



.303" Short Magazine Lee Enfield (SMLE) Mk3 rifle with Bayonet. MOD Pattern Room, Nottingham.

## CHAPTER 6: GOMMECOURT PARK AND ROSSIGNOL WOOD

*Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire  
Lines in grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,  
They leave their trenches, going over the top,  
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,  
And hope with furtive eyes and grappling fists  
Flounders in the mud. O Jesus make it stop!*

Siegfried Sassoon

On February 21st, 1917, both battalions left Doullens and marched to Coigneux and hence into the trenches in the Hebuterne sector. The 16th Battalion occupied the L3 sub-sector with the 18th on their left flank in the L4 sub-sector. The 18th Battalion was now under the temporary command of Major C. W. Tilly of the 18th Durham Light Infantry, Lieutenant-Colonel H. F. G. Carter being hospitalised. Four days later Major Tilly became ill and Major A. W. Robinson assumed command.

On the 23rd February, the enemy began to evacuate his front line and fall back on to the Hindenburg line, a system of strong defences which straightened out his salient between Arras and Vailly. The first indication that something unusual was taking place, on the opposite side of No-Man's Land, was when smoke was observed rising from the German trenches at two points. Artillery was informed and a barrage of 18 pounder fire directed at these points for several hours. At 11.00 p.m. on February 24th, Brigade Headquarters wired that the enemy was thought to have left his front line trenches opposite V Corps, and ordered patrols out to investigate, including two patrols from the 18th Battalion.

Company commanders were ordered to Battalion Headquarters and briefed for these operations. Two platoons from 'A' Company, on the left, were to reconnoitre the tongue of the Gommecourt salient; two platoons from 'C' Company, on the right, were to search the south-west corner of the Park, at 'Fir trench'. These were the first objectives. Two platoons each from 'D' and 'B' Companies were to support and proceed to points beyond the third line of German trenches and well inside the Park. These were the second objectives. Patrols were instructed that, if the enemy line was found to be unoccupied, they were to push forward to their objectives with vigour. The 18th Battalion the Durham Light Infantry were ordered to move up in support to enable the exploitation of any gains. Zero hour was fixed at 5.00 a.m. on February 25th (see map 5).

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The patrols moved off at the appointed hour but at 6.40 a.m. 'B' Company were reporting bomb and rifle fire on each flank. Shortly after this the enemy artillery became very active. Ten minutes later, a report was received from Captain J. R. Thornton of 'A' Company, saying that his patrol had reached its first objective but that he was not in touch with 'C' Company. A little later 2nd Lieutenant Hartman, of the 19th Divisional Artillery, reported at Battalion Headquarters that Captain Thornton had gained the tongue of the salient and that Lieutenant Sleigh, leading the other platoon from 'A' Company, was moving through the woods of Gommecourt Park. A party of ten of the enemy had been seen on the left and had been dispersed by Lewis gun fire. 2nd Lieutenant Hartman was instructed to rejoin Captain Thornton and tell him to press on to the second objective. Captain Thornton wrote later:

"I was in charge of No. 2 platoon and moved out from K3d 3.6 at 5.00 a.m. my objective being K2c2.9 to K3b 9.10. On moving into No-Man's Land a Very light was sent up from 'four tree SAP'. I moved north-east and entered a communication trench, at about K3b 9.5.10. Bombers were leading and we came into contact with an enemy post about K4c 9.0. The occupants of this post fled and we advanced to K4c 2.9.

I stayed in this trench for about 45 minutes during which time I sent a patrol up 'Fin' towards 'Field' and another along 'Fish' [these were code names for three German trenches in Gommecourt Park] to about 100 yards past the communication trench at K4c 7.6 without coming into contact with any one. We were bombed from K4 2.2.05 and retaliated with bombs and claimed two hits. Shelling was heavy and as I could not get in touch with anyone I decided to return, leaving the enemy trench at about K4c 6.6, moving south of 'Yiddish'. I approached to a spot about K3d 9.8, from which smoke had been seen to issue for the last two days. This I found to be a burning dug-out, the wood around the entrance being charred."

