without a break in heavy mud and rain since the early hours of the 19th, and were utterly worn out. Faced by a most determined enemy in greatly superior numbers, hampered by a constant shortage of bombs and grenades, with both flanks in the air for a great part of the time, the 1st Seaforths had not only succeeded in holding out in spite of heavy casualties, but they had also retaken a portion of the trenches lost by the Gurkhas. For the Seaforths no higher praise can be accorded than

that the regiment sustained and even added to a glorious reputation.

The casualties of the battalion from the 16th to the 22nd December amounted to 174, of whom 8 were officers. For their distinguished services Lt-Colonel Ritchie received the C.M.G., Captain Wicks the D.S.O., Lieutenant Macandrew was mentioned in despatches, and Captain Laing was awarded the Military Cross.

Lt-General C. Anderson, Commanding the Meerut Division, reported that in his opinion the action of the Seaforths and 58th Rifles, sustained over a period of three days and nights, under extremely difficult conditions, was worthy of the highest possible commendation, and reflected the greatest credit on officers, non-commissioned officers and men of both regiments.

The losses of the 58th Rifles were: Captain Bell, 54th Sikhs, Jemadar Mardan Ali and 24 other ranks killed, with 32 other ranks wounded.

Shortly after 1 p.m. on the 22nd December, Sir Douglas Haig took over command of the whole line which had been held by the Indian Corps.

The position was then as follows:—

South of the La Bassée Canal, the Connaught Rangers had not been attacked. Just north of the Canal, the 57th Rifles with one company 9th Bhopals, although attacked, still held their original trenches. The 1st British Brigade, holding Givenchy and its northern and eastern approaches, connected northwards with the Ferozepore Brigade, and on its left again came the 3rd British Brigade, although touch between the two Brigades had been lost. The 3rd Brigade held a line along the east of the Festubert

road, its left being in touch with the right of the Meerut Division, where a battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment had just relieved the 1st Seaforths.

Further north the 2nd British Brigade held the line west of the "Orchard," and connected with half of the Black Watch and the 1/9th Gurkhas. From this point northwards, the 6th Jats and the whole of the Garhwal Brigade occupied the line which they had held since the beginning.

The relief by the 1st Corps of the southern section was effected on the night of the 22nd December, but the Meerut Division remained under the orders of the 1st Corps, and was not completely withdrawn till the 27th December.

Very little has hitherto been said about the work of the 57th Rifles and one company 9th Bhopals, beyond mentioning the fact that they held their portion of the line throughout.

The share taken by them deserves more detailed mention, as it was owing to their determination and tenacious grip of their trenches that communication with the Connaughts on the south side of the La Bassée Canal, and through the Connaughts with the French on their right, was maintained, and that our line was kept intact in this sector of the defence.

The 57th Rifles, under Lt-Colonel Gray, D.S.O., with one company of the 9th Bhopal Infantry, held the centre section of the Ferozepore line. In the firing line on the right was the Sikh Company of the 57th, under Major Willans, with Captain Leith-Ross attached from the 55th Rifles, and Lieutenant Taylor with 45 rifles, 9th Bhopals. In the centre was the Afridi Company, 57th, under Major Jarrett.

On the left were the Punjabi-Mahomedan Company, 57th, and 75 rifles 9th Bhopals, under Captains Jardine and Shepherd, with Lieutenant Deedes, 31st Punjabis, as machine-gun officer.

The local reserve consisted of the Dogra Company, 57th, and 75 rifles, 9th Bhopals. One machine gun was on the right and one in the centre.

On the 19th December, the parapet, owing to heavy rain and the enemy's fire, was in a very dilapidated condition. On the left a number of casualties were caused by shots through the loop-holes from the German saps, only 70 yards away. Captain Mahon with 35 Dogras was brought up to reinforce this section.

At about 10 a.m. on the 20th, the enemy succeeded in occupying the trenches on the left flank of the 57th, which was thus in the air, and the Germans were able to enfilade the left company, with the result that Captain Shepherd was mortally wounded, Captain Mahon then taking over command of the company. The enemy also took advantage of the retirement of the 129th Baluchis on the left to work round to some scattered houses in rear of the 57th. This forced Captain Mahon to fall back to avoid being cut off. The retirement was carried out with the utmost coolness, two or three men engaging the Germans from behind each traverse as they fell back.

