

PASSCHENDAELE

AS IT CONCERNS THE LINCOLNSHIRE REGIMENT

The Third Battle of Ypres commenced on 31st July 1917 and continued for nearly four months under the most appalling weather conditions. The Germans put up a stout defence and used up seventy-eight divisions, of which eighteen were used a second and third time.

Britain's New Armies captured some 24,000 prisoners, 74 artillery guns, 940 machine guns and 138 trench mortars. Haig's Despatch of 25th December 1917 states that '...our new and hastily trained armies beat the enemy's best troops in conditions much in his favour.'

The opening attack took place on a seven and a half mile front from the Zillebeke-Zandvoorde road to Boesinghe with the French attacking to the north, on Gough's Fifth Army left flank, and Plumer's Second Army covering the right flank of the assault so as to dissipate the enemy's artillery fire.

Eight battalions of the Lincolnshire Regiment took part in at least one action between August and November and suffered over 2,000 casualties as a result.

The first battalion into action was the 2nd Battalion on the opening day known as the Battle of Pilckem Ridge – 31st July – 2nd August.

2/Lincolns were in 25th Brigade of 8th Division and were initially in support to 23rd and 24th Brigade. The second objective of the 8th Division was to be taken by the 25th Brigade with 2/Lincolns on the left, 1/RIR in the centre, 2/Rifle Brigade on the left and 2/Berks in support.

As the brigade advanced on the Westhoek Ridge, which was believed to be in British hands, the men came under fire from Glencorse Wood, Kit and Kat and fortified houses on the Westhoek Road.

2/Lincolns, commanded by Lt. Col. Reginald Bastard, formed up at 6.50am and advanced in artillery formation. By 9am they had arrived at their position of deployment but all companies reported casualties whilst passing through Chateau Wood.

By 9.40 am, the Commanding Officer, the Adjutant and two further officers were casualties and command of the battalion fell upon 2nd Lieutenant K Young [Young was awarded a DSO for his energy and resource on this occasion – Ed]

With D Company to the right, A in the centre and C on the left and with B Company mopping up, the Lincolns reached the crest of the ridge where heavy machine-gun fire tore gaps in the ranks as the 30th Division to their right had been held up and the creeping barrage moved too far ahead of the attacking troops thus leaving the enemy machine guns unscathed.

No further advance was possible and the Lincolnshire began consolidating the reverse slope with Lewis gun teams left on the crest.

At 11.50am and again at 1.10pm, German counter attacks were beaten back and when considerable German reserves were spotted moving up, the 2/Lincs poured Lewis gun and rifle fire into the enemy causing considerable casualties.

After a substantial artillery bombardment, a final counter attack was beaten back later in the afternoon and after further consolidation, 2/Lincs were relieved by 2/Royal Berks at 5am the following day and moved back to Pioneer Camp.

The battalion casualties were 41 dead with 2 further officers dying of their wounds, 6 officers and 177 other ranks were wounded and 27 other ranks were posted as missing.

Also in action on 31st July was the 8th Battalion of 63rd Brigade, 37th division. At 3.50am on 31st July, the attack began. D Company of the 8/Lincolns formed a defensive flank from June to July Farms on the Wambeke as 4/Middx. advanced and captured Bab Farm. It was at this time that the leading platoon of 8/Lincolns was drawn into the fighting with some stiff close quarter fighting which inflicted many casualties on the enemy. Runners were sent to ask for assistance but they were all shot in the attempt and eventually the gallant party of Lincolns and Middx. '.....fought it out where they were until all were either killed or wounded.'

At 7.50am, the main operation began. B Company of 8/Lincolns supported by C Company attacked with a line from July Farm to the Wambeke river as their objective. The line was reached and the attackers linked up with the Somersets to their right but no trace could be found of the Middx. and D Company [See above – Ed]. A Company with a company of the Middx. attacked May Farm and held it until 8pm when 11/East Lancs attacked on the flank of the Middx. and reinforced the line. Several counter attacks were beaten off over the next 24 hours and on the night of 1st August, the battalion was relieved and returned to billets at Kemmel Hill.

The 8/Lincolns suffered 3 Officers killed, 2 wounded and 2 missing of the Other Ranks, all 85 reported as missing were men of D Company who fought it out to the last man.

For the next two-weeks, the rain fell in torrents and Haig's post battle despatch states; 'The low lying, clayey soil, torn by shells and sodden with rain, turned into a succession of vast muddy pools. The valleys of the choked and overflowing streams were speedily transformed into long stretches of bog, impassable except by a few well defined tracks which became marks for the enemy's artillery. To leave these tracks was to risk death by drowning.....'

It was into these horrendous conditions that the 2nd Battalion was again asked to attack in what is known as the Battle of Langemarck 16th-18th August.

