

CHAPTER XVI

THE BATTLE OF NEUVE CHAPELLE

Success of the French in Champagne in January, 1915—German troops diverted from other fronts—Situation at commencement of March—French methods of offensive—Value of surprise—Operations round Neuve Chapelle decided on—Splendid services of the Flying Corps—Operation orders—Strength of Meerut Division—Description of ground—Preparations for attack—Special order by Sir Douglas Haig before the battle—Preparatory bombardment by 480 guns—Activity of our aviators on hostile communications—Attack by Garhwal Brigade—Gallantry of 2/39th Garhwalis—Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi gains the V.C.—Dashing attack of the 2/3rd Gurkhas—Major Tillard, D.S.O.—Rifleman Gane Gurung captures eight Germans—The 2/3rd Gurkhas the first regiment to enter Neuve Chapelle—The 1/39th Garhwalis find German wire uncut—Splendid behaviour of the battalion—Bravery of Lieutenant Cammell, R.F.A.—200 yards of trench taken, but attack isolated—All British officers killed—Colonel Swiney wounded, but continues to command—2nd Leicesters attack with their usual gallantry—Trench captured—Captain Romilly leads bombing party to assist 1/39th Garhwalis—Captain Hobart, R.E.—Private William Buckingham gains the V.C.—Attack by 1st Seaforths and 1/3rd Londons to help 1/39th Garhwalis—Splendid charge by Londons—Trench taken—Gallant conduct of Captain Taylor, I.M.S.—Heavy losses of 1/39th Garhwalis—Position on the night of 10th March.

DURING the months of January and February, 1915, the French under General Langle de Cary were heavily and successfully engaged in Champagne, where they carried the town of Perthes with an important hill in the neighbourhood, and towards the end of February captured a very strong position north of Beau Séjour.

The value of these operations lay, not only in

the moral and material effects of the recapture of ground from the enemy, but also in the fact that the Germans were compelled to divert large bodies of troops from the Eastern front, as well as from other portions of their line in the West, in order to stay the progress of the French. Amongst these troops were the 6th Corps from Silesia, the 8th Corps from the Crown Prince's army in the Argonne, and six battalions of Prussian Guards from the neighbourhood of Ypres. It was also believed that for the same purpose the enemy's line opposite La Bassée and Lille had been considerably depleted, and that the only immediately available reinforcements consisted of a body of troops, principally Bavarian and Saxon, which was in billets at Roubaix on relief from the trenches round Ypres.

The position at the commencement of March was as follows :—

The line from Dixmude southwards to the apex of the Ypres salient was held by French troops, interspersed amongst whom were British cavalry. To the south again was the 5th Corps commanded by General Plumer, in touch with which was the 2nd Corps. The 3rd Corps under General Pulteney occupied its old position opposite Armentières, whence the line was continued southwards from Estaires to the west of Neuve Chapelle by the 4th Corps under General Rawlinson. Thence the Indian Corps under General Willcocks held the line as far as Givenchy, where it linked up with the 1st Corps, which was in touch with General Maud'huy's 10th (French) Army across the La Bassée Canal.

The conditions created by the success of the French in Champagne were thought to be favourable

to offensive operations by the British, and a decision to this effect had been arrived at by the end of February. To quote Sir John French's words in his despatch of the 5th April, 1915:—

“About the end of February many vital considerations induced me to believe that a vigorous offensive movement by the forces under my command should be planned and carried out at the earliest possible moment.

“Amongst the more important reasons which convinced me of the necessity were—

“The general aspect of the Allied situation throughout Europe, and particularly the marked success of the Russian Army in repelling the violent onslaughts of Marshal Von Hindenburg; the apparent weakening of the enemy in my front, and the necessity for assisting our Russian Allies to the utmost by holding as many hostile troops as possible in the Western theatre; the efforts to this end which were being made by the French Forces at Arras and Champagne; and perhaps the most weighty consideration of all, the need of fostering the offensive spirit in the troops under my command, after the trying and possibly enervating experiences which they had gone through of a severe winter in the trenches.”

The chief lesson learned from the Champagne offensive was that, given a sufficient concentration of artillery on any section of front, and the employment of an adequate force of infantry, an attack on the section bombarded was practically certain to succeed.

The method employed by the French (to whose intuition and originality the debt of our Staff is as evident as it has been continuous) was to batter the

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hostile trenches and obstacles out of existence, then to lift the guns and to establish such a curtain or barrage of fire as to render the arrival of reinforcements impossible. Under cover of this fire, the infantry could advance and occupy the position with comparatively small loss. The only danger of failure lay in the possibility that the enemy, by means of aerial reconnaissance or the operations of spies, might become aware of the plan and defeat it by massing guns on the sector selected for attack.

The portion of the enemy's line chosen for the British offensive was that covering the village of Neuve Chapelle, in rear of which lay the Aubers ridge and the city of Lille. We have already seen that on the 16th October, 1914, the 2nd Corps under General Smith-Dorrien took the village, and on the 17th reached Aubers and Herlies, one battalion, the Royal Irish, even capturing Le Pilly, three and a half miles to the east of Neuve Chapelle. The Germans then developed a counter-offensive, which pushed us back until our line ran just east of Neuve Chapelle, which village was captured by the enemy on the 27th October. On the 28th it was retaken by the Indian Corps, after a most gallant action, but owing to the lack of support, we were again driven out, and from the commencement of November our line ran well to the west of the village; and so it remained throughout the winter.

A glance at the map will show that Neuve Chapelle formed an enemy salient which it was eminently desirable to straighten out, if this object could be achieved without excessive loss. Moreover, during January and February, 1915, there had been a complete lull on this section of the line, and there was

reason to hope that the Germans might here be caught off their guard. As before remarked, the one condition absolutely necessary to success was secrecy.

