

IV Corps

5th K.O.Y.L.I (King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry)

Notes on Operations 21st March - 5th April 1918

From sometime about 21st March to night of 25th/26th March, the 187th Infantry Brigade was attached to a division on Telegraph Hill, Arras, as a counter-attack brigade.

I was in command of 187th Inf. Bde. Details, and on night 25th/26th March we received orders to proceed to Bucquoy and there report to 62nd Division headquarters.

After reporting in Bucquoy we were located in old German dugouts at Gommecourt; all available personnel were ordered up from transport lines and Quatermasters' stores, and were organised into parties as necessity arose and sent out to bomb back parties of the enemy who were filtering behind our lines through the gap in the low ground south of Gommecourt.

27th March 1918. I received information that Lieut-Colonel O.C.S. Watson (afterwards awarded a posthumous V.C.) had been killed and that I was to report to 18th Brigade Headquarters near Gommecourt for orders before taking over command of the Battalion. After running the gauntlet through enemy rifle and shell fire, and having received my orders from the Brigade Commander, I proceeded to Rettemoy Farm, arriving there about 3pm and found the enemy occupying ground which we thought was occupied by the three companies of the battn., which proved to have been surrounded and captured.

I collected what men I could find that night and about 7pm I was given orders to attack and clear the enemy away from Crucifix, situated in the low ground South of Gommecourt, and which was a strong post of the enemy and had resisted attacks several times before. I could not find enough men for the attack, and this being realized, my orders were cancelled.

28th March 1918 During the night I collected as many men as I could find and just before dawn, with a party of about thirty eight (all we could then find of the Battn), consisting mostly of runners, servants, signallers and stragglers we proceeded to occupy the old German trench line West of Rossignol Wood, endeavouring to get in touch with the 2/4th K.O.Y.L.I. on the left and to try and get touch with the 4/Australian Brigade on our right, our object was to close up the gap which there was across the valley running south-east from Gommecourt, and along which numerous parties of the enemy had established themselves in posts. These parties were giving us much trouble by firing into our posts from the rear.

The enemy were firmly established at the Crucifix in this valley with advanced posts out between Gommecourt and Hebuterne, and although several attempts were made to take it the Crucifix remained in enemy hands for some days, and I think it was the Australians who finally took it.

As an illustration of how opposing troops were mixed up in the vicinity during this period, I would state that whilst I occupied a small frontage with the remains of the Battn I could, after facing the enemy, turn directly round and fire into the rear of an enemy post some short distance behind.

My men were able to harass the enemy with rifle and Lewis gun fire, and inflicted many casualties, especially in the posts during relief of sentries.

It was whilst in this line of old trenches that we saw artillery unlimber somewhere near Hebuterne and it was only when we saw the direction in which their guns were pointed that we knew that they were British.

On our right front we could observe a German battery which fired into Hebuterne, and we also saw at daybreak one morning the remains of an enemy camp or bivouac within a comparatively short distance of their line.

Whilst we were in this line our Regimental Sergeant-Major joined us one night, having been with the companies when they were captured, but had hidden himself during the days until the opportunity occurred to find his way back through the German lines under cover of darkness.

On, to the best of my recollection, the 29th march I received a reinforcement from the Labour Corps. This reinforcement started out with 5 officers and 130 other ranks and, owing to casualties, reached me with a strength of 2 officers and 80 men.

I utilised these men to extend our line to the south and so endeavour to get touch with the Australian troops somewhere on our right. Having a few German machine guns, I had these mounted in the line occupied by the Labour Corps and manned by our own men, the personnel of the Labour Corps being instructed of their use and the handling of the same.

During the same day I also received a party of Motor Machine Gunners which were also disposed in an endeavour to fill up the gap through which the enemy had broken, and, through which they had filtered troops since we arrived in this particular sector.

Greet credit was due to our transport section in being able to get supplies to us, having regard to our isolated and exposed position, and to the fact that there being no troops on our immediate right except isolated posts of the enemy.

(signed) T. Shearman, Major

5th Battn, K.O.Y.L.I.

Doncaster

27th May 1931

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(Transcription made by William Bridge, williambridge@stanwardine.com, August 2016)