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The West Yorkshire Regiment

The Third Battle of the Scarpe, 1917, 3rd-4th May

In the Battle of Arleux (28th-29th April) no battalion of the Regiment was engaged, and it was not until the 3rd and 4th May, in the Third Battle of the Scarpe, that the West Yorkshires again exchanged blows with the enemy. In this battle, however, no less than five battalions of the Regiment took part, i.e., 12th, 15th, 17th, 18th and 21st.

The 15th, 16th and 18th West Yorkshires (93rd Brigade, 31st Division) had been but a few days in the Arras area when they were ordered to take part in the operations of 3rd and 4th May.

On 29th April the 93rd Brigade relieved the 188th Brigade (63rd Division) in the front line in the Gavrelle sector. The 15th West Yorkshires had taken over the right sub-sector C.19.c.7.4-C.25.b.8.2; the 16th West Yorkshires the left sub-sector B.18.d.4.5-C.19.c.7.3; the 18th West Yorkshires were in support, one company at Hill 80, two companies in B.30.C.49-H.6.a.4.7 and the remaining company at C.25.c.8.2-C.25.c.3.9¹.

¹ Without maps or any other means of describing these positions, it is impossible to avoid the use of co-ordinates. The diaries generally during the Arras offensive of 1917 are lacking in detailed descriptions of the operations, and the positions of the various battalions of the West Yorkshire Regiment are at times extremely difficult, if not impossible, to locate.

Brigade Orders issued on 2nd May stated that the 31st Division would attack the enemy's trench line – **Gavrelle Support, Windmill Support and Oppy Support trenches** – with the 93rd Brigade on the right and 92nd Brigade on the left. To the former Brigade a frontage of over 2,500 yards from a point south of Oppy (junction of Windmill and Link Trenches) to Gavrelle, had been allotted. The three West Yorkshire battalions were assembled for the attack in the following positions: **15th on the right**, 18th in the centre and 16th on the left; the 18th Durham Light Infantry were in support. There were to be two attacks, the Southern and Northern; the 18th West Yorkshires were to be divided into two half-battalions – the half on the left of the 15th Battalion co-operating with that battalion in the Southern Attack, and the half on the right of the 16th Battalion co-operating with that battalion in the Northern Attack. "Zero" hour was 3-45 a.m. on the 3rd May.

The 15th West Yorkshires (Lieut. Colonel S. C. Taylor) numbered only 547 officers, N.C.O.s and men when the battle opened, the battalion having to attack on a frontage of 250 yards from I.I.a.9.9 [Note: possible transcription error – should be C.25.a.8.3?] to C.25.a.6.6. "D" was right front Company with "A" in support and "B" left front Company with "C" in support. Each company went over in two waves of single line. Battle Headquarters of the battalion were in the Cemetery, south of Gavrelle. About 2 o'clock on the morning of 3rd the enemy appeared nervous and put down a very heavy bombardment on Gavrelle and its environments. For three-quarters of an hour he continued to plaster the village and the neighbourhood with steel of all calibre, but all was quiet just prior to "Zero".

At 3-45 a.m. the British barrage opened and the troops at once went forward to the attack. Up to 5-30 a.m. no information reached Battalion Battle Headquarters of what had happened in the front line, but at that hour wounded men began to dribble in, and from these it was learned that **the first**

objective, an irregular line running through Gavrelle Trench, the Windmill and Windmill Trench, had been captured. The attack had swept on towards the second objective, the line of Gavrelle and Windmill Support Trenches, but had been beaten back, and finally had had to abandon the first objective. Definite news was, however, unavailable, and finally Colonel Taylor closed his Battle Headquarters, sent all his papers back and, with runners, signallers and all Battalion Headquarters' Staff, manned the front-line parapet. Heavy fire was then opened on groups of the enemy's infantry, who could be seen retiring, seemingly from trench to trench, over the top. All stragglers were collected and organised, and **about 7-30 a.m. eighty men were available for the front line.** But touch had been lost with flanking battalions on right and left; the trenches were therefore blocked and bombing parties stationed on each flank.

The Battalion Diary states that: "**At this period it was quite evident what had happened. The battalion had got forward all right, and had driven back the enemy, but having no supports had lost all driving power, and the enemy, realising this, had turned on them and commenced organising to counter-attack.**" The enemy, about 400 strong, could be seen advancing in extended order "but an S.O.S. was sent up and the artillery soon broke up the threatened attack." In answer to the C.O.'s appeal to Brigade Headquarters for assistance, a platoon of K.O.Y.L.I. and two companies of D.L.1. were sent up, and these were used to reinforce the left flank of the 15th West Yorkshires, that flank being out of touch with the right of the 18th Battalion. Touch had, however, been obtained on the right with the K.O.S.B. About 8 p.m. the enemy opened a heavy bombardment, but the night was fairly quiet.

Terrible indeed had been the losses of the 15th Battalion. Only three officers returned and reported to Battalion Headquarters, and of these two had broken arms and the third was slightly wounded. Capt. R. M. S. Blease and Capt. G. S. King, Lieut. D. Robinson, Second-Lieuts. W. H. Jackson, F. W. Scholes, J. S. Thomas, A. S. Parkin, J. L. Jennison, J. W. Lisle and A. T. Peek were killed; Second-Lieuts. R. S. Tate and A. H. Riley were reported missing. The total officer casualties was fifteen. In other ranks the battalion had lost fifteen killed, 122 wounded and 262 missing, though during the night and early morning of 4th May a number of slightly wounded men crawled in from No Man's Land.

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From the reports it would seem that the fate which met the attack of the 15th Battalion was also suffered by the 18th West Yorkshires, for the first objective appears to have been reached, but owing to the very heavy machine-gun and rifle fire the attacking waves were considerably depleted by the time they had reached the second objective. In the darkness touch had been lost and there was confusion, but for this the dust and smoke were responsible. **A number of prisoners were taken, but the lack of driving power robbed the West Yorkshires of the fruits of their gallant effort. Many Germans were about to give themselves up when they realised that there were no waves coming against them and that "the few oddments of men in the trenches were the only ones they had to deal with." This at once altered the situation, and in many instances, instead of surrendering, the Germans fought on, surrounding those to whom they had at one time intended giving themselves up.**

When it became apparent to Lieut. Colonel Carter that the attack had failed, he held a consultation with Lieut. Colonel Croydon (commanding the 16th West Yorkshires), and together with two C.O.s took steps to hold at all costs their original trenches and line.

Promptly at "Zero" the **16th West Yorkshires** (on the left of "A" and "B" Companies, 18th Battalion) went forward, keeping close up to the barrage. The men advanced, well extended, in good order, and in four waves. The first line was made up of a platoon of "D" Company (Capt. Parker) on the right and two of "C" Company (Lieut. Crowther) on the left, the second line being made up of the remaining platoons of both companies. The third wave was formed of "B" Company (Capt. Ashworth) and the fourth of "A" Company (Capt. Illingworth). Heavy machine-gun fire from the

Windmill and Link Maze met the advance and tore gaps in the moving lines of West Yorkshiremen. When the advance began it was quite possible to see the advancing waves, but in less than five minutes after the hostile barrage had fallen, dust and smoke blotted everything out, and those whose duty it was to observe the course of the battle found observation impossible, even though they were posted in shell-holes on the battlefield.

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The O.C. "D" Company, of the 16th Battalion, stated that about 6 a.m. the first objective was reached, little wire still standing in front of the trench to impede the advance. The trench was but lightly held by the enemy and a number of the Germans surrendered. The first wave having been left to "mop up" and consolidate, the remaining waves advanced. But suddenly considerable machine-gun and rifle-fire opened on the immediate left of the battalion, the machine-guns firing apparently from the junction of Windmill and Link Trenches. The advance was continued until the second objective was reached, the enemy in large numbers retiring in disorder as the West Yorkshiremen approached. Many casualties were inflicted on the Germans as they ran off. "D" Company thereupon occupied the trench, but the Company Commander stated that at this period he discovered that the companies on the right and left of him had not come up. The time was now about 4-20 a.m. and it was possible to see some distance. In very indifferent trenches, with a Lewis gun pushed well out, the position was being consolidated when the enemy was seen approaching from a half-right direction in extended order. His strength was about 100. Thinking they were coming up to surrender, the men of "D" Company waved their arms to them to come over, whereupon the Germans opened fire. The fire was returned and, after many Germans had been shot down, the remainder fell back in disorder. Hostile machine-gun and rifle-fire now met "D" Company in flank (on the left) and rear, and it was impossible to continue digging operations. An exceedingly uncomfortable two hours were then spent, until about 7-30 a.m., when the enemy was again observed advancing in waves on the right flank of "D" Company, whose left flank and right rear now came under heavy machine-gun fire. For ten minutes the Lewis guns and rifles blazed away on the advancing Germans, but they were coming on in considerable strength, and it was obvious that the position would have to be evacuated. Many casualties had already been suffered when the withdrawal took place from the left, the men extending as they went back. In spite of a murderous fire from both flanks and their front, the West Yorkshiremen eventually reached their old front-line trenches, which they at once proceeded to man, the Company Commander having reported to his C.O. The O.C. "C" Company became a "missing, believed wounded" casualty, and there is no report of the action of his company.

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"B" Company (Capt. Ashforth) of the 16th West Yorkshires, which formed the third wave of the Northern Attack, was formed up behind "D" and "C" Companies, the right-half of "B" (8th and 7th platoons) to follow "D" and the remaining two platoons (5th and 6th) to follow "C". At 3-45 a.m. as the Divisional barrage opened, the troops moved forward and, although the enemy's barrage came down four minutes later, "B" Company was quite clear of it and suffered no casualties. A sunken road was crossed and then several enemy posts were encountered, which the Battalion Diary states "were disposed of." At this period touch had been lost on the right, i.e., with the left-half battalion 18th West Yorkshires. The right platoons of "B" therefore eased off to the right, but direction was difficult to maintain owing to the intense darkness, and touch was not obtained. At 4 a.m. "B" Company reached the line of the first objective and crossed over, but it was now found that "D" Company (in front) was out of touch on both flanks, and although two more platoons were moved up into the line and the latter eased off to the flanks, touch was still unobtainable. A probable explanation of the failure to obtain touch was now forthcoming, for at this period very heavy machine-gun fire was heard on the left; the advance of the left of the attack had almost certainly been held up.

Several more enemy posts were found and dealt with, and prisoners were sent back. At 4-15 a.m. the line of the second objective was reached, but now dawn was breaking, and in the dim light it was possible to see that neither the right nor left flanks of the attack had advanced in line with the attack of the 18th West Yorkshires, the O.C. "B" Company stating in his report that "neither flanks were up." Consolidation of the line now began, the men working hard to get themselves "dug in" before daylight. "B" Company (Capt. Ashforth) was, however, in constant touch with "D" Company (Capt. Parker) and "A" Company (Capt. Illingworth).

At 5 a.m. the enemy attempted a counter-attack with about fifty men, but was easily repulsed. A little later (at 5-15 a.m.) Capt. Dockett of the 18th West Yorkshires, with four men, came up on the right of "D", "B" and "A" Companies.

About 5-30 a.m. the situation began to change-for the worse. Hostile snipers and machine-guns which had been firing from the front, now opened from the flanks and right rear of the West Yorkshiremen. Gradually it increased in volume until presently it was

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necessary for the men engaged in "digging in" to keep low, a difficult matter, especially as the flanks where the trenches were only as yet very shallow. In the face of difficulty and danger, however, the men stuck to their task, and by 7-30 a.m. the trench in the centre was in a good condition for defence, but still not deep enough on the flanks. After taking a survey of his position, Capt. Ashforth estimated he had now with him about 100 men, but the enemy was advancing, and hostile fire from both flanks was increasing, and men began to fall. Capt. Illingworth (O.C. "A" Company) was here mortally wounded, dying later in the day.

The enemy was, however, held back, but at 7-40 a.m. about 500 Germans in waves were seen working round the right flank, and after a hurried consultation it was decided to evacuate the position, otherwise the companies would be cut off and compelled to surrender, as "the only thing to do to save any men was to withdraw from the left." This movement was successfully carried out, the enemy following, but not advancing beyond his original line. On reaching their own line the survivors of "B" Company manned the fire-bays.