At 7.20 a.m., a runner arrived at Battalion Headquarters with a message from 2nd Lieutenant Friday, who was in charge of the reserve platoon of the right patrol, saying that he had met a platoon of 'A' Company who had been ordered to retire. He had put them in support in Z Hedge and gone on with No. 6 platoon. By 7.30 a.m. 'C' Company had reported the return of the platoon that had formed the right patrol and led by 2nd Lieutenant O. H. Staff who reported:

"I left Z Hedge as ordered at 5.35 a.m. and proceeded to my objective through our own wire, which had been cut. I found the enemy wire strong and had some trouble cutting through it. I entered the enemy trench and bombed five dug-outs. I was met by a superior enemy force with a machine gun and, because my men's rifles were practically useless due to mud, I decided to withdraw."

The officer commanding 'C' Company was instructed to order the platoon forward again with support if necessary.

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2nd Lieutenant O. H. Staff

At 7.42 a.m., 'A' Company reported that Lieutenant Sleigh's platoon had returned on his orders but that he was not with them. About this time a heavy enemy bombardment developed shelling 'A' Company out of 'The Mouse Trap' opposite Gommecourt Park. The enemy was, by then, laying a heavy barrage on his own front line. On the fate of Lieutenant Sleigh, Captain Thornton wrote:

"... Lieutenant Sleigh and No. 3 platoon followed behind me, I saw him enter at the same place (in the enemy line) as I had done. Apparently he continued north of 'Fin' and I heard bombing about 200 yards up. I did not see anything more of him. My casualties were nil."

Lieutenant Sleigh was subsequently posted missing, believed killed.

2nd Lieutenants Staff and Holt who had, by that time, submitted their reports to Battalion Headquarters were ordered out again with instructions to take the line and make every effort to hold it, but to return if this proved to be absolutely impossible. However, before this order could be executed, instructions were received from Brigade to withdraw all troops to their own lines. This decision was probably influenced by the fact that the 18th Battalion Durham Light Infantry was having difficulty in moving forward into support and, in fact, had not arrived by 7.47 a.m. The last patrol to return was No. 6 Platoon, led by 2nd Lieutenant N. H. Priday, who reported:

"No. 6 platoon left the line at 6.15 a.m. and on arrival at Z Hedge received a verbal message from the Officer commanding 'B' Company to the effect that I was to remain at Z Hedge in support. Here I met 2nd. Lieutenant Hartman of the 19th Division Royal Field Artillery who told me that he had just returned from the first German line. Soon after this I saw No. 2 platoon arriving at the junction of 'Yiddish Street' and 'C' line. I learned that this platoon had been bombed out. This decided me to move my own platoon forward and bring No.2 platoon into Z Hedge in support. This I effected and at 7.00 a.m., I despatched a message to the officer commanding 'B' Company stating my intentions. I immediately moved forward in battle formation. A platoon of 'C' Company passed me here. They told me they had been bombed out and had lost direction. I explained what I was doing and continued my advance. I arrived at a point opposite K7c 5.7 and discovered two gaps in the wire. I immediately moved forward through these gaps into

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the Bosche line which I occupied at 7.30 a.m. I sent two runners to Z Hedge to bring forward No. 2 platoon under Sergeant Hustwick. On arrival of this party I pushed a point out about 50 yards inside Gommecourt Park and sent bombing parties along the trench on either flank, to try to get in touch with my flanks. These patrols returned, after half an hour's absence, stating that they had discovered no sign of anyone. I myself, with thrt men, pushed on into the Park to reconnoitre.

