

COPY.

1st JULY 1916 (46th DIVISION).

These Notes were written by T.F.C. Downman, June 1918.

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I joined the 5th Bn. Sherwood Foresters, the 139th Brigade, 46th Division, VIII Corps, Third Army, on 12th June 1916, the Battalion then being at Luchaux near Doullens. That day and each day that week the attack was practised over ground supposed to resemble that which would be the scene of the real action. These practices were continually begun, stopped and sent back and recommenced. Equipment was altered several times and generally put into a state of muddle.

18th June the Battalion marched to Pommier and took up billets there, from here working parties went up to the front every day. Occasional shelling of the village especially after the batteries of 9.2's had commenced their work. The evening of the 27th the Battalion went into the trenches in support, the attack being timed for 7.30 a.m. on 29th. The trenches were deep in mud and lacking duck boards; this deficiency was begun to be made good on morning of 28th. The evening 28th the Battalion moved out of the trenches back to Pommier. The attack was withheld for 48 hours, thereby losing the value of the artillery preparation, enabling the enemy to organize his defences, and spoiling the spirit of our men.

We had already had elaborate instructions as to what to do when we had reached our objectives, and instructions as to flares, Verey lights, and numerous other details. So there being nothing farther to learn (?) we spent a quiet time till the afternoon of the 30th June. That evening we moved up to the trenches and again had parties carrying duck boards. My platoon had already been reduced from a strength of 35 to 20, fifteen men being taken as bombers, runners, carriers &c., then during the board carrying a shell wounded my platoon sergeant and 4 men of my platoon, reducing the strength to 15.

At 11 p.m. we moved up to the front line going over the top for some distance. We eventually reached our portion of the line (3 bays for 1 platoon), about midnight. From about 12 to 12.30 a.m. 1st July the enemy machine guns were very active, just passing over the parapet of our front line. After this had died down I sent a small party out, about six men who each had wire cutters, to clear the path through our wire; this was soon done and I went out myself right through the gap which was quite well cleared. I attempted to report to my Company Commander who was with Battalion headquarters, but lost my way down a badly battered communication trench (I had only been down this once before and that was in daylight and before the Bosch had bombarded it. All our communication trenches were in good condition a week before the attack, but had been systematically bombarded by the Bosch during the last few days). I regained the front line and sat on the firing step until daylight; during this time the trenches were shelled by

*I was posted to "A" Coy  
was put in charge of  
No. 3. Platoon.*

the enemy with small high explosives. About 3.30 a.m. hot tea with rum mixed in came along, I saw this distributed to my platoon, who each had a cupful, and then passed on to the next platoon.

Soon after this casualties came along, chiefly from the Monmouths who had been out digging an advanced line, a dead man was deposited in my middle bay. At 5 a.m. I went into a dugout and remained there  $\frac{1}{2}$  of an hour. I then returned to my station (the next bay) and waited there. An issue of neat rum came round, each man in my platoon had a small cupful.

After the intense bombardment had started at 6.30 a.m. the enemy replied with shrapnel on my right, but nothing came near me. At 7.25 a.m. the platoon on my left (No. 2) were to go out and I was to follow and get behind them (70 yards interval) at 7.28 a.m. I remained to the left of my platoon and in communication with a man of No. 2 platoon, at 7.26 I called to him and asked if No. 2 had gone, he replied NO; again at 7.27, 7.28, 7.29 and 7.30 I received the same reply; as I was then 2 minutes overdue I decided not to wait and immediately gave the order for No. 3 to go over.

Smoke bombs had been thrown out about 7.20 a.m. and did nothing but make a thick fog of evil smelling and tasting smoke on our own parapet, making it difficult to find the way out and calculated to lose one's sense of direction. When beyond the smoke I looked for my platoon which should have been lined up in the prone position in front of our own wire, but I could see no one, either to right, left, or ahead. Looking back I saw a party coming out carrying tremendous burdens, offering a good target and moving very slowly. This was No. 4 platoon, supposed to bring up wire, steel poles, bombs, flares &c for "A" Coy. Without waiting I proceeded towards the German lines alone, taking a direction towards the left, according to instructions. I passed the advanced line, a very shallow and narrow trench and came to a very large shell hole, here I came up with 2 men of my platoon who had evidently gone on without waiting for me. They gave me the direction further to the left and followed me. I was not aware of shells, bullets or other missiles whilst in the open. On reaching the German wire I found it well cut and smashed up and had no difficulty in getting through. On reaching the German front line I found a trench nearly eight feet deep, very wide and apparently totally blocked at one end and partially blocked at the other. It was quite empty. I jumped in and climbed out the other side, still followed by the two men I met in the open, but I do not remember seeing them after this. Between the Bosch 1st and 2nd line I was in the open until noticing a communication trench on my left I jumped into it and was going up when I saw head of me two "cheveux de frises" lying at the bottom of the trench affecting a temporary barricade. When nearing this about half a dozen bullets hit the side of the trench a yard in front of me, evidently a machine gun, but fortunately finished a belt or jammed as I got over the obstacle and proceeded. I soon saw Second Lieut. McEanes of "D" Coy ahead; he called to me to come on evidently thinking I had brought reinforcements. I reached him in the 2nd German line and found it very badly knocked about on the right resembling sand hills, quite irregular; to the left the trench was in