On 14th August 2/Lincolns moved up to the Westhoek Ridge to relieve 11/Cheshires just as the enemy put down a very heavy barrage, both A and D companies had many casualties.

At 4.45am on 16th August the attack began with 2/Lincolns in Brigade Reserve. At zero hour, B and D Companies moved forward to support 2/Royal Berks halting about 150 yards west of the Hanebeek, where they dug in.

Good progress had been made to the left of the Lincolns but on the right the defence was more obstinate. At 6.30am, an order was received to support the next attack and D Company with 2 platoons of B, crossed the Hanebeek to reinforce the assault. Before long, the two attacking brigades were held up and a decision to withdraw was made to some 200 yards west of the Hanebeek, this was followed by a further 200 yard withdrawal at 10.30am.

During the early afternoon, the enemy was observed massing for a counter attack. A and C Companies of the Lincolnshire were moved forward to the eastern slopes of the Westhoek Ridge, from which position they could fire into the advancing enemy. There they remained until 11pm, when they were relieved by 2/Northants.

On the night of 13th August, the strength of 2/Lincolns was about 400 men of whom, 11 Officers and 300 Other Ranks went into action on the 16th. The total battalion casualties were 31 Other Ranks killed, 137, including 3 Officers, wounded and 36 Other Ranks missing.

Having returned from Gallipoli and Egypt in July 1916, a year later, the 6th Battalion now found itself in action in Flanders. 6/Lincolns in 33rd Brigade of 11th (Northern) Division were in Divisional Reserve when the battle opened on 16th August. Tasked with providing carrying parties for the attacking troops, the battalion lost 10 men dead and 12 wounded on the opening day.

The following day, the attack by 34th Brigade having failed, the 33rd Brigade took over the line, with 6/Lincolns moving into Lancashire Farm where they remained until the night of 19th/20th August. Further attacks against the enemy were made on the 19th, 22nd and 27th, in these attacks, the 11th Division was engaged.

6/Lincolns relieved 7/S. Staffs. in the front line after the capture of a strong point called the Cockcroft. On the 21st, orders stated that the following day 6/Lincolns would take part in the advance by 11th and other Divisions in order to gain a good jumping off point for the pending attack on the Pheasant Line.

6/Lincolns with a two company front, D on the right and B on the left would attack at 4.45am with 6/Borders on their left towards Bulow Farm. The enemy's defences consisted of numerous strongly held concrete pill boxes.

B and D Companies attacked in small parties and by 6.40am, B Company was digging in on its objective, but D Company had been held up when all 3 officers and 3 sergeants became casualties as soon as the advance began.

Captain Sutherland of B Company went to see what was holding up D Company and on finding them leaderless, he immediately took command and calling up a platoon and a Lewis Gun team from A Company in support, he formed a defensive flank facing Vieilles Maisons.

Great credit is due to Captain Sutherland for the success of this attack as not only did he command his own company, but his quick thinking saved the day for D Company when the loss of Officers and NCO's made the situation critical.

The battalion casualties were 19 killed, 63 Other Ranks and 2 Officers wounded 2 missing. Throughout the whole period the battalion behaved splendidly in trying conditions.

The next phase of battle is known as the Battle of the Menin Road, 20th -25th September 1917. Here we meet the 1st Battalion in action as part of 62nd Brigade, 21st Division. 1/Lincolns acted throughout this period as a support battalion and did not make a full frontal assault against the enemy.

Nevertheless, they suffered casualties whilst digging cable trenches for 2,000 yards from Clonmel Copse and on the 23rd, another trench from Clapham Junction to Fitzclarence Farm. This work was done under continual shell fire and was well remembered by the survivors as having been a particularly unpleasant time.

At the Battle of Polygon Wood, 26th September-3rd October 1917 [I reported on this battle 3 weeks ago as Wayne Evans informed us of a new walk that has just opened to Dochy Farm – Ed] we come across the so-called Second Line Territorial Battalions the 2nd/4th and 2nd 5th of 59th (2nd North Midland) Division.

On the night of the 25th/26th September, the 2/4 and 2/5 Lincolns formed up on a line from Zevencote to Elms Corner, in rear off the attacking Leicester battalions.

Two hours before Zero (5.50am) the guns opened a heavy bombardment on the enemy positions. At Zero the Leicester's attacked and gained possession of the first objective without much opposition. The 2/4 Lincolns advanced through the 2/4 Leicester's , A Company on the right, C on the left and B in support, whilst D was used for carrying and mopping up purposes. The enemy showed very little fight, some surrendered as soon as the first line approached.

The 2/4 Lincolns advanced until held up by their own barrage, under cover of which deep narrow trenches were dug. Patrols were pushed out and more prisoners taken from a strong point south east of Dochy Farm.