The task of a commander in the field has been rendered infinitely more difficult in recent years by the introduction of aerial reconnaissance. From the eye of the bird-men who hover over the scene of operations little can be concealed. Photographs are taken by them which reveal the smallest changes in the disposition of the hostile forces. Bodies of troops on the march, the movements of batteries or supply columns, the presence of any unusual amount of rolling stock at a railway station are at once detected and reported, and inferences are drawn which may be fatal to the enterprise. In fact, if the aviators obtain free range, surprise on an important scale is impossible. The operations of the flying men can only be prevented by the opposing air squadrons or by the occurrence of fogs or of clouds lying at such a low altitude as to force scouting machines to fly within close range of the hostile anti-aircraft guns.

Such success (and it was not in perspective very considerable) as attended the operations of March, 1915, round Neuve Chapelle was rendered possible by the gallantry and zeal of our Flying Corps. To appreciate this fact, it is only necessary to consider that our attack on the 10th March, on which date the surprise of the enemy was complete, succeeded to the full. Had we then been able to push on, it is possible, though far from certain, that our more distant objectives would have been reached, but owing to unforeseen delays, the enemy obtained

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sufficient breathing time to enable him to overtake the advantage which the element of surprise had conferred upon us, with the result that our subsequent operations were finally checked and at last perforce abandoned.

For weeks previous to the battle, our airmen had made a deliberate and in the main a successful challenge to the German planes, with the result that they had obtained such a degree of ascendancy as rendered it impossible for their rivals to carry any constant or reliable information.

The scope of the operations was defined in an order issued on the 9th March. The attack on Neuve Chapelle was to be undertaken by the 4th and Indian Corps, the 8th Division of the former and the Meerut Division of the latter Corps supplying the assaulting troops.

The strength of the Meerut Division on the 10th March was as follows :—

British officers, 250 ; Indian officers, 148 ; British, other ranks, 4915 ; Indian, other ranks, 6369 ; total, 11,682 all ranks, exclusive of Staff, Cavalry, Artillery, and Engineers.

Composition of Brigades on the 10th March, 1915 :—

LAHORE DIVISION.

Jullundur Brigade.

Commander : Brigadier-General E. P. Strickland,
C.M.G., D.S.O.

1st Manchesters.

4th Suffolks (Territorials).

47th Sikhs.

59th Rifles.

Sirhind Brigade.

Commander : Brigadier-General W. G. Walker, V.C.,
C.B.

1st Highland Light Infantry.

4th King's (Liverpool) Regiment (Special Reserve).

15th Sikhs.

1/1st Gurkha Rifles.

1/4th Gurkha Rifles.

Ferozepore Brigade.

Commander : Brigadier-General R. M. Egerton, C.B.

Connaught Rangers.

4th London Regiment (Territorials).

57th Rifles.

129th Baluchis.

Divisional Battalion, 9th Bhopal Infantry.

MEERUT DIVISION.

Dehra Dun Brigade.

Commander : Brigadier-General C. W. Jacob.

1st Seaforths.

4th Seaforths (Territorials).

2/2nd Gurkha Rifles.

1/9th Gurkha Rifles.

Garhwal Brigade.

Commander : Brigadier-General C. G. Blackader,
D.S.O.

2nd Leicesters.

3rd London Regiment (Territorials).

1/39th Garhwal Rifles.

2/39th Garhwal Rifles.

2/3rd Gurkha Rifles.

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Bareilly Brigade.

Commander : Brigadier-General W. M. Southey.

2nd Black Watch.

4th Black Watch (Territorials).

6th Jats.

41st Dogras.

58th Rifles.

Divisional Battalion, 2/8th Gurkha Rifles.

The 125th Rifles were lent to the 4th Corps for work on communications.

The immediate objective was the enemy's trenches west of Neuve Chapelle, and the occupation of a line to the east of the diamond-shaped figure formed by the main road from Estaires to La Bassée, the road by Fleurbaix to Armentières, and that which connects the two. In the northern angle of this diamond lies the village of Neuve Chapelle. The general object of the attack was to enable the 4th and Indian Corps to establish themselves on a more forward line to the east, the ultimate objective being the high ground on which are situated the villages of Aubers and Ligny-le-Grand, with the intention finally of cutting off that portion of the enemy's troops which held the line between Neuve Chapelle and La Bassée.

The artillery of the Meerut Division, reinforced by that of the Lahore Division and heavy guns, was to carry out a preliminary bombardment, commencing at 7.30 a.m. on the 10th March, and lasting for 35 minutes. The objects of this bombardment were—

- (a) to demolish the enemy's obstacles ;
- (b) to destroy the enemy in his trenches ;

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(c) to put up a curtain of fire in rear of the hostile trenches in order to prevent the arrival of reserves ;

(d) to cover the southern section, which was not attacking ;

(e) to engage the enemy's batteries.

A short description of the ground will enable the reader to follow the course of the action with greater ease and clearness. Eastward from our front lay the village of Neuve Chapelle, in pre-war times a typical French townlet, with its centre street lined by estaminets, small shops and neat dwelling-houses, while on the outskirts were the villas of the better-to-do residents. The most prominent buildings were the white church on the left of the main street, the brewery in the south-east corner of the village, and a small château to the north-east of the church. The village was already in a half-ruined condition as the effect of the previous sanguinary fighting in October, 1914, but as compared with the state in which it was left by the bombardment and counter-bombardments of the 10th March, 1915, and following days, it might almost be described as in good repair.

