

On 2nd Dec the 14th DLI were placed under the orders of 16th Infantry Brigade and proceeded at 6pm to relieve the 1st Inniskilling Fusiliers (86th division) in the advance sector east of Marcoing in L 23 c & d sheet 57c

The relief was complete by 12.20am

An appendix to the War Diary details operations on the 3rd:

On the early morning of the 3rd we took over the trenches from the INNISKILLING FUSILIERS - 3 companies in the Front line and 1 company in support. The two left companies were fairly well dug in but the right company's trench was only 2 or 3 feet deep in places and ran straight out towards the enemy. A new trench was commenced that night but owing to the hard chalk not much progress was made. There was no wire in front of the sector at all.

10 to 10.30am: The enemy opened a very heavy barrage on all trenches of the sector and south of the canal, and attacked our right company and the 29th division south of the canal. Artillery support was asked for by telephone and obtained but immediately afterwards the telephone was disconnected and all communication with brigade cut.

Our right company was driven out of its trenches but Capt A M Lascelles with the remainder of his company (about 12 men) immediately counter-attacked and drove the enemy (about 60 strong) back causing them severe casualties.

11.30am: A very heavy barrage was opened out on all trenches causing severe casualties. the enemy again attacked and was driven back by the left companies but drove the right company right out capturing Capt Lascelles and establishing machine guns in the house by the lock in L 24 b. SOS rifle grenades were fired from front line companies and from headquarters but no artillery support was forthcoming.

The reserve company then counter-attacked and drove the enemy out again causing very severe casualties but suffering heavily themselves from machine guns in the lock house.

12.15am: About 12.15 the enemy again attacked in large forces the R.S... on our left and the whole of our front. The right company was again driven out but the two left companies were able to hold on causing very severe casualties to the enemy. The SOS rifle grenade was again fired but with no result.

The right flank of the battalion was then in the air and a block was made but there were no bombs to defend it with.

12.45pm: About 12.45 the enemy attacked heavily all along the line and drove out the KSLI on our left and our left company. The remainder of the battalion who had suffered very severely from the continual bombardments and counter-attacks were

practically surrounded.

The enemy could be seen to debouch from Masnieres in artillery formation to follow up the success. The remainder of the left companies succeeded in fighting their way back to the strip of reserve trench where the remainder of the battalion reorganised.

I got touch with the officer commanding the KSLI who informed me that his left was driven in and that the enemy had broken through his line also and we decided that the position was untenable as there were no signs of support and that the only thing to do was to evacuate the remainder of the battalion over the railway bridge while there was yet time. This we did in good order without being observed by the enemy.

I reorganised my men (about 80 to 100) on the sunken road (L 22 d 15 15 to L 28 a 85 00) and advanced to support the 29th division and cover the south side of Marcoing forming a line along the ridge just SW of Marcoing copse. I found the 88th Brigade headquarters and reported to GOC.

Meanwhile the 88th brigade had done a successful counter-attack south of the canal which had the effect of preventing the enemy from moving down the north bank. The enemy were reported by the 88th brigade not to be holding the north bank.

3.45pm: At 3.45pm 1 company of Bedfords arrived to support.

4pm: At 4pm under orders from GOC 88th brigade we recrossed barge bridge, retook reserve line, meeting with opposition from enemy outposts on the railway at L 23 d 20.40 and further up the trench. These were captured, 4 prisoners being sent back and the remainder killed.

I then pushed round to cover the railway bridge and, reinforced by another company of the Bedfords, established a line from L 23 d 40.40 to L 23 d 80.85 and L 23 b.00.30 covering both bridges.

The enemy were holding the line of our old trenches strongly and bombing into us at L 23 d 80.85 which was difficult to deal with as we had no bombs.

At 10.15pm I received orders to withdraw the whole line and man the west side of the canal getting in touch with Y&L on the right and Bedfords on the left and to order the RE to blow up the bridges.

The withdrawal was successfully carried out without casualties. Touch with Y&L and with Bedfords was obtained W of canal and the bridges blown at 1am.

There was some trouble about the barge bridge as the barge had become stuck in the mud owing to the water of the canal going down.

1.10am: At 1.10am I received orders to withdraw to L 20 which I did leaving the RE officer to arrange for the destruction of the barge bridge by shell fire or fire.

The total casualties were 6 officers killed, 1 officer missing believed killed and 7 officers wounded. Other ranks: killed 33, wounded 102, wounded and missing 3, missing believed killed 45, missing 72 ORs.

The number of missing does not represent prisoners. Nearly all these men were killed and buried during the severe fighting and heavy bombardments but owing to the continuance of the fighting it was not possible to identify them.

Officers and men fought splendidly throughout the day. Had it not been for the manner in which they stood the bombardment with little cover and the readiness with which they responded to all calls for counter-attack, the whole force north of the canal must have been captured as the enemy forces used against us were very heavy, and had he once penetrated to the bridge nothing more could have been done to prevent the capture of the whole line.

The great difficulty throughout the day had been lack of any communication with the rear and therefore lack of artillery support. The SOS rifle grenades proved quite useless.

J B Rosher - Lieut Colonel commanding 14th Durham L I