At 5.30pm the enemy put down a heavy barrage which fell on the support line causing many casualties and an attempted counter attack was beaten off. Throughout the night of the 26th/27th enemy shell fire was continuous.

On the left of the 2/4 Lincolns, the 2/5 Lincolns had similarly captured their objective. The battalion attacked with B Company on the right, D on the left, C in support and A in reserve. D Company met with little or no resistance and dug a strong point north of Dochy Farm, sending a platoon to assist B Company in attacking the farm. Attacking from the flanks of the blockhouses, the Germans surrendered, some fifty being captured.

The 2/4 and 2/5 Lincolns consolidated the captured ground and came under fire again on the 27th, with the 2/5 being relieved at 11pm and the 2/4 being relieved by the New Zealanders on the 29th. [This is where the NZ myth of capturing Dochy Farm comes from as I reported 3 weeks ago – Ed]

The 2/4 Lincolns lost 1 Officer and 36 Other ranks killed, 9 Officers and 144 Other ranks wounded and 18 Other ranks missing. The losses of the 2/5 Lincolns was heavier still with 4 Officers and 12 Other Ranks killed, 7 Officers and 202 Other ranks wounded and 74 Other Ranks missing, the vast majority of whom were killed. The 2/5 battalion strength was reduced from 584 to 285 Officers and men.

The 8/Lincolns moved up to Shrewsbury Forest on 27th September where they were under continuous shell fire for four days, and on the evening of 3rd October the fine weather broke once again. Under such adverse conditions arrangements were made for the next battle, the Battle of Broodseinde, 4th October 1917.

The 8/Lincolns were the left attacking battalion of 63rd Brigade, 37th Division and 8/Somerset were on their right. No movement was possible during the day and reconnaissance was extremely difficult due to snipers.

The Lincolns and Somersets formed up under the greatest difficulty and attacked at 6am, but from the time they left their positions, both battalions came under murderous machine gun fire. The only comment in the Battalion War Diary is 'Attack unsuccessful.'

After an advance of about 100 yards, 8/Lincolns came under fire from several machine guns south of the Menin Road and Joist Trench. These guns inflicted heavy casualties on the leading companies and with the whole plateau being swept by machine gun fire the decision was taken to withdraw to the original jumping off point.

On the 5th October they advanced to within 50 yards of the Germans at Jute Cotts and the following day they were relieved and returned to Little Kemmel. The battalion suffered 184 casualties including 5 Officers killed for little gain.

At the Battle of Broodseinde, the 1st Battalion was also in action, but in their case, north of the Menin Road on the eastern edge of the recently captured Polygon Wood.

At 9.30pm on the 3rd October the 1/Lincolns moved up in single file via duckboards from Sanctuary Wood to Clapham Junction, thence to Fitzclarence Farm and finally to a spot near Black Watch Corner. Here they dug in and at 5am on the 4th, one hour before Zero, the Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. L P Evans ordered the battalion to advance as the left battalion for the second objective.

The battalion passed through the 12/13 NF and formed up for the attack, D Company on the left, C Company on the right and B and A Companies covering them off respectively.

At Zero the battalion moved forward with the first casualties occurring immediately from machine gun fire and 'shorts' from the British barrage. On reaching the first enemy strong point, Lt. Col. Evans, noting gaps in the front line, ordered C and D Companies to push through and catch up the barrage. A and B Companies followed by platoons to the first objective which was captured with the help of 3/4 Queens.

Pushing on, after reorganizing in Judge Trench, Lt. Col. Evans together with his men and an officer of the MGC, silenced a concrete pill box and forced the garrison to surrender. For this act, and for his leadership and cool bravery throughout the day, when, twice wounded, he still led his battalion, Lt. Col. Evans was awarded the Victoria Cross.

After a halt of 100 minutes, the attack recommenced and went smoothly to the final objective, although heavy casualties were caused by a machine gun in the vicinity of Judge Copse. At 2am on the 6th of October, 1/Lincolns were relieved by two companies of 6/Leicester's.

The battalion had gone into action with 570 men and 22 Officers, 16 Officers were killed or wounded including Evans, the CO, and 227 men were killed, wounded or missing.

The next phase of battle was the Battle of Poelcapelle, 9th October 1917. The 6th, 7th and 10th Battalions were all in the vicinity engaged in various duties, but none were ordered to make a major assault on the enemy during this phase of battle although all suffered random casualties from shell fire.

On 12th October 1917, the First Battle of Passchendaele commenced. Here the 7th Battalion came into the line for the attack which was to be made between the Ypres-Roulers railway line and the Houthulst Forest. [In was in this attack that Dave and John Burkitt's father was wounded. I had the great honour of walking the line of 7/Lincolns attack with Dave back in 2017 on the 100th anniversary of the attack – Ed].