Lieutenant Deedes remained behind at great risk, and helped to bring away Captain Shepherd's body. By his gallant conduct in this and other actions he gained the Military Cross.

In the meantime, Captain Jardine was busy making a barricade across the trench, near the

junction of the left and centre companies, which he held with the men of the 9th Bhopals. Captain Mahon with Subadar Arsla Khan held an old communication trench facing north in continuation of the line of the barricade. Apparently the enemy was not sure of the strength of the position, as he only made weak attacks, which were easily beaten off, the men even climbing up on the parapet to get a better view of the enemy.

Shortly afterwards a company of the 142nd French Territorials came up and was put in support of the left. Pressure was relieved about this time by the retaking of Givenchy by the Manchesters, as already related.

The left section of trench which the 57th had vacated remained empty, as the Germans built a barricade across it at the far end. Subadar Arsla Khan and some of his Afridis reconnoitred along this portion and brought back valuable information as to the whereabouts of the enemy.

During the night, the French Territorials occupied the empty section of the trench and built a barricade at a distance of about 40 yards from that of the Germans. The French are described by an officer as having behaved with the utmost sangfroid and contempt of the enemy. They remained in this very uncomfortable position until the 57th were relieved.

During the 20th, the Germans broke through the Sirhind Brigade on the left, and matters looked so bad that the Transport was taken out of billets and kept in constant readiness to move at a moment's notice. This, as it turned out, was very lucky, for the billets were shortly afterwards shelled and burnt.

During the day, a small body of Germans attempted to creep up from the eastern side, but were all shot down before they had advanced fifty yards.

At daybreak on the 21st, Subadar Arsla Khan went out with two men and reconnoitred the enemy's position. He ascertained that they were still in a section of the left trench, and succeeded in shooting several of them at their barricade.

At about 3 p.m. Givenchy was evacuated by the Manchesters, and pressure on the 57th left was greatly increased. The enemy again occupied the houses in the left rear, and were with difficulty prevented from moving further south and thus cutting off the battalion. Three separate attacks on our left were then repulsed, but matters began to look serious, as the reserve was being employed in bringing up ammunition, leaving no reinforcements in the event of a serious attack. Subadar Fateh Jang gained the Indian Distinguished Service Medal by his coolness and leadership at this time.

At 4 p.m., luckily, the pressure was again relieved by the attack of the 1st British Brigade on Givenchy, and at about 8 p.m. they got into touch with the 57th left, the Scots Guards occupying a trench facing north at about 200 yards' distance.

Early on the 22nd, a body of about seventy Germans made a determined attack on the trench which had been thrown back on the left, but Subadar Arsla Khan collected all his men and charged the enemy, who fled without waiting for the assault, leaving about thirty of their number, including two officers, killed or wounded on the ground.

Subadar Arsla Khan is one of the finest specimens

of the Indian officer imaginable. During the Mohmand Expedition of 1908, he was granted the 2nd Class of the Indian Order of Merit for gallantry during a hand-to-hand fight in which he killed two of the enemy with his Mauser pistol, and rendered an important "Sangar" untenable. In the present war he was granted the 2nd Class of the Order of British India for his good services at Messines, and at the second battle of Ypres in April, 1915, he won the Military Cross for his gallantry. Subadar Arsla Khan is a Malikdin Khel Afridi, and a man of considerable importance in his tribe. The 57th Rifles have every reason to be proud of him.

A company of the 59th Rifles now came up to reinforce, and were sent to the right, where Major Willans was in difficulties, as his men had been standing deep in mud and water since the 19th, and it was impossible, owing to the absence of reserves, to evacuate the sick and wounded.

On the night of the 22nd December, the 57th were relieved by the South Staffords, having been for three days and nights absolutely without rest and wet through the whole time, in consequence of which many men suffered from frostbite. Their staunchness earned the hearty congratulations of the Corps Commander.

This concluded the operations of the Indian Army Corps round Givenchy in 1914.

Sir John French, in his despatch dated the 2nd February, 1915, sums up his opinion of the work of the Corps during this very trying period in the following words:—

"The Indian troops have fought with the utmost

steadfastness and gallantry whenever they have been called upon."

These words, springing from the full knowledge of detailed operations which the foregoing pages have attempted to provide, are a sufficient reply to much ill-informed contemporary criticism.