Between our line and the village lay fields, intersected by deep ditches and cut up by hedges. The going was terrible, as the recent heavy rains had converted the plough into holding bog. Further to the east, at a distance of about two miles south-west of Lille, commences a ridge which, running in a horse-shoe shape, connects the villages of Illies and Aubers, both of which were occupied by the enemy. Between the two villages is a plateau, the importance of which to us lay in the fact that its

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capture, while depriving the enemy of the great advantages accruing from his possession of the high ground, would give us command of the approaches to the three great manufacturing centres of Lille, Roubaix, and Tourcoing.

Between Neuve Chapelle and the Aubers ridge runs the stream known as the river Des Layes, a tributary of the Lys, with a width of 6 to 10 feet, and a depth at that season of 3 to $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet. The enemy had constructed a second line of defence along the eastern side of the stream, with strong bridge heads.

A large wood, consisting mainly of young trees with a thick undergrowth, called the Bois du Biez, lies to the south-east of Neuve Chapelle, while further east is the Bois de Pommereau on the ridge south of Aubers.

The preparations for the attack in that section which was committed to the Indian Corps, large-scaled as they were, were of the most minute description, eliminating, as far as human foresight could, the element of chance. Two lines of breastworks were constructed in rear of our trenches along the Estaires—La Bassée road, from Port Arthur to the Rue des Berceaux, to afford cover to the troops when forming up for the assault. Strong communication breastworks were completed to the front line. Drains and water-courses were bridged, as many as 105 such bridges being put into position over the ditch in rear of our trenches on the La Bassée road. Numbers of step ladders were provided to enable the infantry to get over the parapets. Barricades and screens were everywhere strengthened. Bombs, rations, ammunition, spare bridges, planks,

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hurdles, pickets, sandbags, plain and barbed wire, were stocked at various advanced depôts.

From the 7th March onwards, all the artillery of the Lahore and Meerut Divisions and No. 1 Group G.H.Q. Heavy Artillery was brought into position and carried out registration of targets. During the first week of March several conferences took place between the Corps and Divisional Staffs, following on which, instructions outlining the operations were issued, details being worked out by the Divisional and Brigade Staffs. On the 8th March, a final general conference was held, when full details were considered and settled.

The Garhwal Brigade under Brigadier-General Blackader was detailed for the assault, the Dehra Dun Brigade under Brigadier-General Jacob being in support, while the Bareilly Brigade under Brigadier-General Southey was to hold our line during the attack. The wire in front of our trenches was to be cut, and bridges were to be put in position over the ditches between our line and that of the enemy by the Bareilly Brigade, under cover of darkness, on the night of the 9th-10th March. Finally, all troops were to be in position by 4.30 a.m. on the 10th.

On the 9th March the following special order by General Sir Douglas Haig was published :—

“ TO THE 1ST ARMY.

“ We are about to engage the enemy under very favourable conditions. Until now in the present campaign, the British Army has, by its pluck and determination, gained victories against an enemy greatly superior in men and guns.

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"Reinforcements have made us stronger than the enemy in our front. Our guns are now both more numerous than the enemy's are, and are also larger than any hitherto used by any army in the field.

"Our Flying Corps has driven the enemy from the air.

"On the Eastern front, and to south of us, our Allies have made marked progress and caused enormous losses to the Germans, who are, moreover, harassed by internal troubles and shortage of supplies, so that there is little prospect at present of big reinforcements being sent against us here.

"In front of us we have only one German Corps, spread out on a front as large as that occupied by the whole of our Army (the First).

"We are now about to attack with about 48 battalions a locality in that front which is held by some three German battalions. It seems probable, also, that for the first day of the operations the Germans will not have more than four battalions available for the counter-attack.

"Quickness of movement is therefore of first importance to enable us to forestall the enemy, and thereby gain success without severe loss.

"At no time in the war has there been a more favourable moment for us, and I feel confident of success. The extent of that success must depend on the rapidity and determination with which we advance.

"Although fighting in France, let us remember that we are fighting to preserve the British Empire, and to protect our homes against the organized savagery of the German Army.

"To ensure success each one of us must play his part, and fight like men for the Honour of Old England."

The spirit and vigour of these admonitions were alike admirable. Their summary of the military situation was perhaps a little upon the optimistic side.

After dark on the 9th March, the movement of troops to their appointed positions commenced, and continued throughout the night, until by the early morning of the 10th, the Garhwal Brigade was formed for attack in Port Arthur and in trenches and breastworks along the La Bassée—Estaires road, while the Dehra Dun Brigade was assembled in position to support, the whole defensive line of the Indian Corps being occupied by the Bareilly Brigade.

The night of the 9th March was cheerless in the extreme, the cold was intense and snow fell at intervals. Later, the weather improved and a frost set in, which to some extent assisted the advance.

The morning of the 10th March broke cold and misty, low-lying clouds rendering aerial reconnaissance both difficult and dangerous. At the first streak of dawn our guns began a final registration on their objectives, and although there was nothing to differentiate the fire of that morning from the usual "morning hate," the suspicions of the enemy appear to have been aroused.

It was subsequently ascertained that German patrols had reported that our trenches were packed with men, and that requests for artillery fire were sent back from the enemy's front line, but the wiser heads in rear apparently considered it to be a

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false alarm, and the steps which might have had a far-reaching effect on the operations were not taken.

At 7 a.m. a German aeroplane, greatly daring, suddenly appeared over Port Arthur, flying at a height of three to four hundred feet only. The fact that our line was crammed with troops could not escape the notice of the observer, and very shortly after the machine had flown away to the north the enemy commenced a heavy bombardment of the position, which, in the crowded state of the trenches, caused a large number of casualties among the 2nd Leicesters and 1/39th Garhwalis who were assembled at that spot. At 7.30 a.m. our bombardment broke out in all its fury. The experience gained from the French operations round Perthes had been utilized to good purpose by Sir John French. The length of the front to be attacked was little more than two miles, and against this the British had massed nearly 480 guns and howitzers, while the supply of ammunition for a 35 minutes' bombardment was said to have been greater than the amount used by the French at Perthes in a week.

Many attempts have been made to describe the sound of a great bombardment, but exuberant and flowing as has been the language in many cases employed, every description has failed to convey a true sense of the reality. To obtain a slight idea of what such a bombardment means to the enemy, one need go no further than to our own troops. An officer who was in the front line describes his own sensation as the shells passed overhead as one of semi-stupefaction, coupled with an intense desire to hold on to something in order to keep on his feet.

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It was quite impossible to hear one's self speak, for it must be remembered that while the shells from the heaviest guns firing far in rear ascend to the height of Mont Blanc, those of the 18-pounders of the field batteries, firing with very low trajectory, pass at a height of only a few feet above the heads of the troops in the trenches, with a screech and a whirr which are peculiarly nerve-shaking, for there is always the chance that a short burst may land a shell in one's own trench instead of in that of the enemy.

If the bombardment was so disconcerting for our own men, what must it have been for the Germans? The 18-pounders kept up an intense fire on the enemy's wire, the 15-inch, 9.2 and 6-inch howitzers plunged their high explosives into the entrenchments in front of the village.

The line of the German trenches could be clearly traced from a distance by the constant terrific explosions which hurled masses of earth, stones, and bricks high into the air, mingled with the shattered remains of the defenders, while over all hung a dense pall of dust and smoke, through which the flames of the bursting shells constantly stabbed a lurid path. The rapidity of fire was so great that it seemed impossible that it could proceed from single-loading guns; it sounded rather as if leviathan machine guns were at work.

So utterly was the enemy surprised and dominated, that later on, in some places, our men were able to climb out and walk about unharmed in the open. At one spot, the upper half of a German officer, with his cap still firmly fixed on his head, was blown into our trench.

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While our guns were thus preparing the way for the infantry, our gallant airmen were busy on other errands. In order to prevent the enemy from bringing up reinforcements from a distance, our fastest machines were sent on a mission to destroy his communications. The railway bridge at Menin, over which reinforcements might have been sent by the Duke of Württemberg, was attacked, as also was the junction at Courtrai, on the principal route from Belgium to this part of the front. One of our airmen dropped a bomb on Menin bridge from a height of only 120 feet, destroying a pier, while Courtrai Station, and the Don and Douai Junctions were also damaged; a troop train was hit by a bomb; a wireless installation at Lille was believed to have been destroyed; and one of the enemy's head-quarters was set on fire. In another case, as Sir John French mentions in his despatch of the 5th April, 1915, a pilot descended to about 50 feet above the point he was attacking.

Our bombardment continued without a second's pause until five minutes past eight, when the guns lifted on to Neuve Chapelle itself, and put the finishing touches to the devastation commenced at the end of October, 1914.

The attack of the Garhwal Brigade was arranged as follows:—

Right attack, 1/39th Garhwal Rifles.

Right centre, 2nd Leicesters.

Left centre, 2/3rd Gurkhas.

Left attack, 2/39th Garhwal Rifles.

The 3rd London Regiment (Territorials) were in support.

In order to protect the flanks, the 1/39th Garhwalis

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were to send parties, after the capture of the first objective, to clear the German trenches to the right, while the 2/39th were to act in the same way on the left, and to establish touch with the 25th Brigade, 8th Division.

The moment the guns lifted, the Brigade swarmed over the parapet, and moving at a steady double over the intervening space of from 100 to 200 yards, reached (except as regards one battalion) their first objective without a check. The effect of the accurate and intense fire of our artillery was at once evident. The German wire had in nearly every place simply ceased to exist, while the trenches were practically blotted out, burying in their ruins numbers of the defenders. Such of the enemy as were still unhurt were either in a state of stupefaction or half delirious, while everywhere lay the mangled bodies of the dead and wounded. The 2/39th Garhwalis met with some rifle and machine-gun fire from trenches further in rear, but pressed on through the first trench and took the second with a rush, capturing a machine gun and some prisoners.

Subadar-Major Nain Sing Chinwarh, who had won the Military Cross in the earlier days of the war, here earned the 2nd Class, Order of British India, by his gallant leading of his company, which he continued to command although he had been wounded by a shell splinter.

Jemadar Sangram Sing Negi charged a machine gun in the face of a German officer who was aiming at him with his revolver, and with his company captured the officer, the gun, and its detachment. For his conspicuous bravery the Jemadar was rewarded with the Military Cross.

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Havildar Butha Sing Negi gained the 2nd Class of the Indian Order of Merit by heading his section into a German trench, where he rounded up and captured a number of prisoners.

Still pushing on, the 2/39th took the third trench with few casualties, and then made for their first main objective, the fourth line. During their passage between the third and fourth trenches, they came under heavy fire, and lost many men from a party of the enemy on the left flank. These were engaged by the left company of the 2/39th, which had carried through the advance with equal success.

Naik Jaman Sing Bisht here distinguished himself and gained the 2nd Class, Indian Order of Merit, by leading his section up the trench and driving the occupants into the hands of the right company, a large number being captured.

During the advance, Captain Parkin, 113th Infantry, attached 2/39th, was severely wounded, when acting as Brigade bomb-gun officer, through the bursting of one of his guns.

The two assaulting companies of the 2/39th established themselves in their first objective, and the enemy found himself under fire from two directions, with the result that he began to surrender, but, as usual, great care had to be exercised in taking prisoners when dealing with such a treacherous foe. One party of Germans in the main trench beckoned to our men to come over and take them prisoners. A close scrutiny of the ground revealed the fact that in crossing they would come under machine-gun fire from a trench which was not marked on the map. Fortunately, our men were not taken in; the trench was rushed, and the machine gun captured.