The 7/Lincolns were to attack astride the Ypres – Staden railway line [It is a linear walk today – ed] with the 10/S. Foresters on their right and 8/S. Staffs on their left, the attack was to be along the southern embankment of the railway as far as the Turenne Crossing.

At Zero hour on the 12th October, 7/Lincolns were assembled on a line from south of the railway to the road junction below Tranquille House – C Company on the right, B Company on the left with A and D companies in support. B and C Companies were to capture the first objective at Taube Farm and A and D Companies the second objective at Turenne Crossing.

At 5.25am the barrage fell, and eight minutes later the attacking companies advanced. At 6.50am, the first objective was reported as taken, though casualties were fairly heavy. At 7am, Major Peddie moved his HQ up to Taube Farm and the second objective was reported as having been captured by 8am.

Although the attack to the second objective had commenced, some 100 Germans were still occupying Taube Farm and as Major Peddie and his HQ staff set up their position, all of them surrendered to Major Peddie, Captain King and two orderlies! They then discovered a further pill box with a heavy machine gun and a trench mortar, and these too were captured along with another 60 prisoners by Major Peddie and his HQ staff.

The 7/Lincolns consolidated their gains, beat off a half-hearted counter attack and were relieved during the night of the 13th/14th October and marched back to Boesinghe before being taken to billets at Roussel Farm.

The attack was a great success but casualties were high, with 2 Officers and 28 Other ranks killed and 7 Officers and 170 Other ranks wounded and 43 men were reported as missing.

After the First Battle of Passchendaele, it became clear that it was not going to be possible to capture all of the Passchendaele Ridge in the winter of 1917. As part of the consolidation and before the Second Battle of Passchendaele, there were two small operations on 27th October in which 10/Lincolns took part.

We last saw 10/Lincolns working in a Pioneer style operation and this continued, the men working on roads at Langemarck until on 22nd October, 10/Lincolns moved up and relieved 15/Royal Scots in the front line at night near Olga House.

B and D Companies pushed forward and formed a line of resistance in shell holes from Gravel Farm to Brombeek. The whole area was in such a shocking condition that it was very difficult to find the way from Battalion HQ to the front line. It was a great relief when on the 24th, the battalion was relieved and moved back to Huddlestone Camp.

At the camp, the Divisional Commander made an address to the units of 101st Brigade and he said; 'Great credit is due to the 10/Lincolns in taking over the line without a hitch on the night of 22nd/23rd October, without guides and under a harassing fire.'

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The Second Battle of Passchendaele, 26th October to 10th November 1917, was primarily a Canadian affair which cost the Canadians some 16,000 casualties as they slogged up the final slopes of the ridge to capture the shattered village of the same name.

During this time, 1/Lincolns had a torrid time. If they were not in the front line east of Polygon Wood, they were providing working parties under shell fire and air attack, but on the 26th October they moved back to the front line, some 1500 yards east of Polygon Wood to occupy trenches knee deep in water. In 5 days of misery, they suffered 9 Other Ranks killed, 32 wounded and 59 evacuated as sick, most suffering from 'Trench Feet'.

They then spent several days in Railway Dug Outs at Zillebeke, before, on the 8th November, moving up to the front line once again, suffering 2 Officers and 5 Other ranks killed, 17 wounded and 2 men missing.

Following the capture of Passchendaele village, or what was left of it, Haig closed down the offensive for the winter. Thus ended the most reviled battle of the Great War. The total casualties were less than on the Somme and the daily casualties were less than at the Battle of Arras earlier in the year, but the conditions in which the men fought were the most shocking and difficult experienced to date.

Was it a success? In terms of a war of attrition, it continued the wearing out of the German Army which suffered between 200,000 and 300,000 casualties and could not replace these losses. The British casualties amounted to some 250,000 dead, wounded and missing and these could be replaced with America's entry into the war.

After the battle, surveying what was effectively a swamp created by so much artillery that the lunarscape battlefield had become a mass of flooded pools formed of joined-up shell holes, Lieutenant General Sir Launcelot Kiggell was horrified.

Kiggell as Chief of the General Staff under the BEF's (British Expeditionary Force's) Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, was now seeing, for the first time, the conditions that the Tommies had been fighting in for the last three months – he said "Good God, did we really send men to fight in that?"

Siegfried Sassoon MC, who fought bravely but became a mouthpiece for the anti-war faction wrote in his poetry;

"Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight,
(Under Lord Derby's Scheme.) I died in hell;
(They called it Passchendaele.) My wound was slight
And I was hobbling back, and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards; so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light."

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM