

4th Battalion, Yorkshire Regiment War Diary of the battle south-east of Arras on 23rd April 1917 (part of the Second Battle of the Scarpe).

Source: www.4thyorkshires.com Page 40

23rd APRIL. 4.15 a.m. The two Front line Btns were reported "in position and OK."

4.40 a.m. Two tanks attached to the 50th Division moved slowly forward.

4.45 a.m. 84 Eighteen pounder guns and 30 4.5 in howitzers opened fire at once and the Infantry began to advance.

German rockets signalled to their own Artillery and their barrage descended about 40 seconds afterwards. About 100 yds ahead of their own trenches the two Yorkshire Btns ran into their own barrage which was "creeping" forward at too slow a rate. The 4th Btn suffered several casualties from our own guns.

"W" Company, on the right, met considerable opposition from rifle and machine gun fire and had to take shelter in shell holes about 50 yds from the enemy's trenches. Not until the Company had established superiority of fire and a tank had passed through was it possible to rush the trench which was found to be strongly held. But the Green Howards beat down opposition and many prisoners were taken. Many dead and wounded Germans littered the trench which, however was not in bad condition.

In the centre "X" Company had reached the enemy trench a little earlier and had less opposition, but had some 30 casualties from machine gun and artillery fire.

On the left "Z" Company, which had been facing North East at zero hour swung round, aligned themselves with "X" Company and reached the German front line with few casualties and less opposition than the other Companies.

The Battalion, by now considerably thinned out, but still a continuous line, then moved East to the German Support Trench.

5.25 a.m. The Support Trench was reached and found to be broad and literally filled with dead Germans, except for the occupants of two deep dug-outs on "X" Coy's front. No prisoners were taken here.

By this time our line had become very thin. No East Yorks were observable on the right and the 44th Infantry Brigade appeared not to have progressed on the left. The Battalion, however, moved forward and captured a 3 gun howitzer battery.

[This was the dilemma of trench warfare. Here the 4th Yorks Bn were strong enough and brave enough to punch a hole in the opposing trenches. But the forces at either side had not made the same advance and therefore the Yorks ended up being fired on from three sides. The other problem was re-supply of weighty ammunition. Each man carried 150 rounds of ammo which must have been quickly fired off and therefore many offensives soon stalled.]

6.05 a.m. Began to dig in along a line 100 to 200 yds West of the first objective. Enemy rifle and Artillery fire had practically ceased, but Machine Gun fire was increasing in intensity and a particularly deadly stream of bullets was directed on to our left flank from a farm North of the Cojeul River and East of Guemappe. Captain Hirsch [now the only Officer left] therefore established a defensive flank with half of "Y" Company along a line above and parallel to the River Cojeul. With the remainder of the Battalion [about 150 men] he decided to hold on to his position and sent back for reinforcements and Small Arms Ammunition.

The Battalion had no contact with the East Yorkshires on the right. They had lost all their Officers

earlier in the attack. Neither had the Divisions to either side progressed and the 4th Yorks Btn found themselves surrounded by Germans on three sides.

6.30 a.m. "A" Coy of the 5th Durham Light Infantry were sent up to reinforce and with ammunition, the special object of this Coy was to try to extend our line on the right across the railway and if possible get in touch with the **5th Yorks Btn**. They finally reached our line and established themselves across the railway but found their right flank as much "in the air" as "W" Coy's had previously been.

7.15 a.m. Capt Hirsch [who had previously been wounded was killed and Mr Luckhurst of the T.M Battery appears to have taken over the Btn for a short time. His fate is now uncertain.

7.40 a.m. The Btn appears to have maintained itself near the first objective ["Z" Coy being slightly forward, "W" Coy swung back and forming a defensive flank facing South East.] for a matter of something over an hour and a half. But by 7.30 the Germans were seen massing for a counter-attack. One party were creeping down the low ground along the Cojeul. Others were seen coming forward from the trenches in front of Vis En Artois. A third block of men on our right rear previously mistaken for the East Yorks were now observed to be Germans. A retirement in successive phases was therefore undertaken - first to the German 2nd line, then to his first and finally to our front line. The whole withdrawal was carried out under heavy Machine Gun fire and directed by not more than half a dozen junior N.C.Os, who state that throughout the line was under control and that with sections of riflemen constantly fought rearguard actions to cover the retirement of the rest.

8.10 a.m Our men were back in our Front line. **They state that to their knowledge no unwounded prisoners were taken.** Casualties since 21st were 3 Officers killed, 7 wounded and 1 missing, believed killed.

352 other ranks were killed, wounded or missing; the proportions not immediately ascertained.

6.0 p.m. The remnants of the Btn under Major Stead remained in our front line in support to the attack by the 9th Durham Light Infantry and the 5th Border Regt. Btn HQ moved back to Wancourt.