During the assault on the main trench, Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi behaved with very distinguished courage. He was one of the bayonet party accompanying the bombers, and was the first man to go round each traverse in face of a most determined resistance by the enemy, of whom he killed several, driving the remainder back until they surrendered. This brave soldier was afterwards unfortunately killed, but for his most conspicuous gallantry he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

Jemadar Pancham Sing Mahar won the Military Cross by his dashing leading of a party which advanced across the open in face of a severe fire, capturing a machine gun and a number of prisoners.

The Garhwalis, having accomplished all they were asked to do, now consolidated the position, and parties proceeded to search the houses for snipers. Here the Berkshires were seen on the left working through the village, and shortly afterwards touch was established with the 2nd Rifle Brigade on the east. There they remained, and by evening the position had been made defensible, so as to support the 2/3rd Gurkhas and face the Bois du Biez.

In consolidating the line we were greatly assisted by a lucky find of a large quantity of sandbags, hurdles and entrenching tools in a house which had evidently been used by the Germans as a dépôt.

On the whole, there was little hostile fire during the progress of the work, beyond a few shells and an occasional burst of machine-gun fire, Jemadar Ghantu Sing being killed at this time. In this first phase, the 2/39th Garhwalis lost 1 Garhwali officer and

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26 other ranks killed, 2 Garhwali officers and 71 others wounded, and 31 missing.

The battalion carried out its task with the greatest dash and bravery. The comparatively small casualty list was greatly due to the foresight of Lt-Colonel Drake-Brockman, who made use of slight cover in front of his parapet to get his men out during the preliminary bombardment, thus obtaining to the full the advantage of surprise.

The 2/3rd Gurkhas, under Lt-Colonel V. A. Ormsby, on the signal being given, crossed to the first German trench with very slight losses, as the enemy appeared to be utterly overcome by the violence and accuracy of our bombardment.

A company of the 3rd Londons and one of the 2/39th Garhwalis took up the work of consolidating the position, the Gurkhas sweeping on over the second trench with little opposition and crossing the road with the second line close up in support. Here they were met by rifle and machine-gun fire from parties of the enemy still occupying houses in the south end of the village near the Brewery, which caused considerable trouble to the Leicesters, who were making a frontal attack.

Seeing that there was great danger of the enemy rallying at this point, Major Tillard, D.S.O., at once determined to take the responsibility of exceeding his orders, and pushed straight on for the Brewery, driving the Germans, after a sharp struggle, out of the houses and capturing a large number. Major Tillard's determined action undoubtedly had a great effect at a critical moment, and gained for him a mention in despatches.

Havildar Bahadur Thapa distinguished himself

at this juncture by heading a bombing party, which entered a house held by the enemy and stormed a barricade, killing 16 Germans and capturing 2 machine guns. For his conspicuous bravery the havildar was awarded the 2nd Class, Indian Order of Merit.

A dramatic incident occurred at this time. Rifleman Gane Gurung, observing that heavy fire was being kept up from a particular house, most gallantly entered it by himself, cowed into surrendering and brought out single-handed eight Germans at the point of his bayonet. At this moment the 2nd Rifle Brigade came on the scene, and on seeing the little Gurkha shepherding eight burly Germans out of the house, gave him three hearty cheers. This rifleman had previously shown great bravery, and for his daring on this occasion was awarded the 2nd Class of the Indian Order of Merit. In the course of a speech eulogizing the services of the battalion, Sir James Willcocks subsequently remarked that there was probably no other instance in English history of an individual Indian soldier being cheered for his bravery by a British battalion in the midst of a battle.

The question as to which battalion, British or Indian, was the first to enter Neuve Chapelle on this occasion has been much argued. The honour would appear to belong to the 2/3rd Gurkhas, who attacked half an hour before the 8th Division; moreover, it was only after the Gurkhas had reached the Brewery and were fighting among the houses that the Rifle Brigade came up and witnessed the incident just described. During their advance, the Gurkhas captured a large number of Germans, but the total

cannot be stated, as the prisoners were handed over to other regiments to send back.

Lt-Colonel Ormsby, who had throughout the campaign, and especially in this battle, shown great qualities of leadership, was appointed a Companion of the Bath.

Subadar-Major Gambhir Sing Gurung displayed great gallantry during the assault, and did excellent work throughout the battle. For his services he received the 2nd Class of the Indian Order of Merit, and later, that of the Order of British India.

Captain H. H. Grigg, though wounded early in the action, continued to command his double company, and gave an inspiring example to his men, for which he was mentioned in despatches.

Subadar Bhim Sing Thapa performed repeated acts of pluck, especially distinguishing himself by his coolness in leading his men, thus gaining the 2nd Class, Indian Order of Merit.

Lance-Naik Harak Sing Gharti, a signaller, showed great devotion in continuously carrying messages under heavy fire. He subsequently commanded his section when his senior was shot, and here again showed conspicuous gallantry. He was awarded the 2nd Class, Indian Order of Merit.

Jemadar Puran Sing Thapa received the Indian Distinguished Service Medal for having, after being wounded at the start, continued to command his section till the following evening, when, after getting his wounds dressed, he returned to the firing line, and was again wounded.

Rifleman Kharakbir Pun, who behaved with great bravery on several occasions, was wounded at the commencement of the battle, remained throughout

the day's fighting, and was finally ordered to hospital in a state of collapse. He received the Russian Medal of St. George, 3rd Class.

During the attack a very gallant act was performed by Naik Khan Zaman, of the 32nd Lahore Divisional Signal Company. The cable line from the front to Divisional Head Quarters was continually being cut. Naik Khan Zaman went back along the line, repairing it in many places. He was out for $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours under very heavy shell fire, and had twice to cross a zone of 400 yards which was swept by rifle fire as well. By a miracle he escaped unwounded, and was awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal.

So far all had gone well with the attack, but the 1/39th Garhwalis under Colonel Swiney, whose advance we shall now follow, were fated to meet with misfortune, against which they fought heroically, eventually winning through, but with terrible losses, especially in British officers.

On our bombardment lifting, Nos. 2 and 4 Companies, the former under Captains Clarke and Owen, the latter under Captain Kenny and Lieutenant Welchman, went over the parapet. Captain Clarke, who was on the left, was ordered to keep touch with the Leicesters, but from the start No. 2 Company bore too much to the right, thus forcing No. 4 Company out of its direction. Pushing on, with the bravery which has always marked the work of this battalion, they got up close to the German trench in the face of a murderous machine-gun and rifle fire. But here a check was caused, as it was found that the German wire had hardly been touched by our guns, and the trench was practically intact.

This was, of course, only to be expected, as, owing to the wrong direction taken, the assault was being delivered on a section of trench outside the radius of the bombardment.

The casualties during this pause were very heavy, both amongst the British officers and the rank-and-file. Seeing what had occurred, Colonel Swiney ordered Captains Murray and Sparrow to reinforce the leading companies, and the whole line together carried the enemy's trench after a sanguinary struggle, in spite of the terrific fire and the losses already sustained; but Captain Kenny and Lieutenant Welchman were the only British officers to reach the trench alive, and were then themselves killed almost immediately.

Captains Clarke, Murray, Sparrow, and Owen were killed during the check and subsequent rush. Captain Kenny, before being killed in the enemy's trench, had already been twice wounded, but held on with superb courage.

During the advance of the second line, Lieutenant G. A. Cammell, R.F.A., who was observing in the Garhwalis' trench for his battery, saw that the British officers had been shot down, and that the line was inclined to hesitate. As his telephone wire had been cut, and his occupation was gone, Lieutenant Cammell rushed out of the trench, and putting himself at the head of the 2nd line, led them on, four men keeping abreast of him. He had hardly gone twenty yards under the appalling fire, when he and three of the four men by his side were wounded.

Seeing the officer fall, Lance-Corporal V. Thompson, of the 2nd Black Watch, at once ran out and brought Lieutenant Cammell in, being himself

wounded in doing so. For his bravery Lieutenant Cammell received the D.S.O., and Lance-Corporal Thompson the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

The net result of this attack was that some 200 yards of trench were carried, but a gap of about the same extent existed between the left of the Garhwalis and the right of the Leicesters. This space was packed with Germans, practically untouched by our bombardment, and still full of fight. The survivors of the assaulting party of the Garhwalis were thus completely isolated, and, what was worse, were without a single British officer. Repeated attempts were made by small parties to reach them, but the result was invariably the same. All who tried to cross were killed or put out of action.

It speaks volumes for the courage and training of the men that under the command of their Garhwali officers, headed by Subadar Kedar Sing Rawat, who received the Indian Distinguished Service Medal for his gallantry, they held on with the greatest determination throughout the day, in spite of frequent attacks by the enemy, and the fact that they had run short of bombs and ammunition.

At about 9.30 a.m. Colonel Swiney telephoned for reinforcements, and at about 10 a.m. he was severely wounded in the thigh by a shell fragment, but, plucky as ever, he had a field dressing put on, and held out till after midnight, when he was so reduced by pain and loss of blood that he had to be removed to hospital. At about the same time as Colonel Swiney was wounded, Lieutenant Lemon, who was with him in Port Arthur, was hit in the throat. Shortly after this, two companies of the 1/3rd Londons were sent to Colonel Swiney's aid.

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To bring the attack into line, it is now necessary to follow the 2nd Leicesters. At the appointed time B Company under Captain Morgan, M.C., and C Company under Captain Weir, went over the parapet, and advancing at a steady double, jumped the enemy's trench, or so much of it as remained, forced their way through the many obstacles and debris, and gained their first objective in about twenty minutes. Captain Morgan was wounded by shrapnel in no less than six places just as the assault was launched. In spite of the terrible injuries, from which he has even now not recovered, he attempted to lead his company to the attack, but collapsed before he had gone many yards.

The second line, consisting of A Company under Lieutenant Buxton, followed at a distance of about thirty yards, succeeded by Captain Romilly with D Company as reserve, and dealt with small parties of the enemy in outlying trenches and houses which had not been touched by the first line. The whole front of the battalion was thus cleared, and the men began to dig themselves in. It was then found, as previously related, that a gap, full of the enemy, existed between the Leicester right and the left of the 1/39th Garhwalis.

The problem of dealing with the situation was a difficult one, as the wire in front of the Germans was practically undamaged, and a frontal attack, whether successful or not, was certain to entail very heavy losses.

Captain Romilly of the Leicesters at once led a platoon of the reserve company at the enemy, and with great skill and courage bombed them back about 100 yards along their trench, shooting five

of them with his revolver. For this conspicuous bravery Captain Romilly was awarded the D.S.O. He then sent back for Sappers, who arrived under Captain Hobart, R.E., and found a lively hand-grenade fight going on between the Leicesters and the Germans.

The Sappers went up to the furthest point occupied by the Leicesters, and thence Sapper Shaikh Abdul Rahman and two others went back and brought up more bombs, under fire, with which Captain Hobart, Colour-Havildar Chagatta and some Sappers, with the Leicesters, advanced another 20 yards along the trench, and there succeeded in building a sandbag barricade to a height of $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet, when their work was interrupted by our own mortar bombs falling on a house occupied by the enemy a short distance away.

Captain Hobart was then ordered to retire, which he did without a single casualty. For the great gallantry displayed during this work, Captain Hobart received the Military Cross, while Colour-Havildar Chagatta, who already possessed the Indian Order of Merit and the Indian Distinguished Service Medal, was later awarded the Russian Cross of the Order of St. George, 4th Class.