The mist was by this time very thick so that I lost direction and with difficulty retraced my steps to my party. Whilst reconnoitring, three shots were fired in my direction from seemingly close at hand, but I could detect no sign of the enemy. On return I despatched a message to 'B' Company's commanding officer asking for reinforcements. Pending the arrival of these, I collected a quantity of enemy hand grenades, which I distributed amongst the men, at the same time explaining their use. At 9.00 a.m. my runners returned with a message stating that I was to retire as quickly as possible, which order I obeyed. During the hour and a half which I remained in the enemy's lines, no hostile movement was detected. All dug-outs in the vicinity were searched to no purpose and on retirement my party was not molested, but passed through a heavy hostile barrage, extending from the edge of our barbed wire entanglements to beyond Red line."



2nd Lieutenant N. H. Priday

On the evening of the 26th, the 16th Battalion received orders to launch an attack on Rossignol Wood. The assault was to take place the following morning at 6.30 a.m., two companies forming the firing line with two companies in support. The two front companies were ordered to be clear of a line of posts on the Gommecourt-Puisieux Road at 6.30 a.m. Four, and later six, Lewis guns under the command of the battalion Lewis gun officer, were positioned on the 'Sunken Road' to cover the advance and to fire upon any favourable targets. Major H. B. Byles, second in command, together with the battalion signals, intelligence and medical officers took up a position at the Crucifix.

From there a line was laid to Battalion Headquarters in Woman Street. The extreme range ruled out a supporting barrage from the trench mortar battery.

The two companies, 'A' Company and 'C' Company, were clear of the enemy third line by 5.30 a.m. and deployed for the attack in No-Man's Land, moving forward at about 6.00 a.m. with scouts well in advance.

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The first report received from the scouts was that the southern edge of the Wood was occupied. The officer commanding 'C' Company, on the left, sent one platoon to move towards Pioneer Graben and occupy the high ground there. On reaching the trench they were met by an enemy counter-attack which drove them back towards the Crucifix. A bombing party under 2nd Lieutenant E. Crowther was immediately sent against the enemy and succeeded in driving them back about 180 yards after killing one and wounding several others. The party were able to establish blocks in Moltke Graben and Pioneer Graben and a bombing post at the junction of these trenches. The remainder of the company pushed forward, some men getting into the Wood whilst the rest dug themselves in in Stump Alley, and Pioneer Graben, south-west of the Crucifix, after losing some seven men killed and nine wounded in trying to move forward.

At 11.00 a.m., two platoons from the reserve companies were ordered forward to assist 'C' Company, who were not making much headway. This Company, although under heavy fire from 6.00 a.m. consolidated all the positions taken and stayed in them until relieved that night.

On the right, 'A' Company pushed forward into the southern edge of the Wood, three platoons entering by way of the trenches. The enemy immediately opened heavy fire upon them, with machine guns, infiltrating these trenches and killing or wounding almost their entire strength. 2nd Lieutenant Ashworth, who commanded No. 2 platoon, said in his report:

“We came under heavy machine gun fire on reaching the crest of the hill about 600 yards from Rossignol Wood. I entered a communication trench and got my Lewis gun working.”

He went on to say that the machine gun fire was from three directions and that they were also subjected to a light field gun barrage. Private W. Higgins, who went into action with Sergeant Farrar, No. 4 platoon, recalled:

“We took cover as soon as the German machine guns opened fire. The heavy fire was kept up and it was practically impossible to move. My platoon was on the right and I was fourth man from the right. All the N.C.O.'s of my platoon were killed or wounded. I lay in the same position from where I could see about seven or eight men lying on the ground either killed or wounded until about 4.00 p.m.”

The Company's No. 3 platoon, commanded by 2nd Lieutenant Tucker, took cover in shell holes in the open and were able to rejoin the battalion that night. Corporal E. Keighley who went into action with this platoon was to recall:

“After we had crossed the third German line we came under heavy machine gun fire. I found that we were too crowded in the shell hole in which we had taken cover, so I took four of my men to find a better position. As I got to the top of the communication trench, two of my men were killed. I hung on there for some time and, after about half an hour, 2nd Lieutenant Tucker came up and joined me.”

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Captain Armitage, the Company Commander, and Lieutenant Knight, were killed. Of the platoon commanders, Sergeant Farrar was killed and 2nd Lieutenants Ashworth and Tucker were wounded.

No messages were received from 'A' Company after 6.00 a.m. that morning until 2nd Lieutenant Tucker was able to report to Battalion Headquarters at 10.00 p.m. that night. Included in this Officer's Report, and referring to the wounded, are the following remarks:

"I saw a number of men laying about, out in the open, wounded and unable to get back. It was impossible to get stretcher bearers near them as the enemy was constantly sniping from the Wood. Men who were laying wounded were sniped at on making any attempt to reach cover, as the ground where they were was practically without shell holes and absolutely exposed to enemy fire, and snipers were firing incessantly."

In point of fact both Stump Alley and Bulow Weg were too wet and muddy for the use of stretchers. In addition they were exposed to enfilade fire from the Wood, so that these trenches could not be used for the evacuation of the wounded.

When darkness came on the night of the 27th, Lieutenant-Colonel Croydon relieved the two companies in the front line at the Crucifix and the old German third line. Food and water together with ten boxes of ammunition and ten boxes of bombs were sent forward. At that time the Vickers and Lewis gun teams had been in their positions for 42 hours. During the attack the 16th Battalion had suffered 222 casualties, two officers and 64 other ranks had been killed, ten other ranks had died of their wounds, two officers and 83 other ranks had been wounded in action and 65 persons were missing. 'A' Company had suffered particularly heavily. As we have seen both the officers killed and both the officers wounded were from this company. In addition, the company lost 38 N.C.O.'s and other ranks killed, 35 N.C.O.'s and other ranks wounded whilst six N.C.O.'s and other ranks died of their wounds and 61 persons were posted missing. Among the N.C.O.'s who lost their lives were Company Sergeant Major Wilkinson, Sergeant Barnes and Sergeant Cockcroft who had already lost two brothers in the campaign. All these men had joined the Battalion on its formation in 1914. Sergeant Nelson was the only Sergeant in 'A' Company to survive the day.

On the 28th, the 18th Battalion received orders to relieve the two companies of the 16th Battalion, and the two companies of the 15th Battalion on the right, from their new positions. Major Robinson also received verbal instructions that his Battalion would be required to attack Rossignol Wood on the morning of March 1st. These instructions were subsequently amended to the morning of March 2nd.

The relief moved off at 7.00 p.m. Lieutenant Morgan with one platoon from 'D' Company relieved the 16th Battalion from their positions in the Crucifix. Here, he set up a report centre and telephone, and established a party of battalion bombers. Another platoon from 'D' Company relieved the 16th Battalion personnel in the

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old German line from K11d 3.7 to K11d 6.5. The remaining two platoons from this company relieved the 15th Battalion companies in their forward posts. 'A' and 'B' companies established themselves in the old German 3rd and 2nd line from K11d 3.8 to K11d 8.0 and from K11c 8.9 to K11d 3.0. 'C' Company moved into the old German front line from K11c 5.7 to K11d 1.0. Battalion Headquarters was set up in Woman Street. The relief was completed by 12.00 midnight, the Battalion suffering seven casualties, wounded by shell fire.

The 16th Battalion were now relieved from support by the 13th Battalion the York and Lancaster Regiment and proceeded to a camp near Coigneux on the Courcellers Road.

Throughout the afternoon of the 1st, heavy smoke continued to rise from burning dug-outs in the Wood. From the early hours and throughout the day of the 2nd, the 18th Battalion maintained strong patrol activity. At mid-day the officer commanding 'B' Company was informed by Battalion Headquarters that it was intended to occupy the Wood "that night". Shortly before 1.00 p.m. 'D' Company reported that they had a patrol, consisting of an N.C.O. and two other men, probing up Stump Alley. They had been unable to reach the enemy line at the west corner of the Wood owing to a sniper, who had killed one of their men. A second N.C.O. patrol from 'D' Company had penetrated up Bulow Weg trench as far as the Wood, experiencing no opposition except sniping. The Wood end of the trench was found to be blocked with trees and wire. Another patrol was immediately sent out by the same route. Shortly before 3.00 p.m. a message was received from Brigade Headquarters which read:

"Every endeavour will be made to enter Rossignol Wood and 1st Garde Stellung with strong patrols tonight. All ground gained will be held by strong posts and consolidated . . ."