Sapper Shaikh Abdul Rahman received the 2nd Class, Indian Order of Merit.

Captain Weir, 2nd Leicesters, received the Military Cross for the gallantry displayed by him during the battle.

During this attack, and again on the 12th March, Private William Buckingham, 2nd Leicesters, on several occasions displayed the greatest bravery and devotion in rescuing and aiding wounded men.

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Time after time he went out under the heaviest fire and brought in those who would otherwise almost certainly have perished. In the performance of this noble work, Private Buckingham was severely wounded in the chest and arm. For his conspicuous valour he was awarded the Victoria Cross. This very valiant soldier was killed during the fighting on the Somme in September, 1916.

The story of the 2nd Leicesters throughout the campaign is full of instances of bravery and self-devotion, of which it is unfortunately impossible, within the scope of this history, to mention more than a few. Amongst others of the battalion who received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for services in this battle was Private G. Hill, who, during the attack of the 10th March, showed a supreme contempt for danger by continually carrying messages across the open under very heavy fire, the enemy being only 100 yards away. Later in the day he was wounded by a bomb while engaged in clearing the Germans out of a trench.

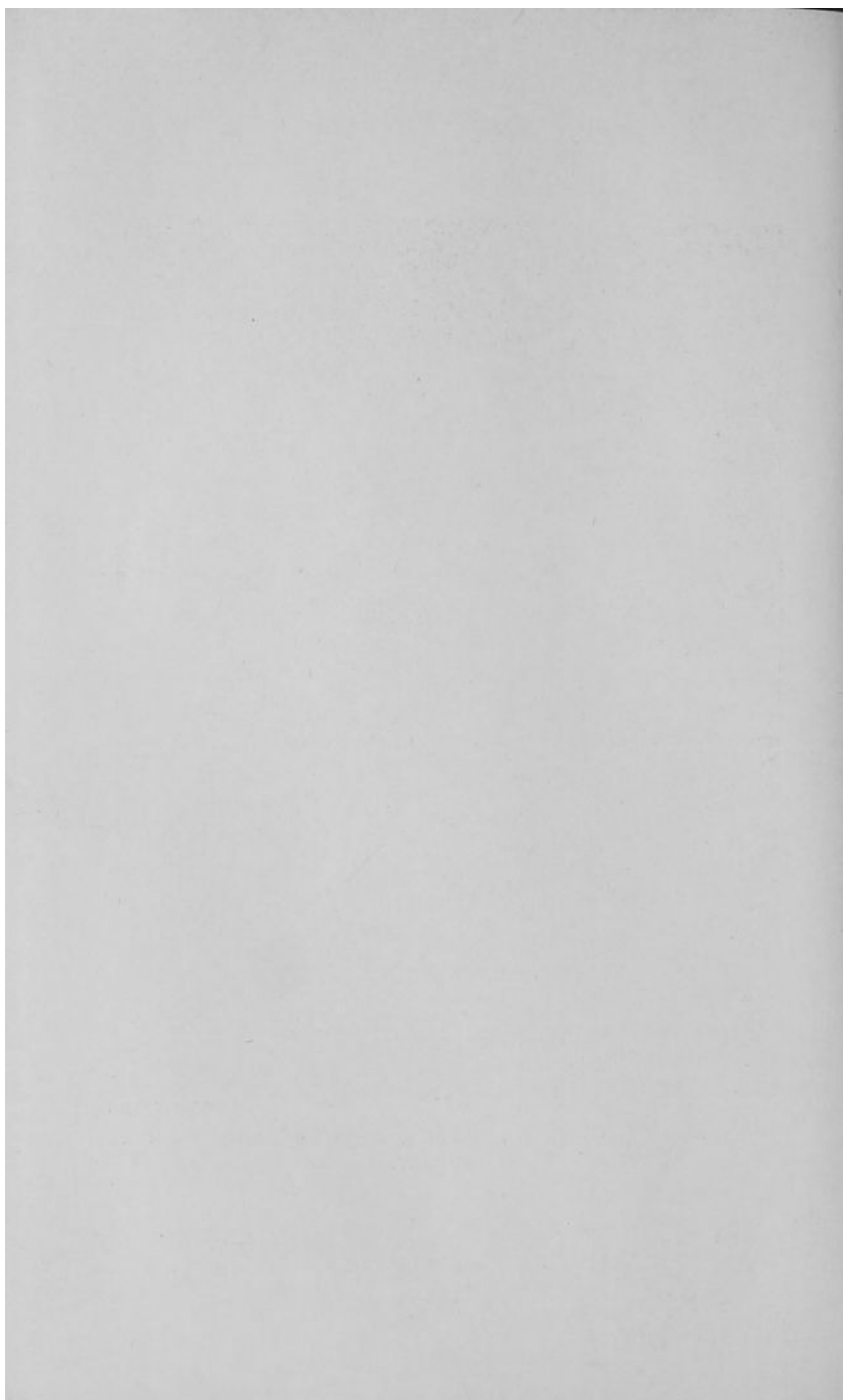
Corporal R. Keitley was granted the same decoration for displaying great courage and the utmost devotion to duty in removing the wounded from the firing line to the aid post during three whole days, without rest and with hardly any food. Throughout he was under very heavy fire. In this work he was assisted by Private C. Oakes, who also received the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Sergeant H. E. Ruckledge dressed the wounds of several men after being himself wounded in the leg. He then collected sandbags and took them to the firing line, being wounded in the wrist in the act. Next, he went to the aid of a seriously wounded



[Central Press.]