By 5.30 p.m. the Battalion had a patrol working into the Wood at K12b 0.6 whilst another patrol was working up the continuation of Bulow Weg trench towards the Wood. A stronger patrol was waiting at the top of Bulow Weg for information from the advanced patrols. At 7.00 p.m. a patrol from 'B' Company moved out from the Crucifix with instructions to meet up with 2nd Lieutenant Priday and his platoon at the north-west corner of the Wood. The company moved out by platoons while 'A' Company moved up behind them. At 8.30 p.m. 'B' Company reported from the Sunken Road, near Stump Alley, that 2nd Lieutenant Priday and his men were in the Wood and had met with no opposition. Their remaining platoons were following up at 15 minute intervals. By 10.00 p.m. both 'A' and 'B' Companies were in the Wood with their Company Headquarters established at its edge in the extension of Bulow Weg. At 10.25 p.m. instructions were received from Brigade Headquarters ordering the Battalion to press on, after the Wood had been cleared, and establish a series of six posts to defend its approaches from the east. The Wood was to be lightly held owing to the possibility of heavy retaliatory shelling. The objectives of the 'Durhams' on their left, was 1st Garde Stellung from the junction of Lehmann

Graben to the junction with Becker Graben thence working south-east along the trench to gain touch with the 18th Battalion at the point where the road intersected the trench. Posts were to be established at the junction of 1st Garde Stellung and the communication trench. At 11.50 p.m. advice was received from Brigade that patrols from the battalion on the right had been encountering serious opposition from K12d 7.8 and L7c 0.7 (some 200 and 500 yards to 'A' Company's right) since 7.30 p.m. The message from this battalion, the 6th Battalion the Wiltshire Regiment, continued: ". . . am endeavouring to obtain possession of the Berg Graben between these points to make a flank attack."



Major Robinson

By this time 'B' Company were consolidating a line a little to the north of the Wood, assisted by a platoon from 'A' Company. They had established the three strong points shown on map 5. 'A' Company had one and a half platoons at the north-east neck of the Wood and had established three strong points there, also shown on map 5. A further one and a half platoons were in the Wood's south-west corner and in the first 200 yards of Berg Graben. Six prisoners had been taken. By 12.40 a.m. the Wiltshires had occupied the rest of the Berg Graben.

Shortly after 5.00 a.m. the 18th Durham Light Infantry reported that one of their patrols, moving along 1st Garde Stellung, had met with heavy opposition and considered that the trench was strongly held. At 11.00 a.m. a message arrived from 2nd Lieutenant Bradford, of the Durhams, who reported:

"I am quite near the barrier at the junction of Pioneer Graben and 1st Garde Stellung. Have patrols out myself. About 100 of the enemy have been seen in the vicinity, wiring and working on the parapet. His wire is very thick and deep and the barricade is the same also. He has evidently seen some of our men, also heard bombs thrown because he is now manning his line. The line is strongly held and, owing to the depth and thickness of the wire, chances of getting through are small."

When this information was passed to the Durhams, their Commanding Officer asked Major Robinson to render any assistance possible to help 2nd Lieutenant Bradford clear up the situation. He left it to the Major to decide upon and carry out what operations he considered necessary to help the lieutenant in achieving his objectives. Two patrols, one of Durhams and one from the 18th Battalion were immediately ordered out to ascertain the strength of the enemy. Both patrols reported the 1st Garde Stellung at point 70 and probably the 2nd Garde Stellung at

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point 82 to be strongly held. After consultations with Brigade, Major Robinson decided to attack these strong points. His operational order read:

“At 5 p.m. the Infantry of Keel (the 18th Battalion West Yorks) and the Infantry of Deck (the 18th Battalion the Durham Light Infantry) will get into battle formation extended order as close to the barrage as possible. At 5.10 p.m. the Infantry will rush the positions at K6c 82 and K6c 02, (these positions were, in fact, strong points). Before 5.00p.m. the Infantry of Keel and Deck must not be within 250 yards of the triangle formed by the neck of the north-west salient of the wood and a line from K12b 2.4 to K12b 3.6.”