PRIVATE WILLIAM BUCKINGHAM, V.C., 2ND BN LEICESTERSHIRE
REGIMENT.



officer. All these gallant actions were performed under heavy fire. Private J. Steeples voluntarily went out into the open with another man under severe close-range fire and carried a wounded officer under cover. In both cases the Distinguished Conduct Medal was awarded.

These are a few instances of the spirit which inspired this splendid battalion to the deeds which it performed.

To resume the story. After the barricade had been built, it was held by two platoons of the Leicesters until, at about 5 p.m., the preparations to deal with the situation were complete. It was arranged that two companies of the 1st Seaforths should assault the trench from the left in co-operation with a frontal attack. Accordingly, the Seaforths took up their position among some ruined houses on the left flank, while two companies of the 1/3rd Londons (Territorials) with a party of the 1/39th Garhwalis were to make a frontal attack, issuing from the same point in the trenches from which Captain Clarke had led the assault in the morning.

As soon as Colonel Swiney saw that the Seaforths had advanced, and that their bombing party was making progress, he launched the attack of the 3rd Londons and Garhwalis. C Company of the Seaforths under Captain Baillie-Hamilton and D Company under Captain Wicks had to move under rifle and machine-gun fire over difficult and intersected ground, and were for a time held up by our heavy artillery, which began to shell the neighbourhood.

The enemy then brought up a trench mortar, which caused several casualties, Captain Wicks

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being wounded amongst others. This officer had shown marked courage and ability on many occasions in face of the enemy, and on this day he again led his company with equal dash and judgment, in recognition of which he was awarded the D.S.O.

A Company under Lieutenant the Hon. D. Bruce and B Company under Captain Murray, were then ordered to co-operate in the attack, as it was getting late (4 p.m.), and the advance of the Dehra Dun Brigade on the Bois du Biez was being retarded by this unfortunate situation. B Company at once set to work to bomb the Germans along the trench from the left, and at this point Captain R. Murray was wounded, dying the next day. A number of men distinguished themselves during the attack.

Corporal A. Hunter outdistanced the remainder of his company, and got in ahead of them in the charge.

Lance-Corporal J. Muir showed great bravery in leading the bombing party and driving the enemy out of traverse after traverse.

Sergeant J. Porter performed a valuable service by taking a portion of his platoon under fire to a position well in rear of the German trench, whence he brought a very effective fire to bear on the enemy.

The services of these non-commissioned officers and men were recognized by the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

While the trench was being cleared of the enemy, 2nd Lieutenant Kirkaldy was killed.

The Seaforths pushed on still further, but by this time the enemy was thoroughly cowed, and about 120 Germans surrendered. The casualties of the Seaforths during this brief but sharp action amounted

to 2 officers and 17 men killed, 7 officers and 49 men wounded.

The Londons, on receiving the order to assault, swarmed over the parapet of Port Arthur, and rushed across the open ground under very heavy fire. Losing heavily as they went, and splendidly led by their officers, they never hesitated for a moment, and got into the trench side by side with the party of the 1/39th Garhwalis.

The Distinguished Conduct Medal was awarded to the following for marked bravery during the charge:—Lance-Corporal Brewster, Company Sergeant-Major Murray, and Sergeant Newman.

On getting into the trench, the Germans put up a half-hearted fight, which ended in a number being killed and about 20 surrendering.

The assaulting companies were commanded by Captains Moore and Livingstone. Captain Moore was awarded the Military Cross for his conspicuous ability and gallantry in handling the two companies during this attack and the remaining days of the battle. This fine battalion, whose first real baptism of fire it was, showed on this occasion what good work might be expected from our Territorial troops. Their casualties in the battle amounted to 8 officers and 160 other ranks.

During this period Colonel Swiney had continued to direct operations from Port Arthur, in spite of the suffering and weakness caused by his severe lacerated wound, but towards 10 p.m. Major MacTier of the 2/39th was sent up to relieve him, and at about midnight Colonel Swiney was carried to hospital. He testified to the great gallantry and devotion to duty shown by Captain J. Taylor,

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I.M.S., the medical officer of the 1/39th, who continued without ceasing to attend to the wounded throughout the day and most of the night, although himself wounded, and under shell fire for the greater part of the time. Captain Taylor was awarded the D.S.O. for his services during this trying period.

Colonel Swiney survived his wound and eventually returned to France, but lost his life on his way to India, when the P. & O. s.s. *Persia* was torpedoed in the Mediterranean on the 30th December, 1915. By his death the 1/39th were deprived of a most gallant and much beloved Commanding Officer.

The 1/39th were now fully installed in the section of trench which it had been intended that they should take in the morning, but their casualties had been very serious, and by the night of the 12th March they had lost 7 British officers killed, Major MacTier, Captains Sparrow, Clarke, Kenny, Owen, Murray, and Lieutenant Welchman, as well as 3 Garhwali officers and 98 rank-and-file; while 5 British officers, Colonel Swiney, Captain Mainwaring, Lieutenants Mankelow and Lemon, and Captain Taylor, I.M.S., with 2 Garhwali officers and 190 men, were wounded. In addition to this, 22 men were missing, of whom the majority were probably killed.

The position on the night of the 10th March, from left to right, was as follows, the line being divided into three sections:—

Section 1: 2/3rd Gurkhas, under Lt-Colonel V. Ormsby.

Section 2: 2nd Leicesters, under Lt-Colonel Gordon.

Section 3: 1st Seaforths, 1/3rd Londons, and

1/39th Garhwalis, all under Lt-Colonel Ritchie of the Seaforths.

On the left of the 2/3rd Gurkhas touch was established with the 2nd Rifle Brigade, 25th Brigade, 8th Division.

During the whole of the 11th and night of the 11th-12th March the process of consolidating the position was continued, and was not to any great extent interfered with by the fire of the enemy.