The operation was carried out with dash and vigour and, by 6.10 p.m. ‘B’ Company had reported that 1st Garde Stellung had been entered, that 20 prisoners had been captured and that the position was being consolidated. Captain Thornton was reported wounded. At 7.27 p.m. Brigade signalled: “Wire directly you are in a satisfactory position for relief platoons and Company Headquarters must be forwarded before sanction is given for relief to take place”.

The dispositions of the companies was then relayed to Brigade but, before requesting relief, Major Robinson visited all posts to check their positions stated (strong points K6c 9.1 and trench K6c 8.2). He led men to their correct positions and saw them consolidating their posts before moving on to inspect other posts. After visiting all the posts in the Garde Stellung and Rossignol Wood, and requesting the 13th Battalion York and Lancaster Regiment to relieve two platoons of ‘C’ Company in 2nd Garde Stellung, he returned to Battalion Headquarters and reported his situation to Brigade as being “quite satisfactory for relief.”

By 12.30 a.m. on the 4th, relief had been completed by the 13th York and Lancaster Regiment, except for the two platoons of ‘C’ Company who were still busy consolidating their positions. These platoons were relieved at 2.30 a.m. The Battalion then moved to Hebuterne where they remained until the afternoon. Then they marched to billets in Bayencourt. The casualties suffered by the Battalion during these operations were described as light.

Captain J. R. Thornton was carried out of the trenches by his orderly and company runner, Private Frank Burn. The two had been inseparable since Festubert. When he attended a Company



Frank Burn on active service,  
September 1916

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Commander's course at Condett, the Captain had taken Frank with him as his servant. Frank was at that time under the age of 19 and, therefore, not allowed to be employed in the trenches. Captain Thornton, happily, recovered from his wounds. The two were able to continue their comradeship in later years through the Bradford Pals Old Comrades' Association. Captain Thornton was, for many years, President of the Association, whilst Frank Burn held the office of Chairman until the Association was disbanded in 1979.

Lieutenant Norman Friday was awarded a Military Cross for his courage and initiative.

The courage displayed by Sergeant Albert E. Sands during operations in March/April earned him also a mention in the despatches of Field Marshall Douglas Haig.

The 16th Battalion had posted a screen of Lewis gun teams, out in No-Man's Land, to cover the approaches to their positions. Just before first light they realised that one of these teams, manned by men from "C" Company, had not received an order to retire. They were in danger of being isolated by an expected enemy artillery barrage.

Sergeant Sands of "C" Company answered a call for a volunteer to go out into No Man's Land to guide the team back to their own positions. Armed with a satchel full of grenades and his comrades' good wishes, he climbed over the parapet and began the long crawl on his belly across the wastes of the battlefield. When he reached the post, he found three men. One was dead, another badly

wounded, the third suffering from exhaustion and exposure. He had enlisted with all three. Sergeant Sands de-activated the Lewis gun, dumped all his gear (for which he was later castigated), took the wounded man on his back and, with the man who could still walk clinging on for support, began the long trek back. When he staggered back into "C" Company positions, the man on his back was found to be dead. Shaking Sands by the hand his Company Commander gave him a measure of rum.

In later life, when recounting the incident to his small son, Albert Sands would include the soldier's song:

And then the officer will meet you,  
With a tot of rum he'll greet you  
And he'll say "Mate, retaliate,  
With a Mills' Number Five."



Gaverelle Trench, 1917. By Adrian Hill. Imperial War Museum picture No. 1648/314