good order, complete with fire step, and dugouts etc. One or two Bosch were firing at us with rifles. Our men (i.e. McInnes men of "D" Coy) used our bombs on these Bosch. I fired my revolver in the direction of the Bosch, also towards their third line, which was still under our barrage. We soon ran out of bombs and as there were only McInnes and myself with about 12 to 15 men and no reinforcements came up nor was there any sign of the carrying platoon for either "A" or "D" Coy or the carrying company "B" Coy for the battalion, things were looking serious for us. We thereupon retired towards our centre, i.e. to the left along the Bosch 2nd Line.

Of the Staffords who should have been on our right flank there was absolutely no sign, there was also a gap on our left and we were not in touch with "A" Coy. I attempted to reach "A" Coy, with which I should have been, but after going some distance without sign of anyone, concluded that they had not reached the 2nd line, so I rejoined Second Lieut. McInnes. Sec.-Lt. Callow of No. 16 Platoon, "D" Coy appeared about this time without any men; he went off to the left to touch up with "A" Coy.

McInnes now got on the fire step in one of the bays to observe what was going on in the German 3rd line, our barrage having lifted from it. He was immediately hit by a bullet on the steel helmet. This dazed him, and he again got up and looked towards the 1st line. Before I could speak to him he was hit again, this time right through the helmet and into the brain. He died immediately. At this time we should have attacked the 3rd line, but being 2 officers and a dozen men it would have been impossible. In spite of elaborate instructions which we had received regarding distress signals, flares, Veray lights etc., we were absolutely unprovided except for the very light pistol I carried. I had asked for cartridges, but was not given any. McInnes had sent two runners back for reinforcements. I doubt if they got more than a few yards. Callow now returned and we were all moving along towards the left. However he said he would go to the left and I was to take all the men left to the right and try to connect up with the Staffords. I had moved back one bay to the right when the Germans bombed us. The first two bombs exploded near me and wounded me in the left arm and hip. The men scattered immediately and Bosch opened with rifles from the direction in which we had been going. I was hit by a bullet in the left arm, through the bicep, the bullet then struck a steel shaving mirror which I carried in my left breast pocket, and so being turned made a shallow groove across my solar plexus and landed in a box of safety matches in my right breast pocket, igniting them. Most of these details I was not aware of until 2 or 3 days later after.

Before I had recovered from the shock of the bomb explosions, all the men disappeared. Where they went to I don't know, but presume some of them were wounded by the bombs but were able to clear out of the bay evidently intending to get cover from further bombs. I think these men left the 2nd line and went towards the 1st German line, but were either killed or wounded (and eventually taken as prisoners) by German rifle fire from the direction in which we had been moving, i.e. from the German 2nd line on our right flank. However almost immediately after the bombs the trench filled with Germans from both sides, and before I could offer any resistance I was pounced on and my revolver and very light pistol were taken, the latter

evoking some comment. Several Germans then lined the fire step and threw a few bombs, there was no reply and they had retaken this portion of their 2nd line effectually ~~xxxx~~ scattering our little party. Whilst still lying on the floor of the trench I was threatened with the bayonet and was nearly finished off by one but fortunately this was averted. A German then bandaged my arm with my field dressing and left me to myself. After some minutes as all the Germans had disappeared I managed to crawl out into a shallow trench going about 10 yards in the direction of the 1st line. Here I remained from 8.20 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. during which time our shells were again active on the 2nd line, several pieces coming very near to me. At 12.30 I thought it advisable to seek better cover and crawled back and found the entrance to a dug-out which I thought was empty. I went down a few steps and sat down. After 10 minutes or so a German N.C.O. came along and took me down the dug-out, about 40 feet deep. Here there were several Germans in a large dug-out fitted with beds, tables &c. I was given some cold coffee and my belongings were looked at. My revolver ammunition alone was taken away. Shelling of these lines ~~was~~ was going on all the time, whilst I was in this dug-out and a shell burst at the mouth and threw large quantities of earth down, covering the pack and equipment of a German who had been neatly arranging them on the steps. About 2.30 p.m. I was taken to another dug-out some distance to the right and most probably in the 3rd line. This was a large place with several rooms, bed rooms with ordinary iron bedsteads, furniture &c. I was placed at a small table in a passage near an officers' mess. This mess belonged to the 91st Regiment. Here I was given hot coffee, kriegsbrot and some sausage meat, also cigarettes. The Major or Colonel of this regiment was seated at a large table with all the junior officers around; he commenced reading a long report to them, in the middle he turned round and asked me my name; this by the way was the only question that was asked me. I was not searched or interrogated. I noticed my very light pistol on the table. This seemed to be regarded with suspicion, so I asked an orderly who spoke English if I could speak to the Colonel. This was quite readily granted, so I explained that the very light pistol was merely a signal pistol and not a new pocket trench mortar. This German officer understood and showed me his store of signal cartridges, several thousands and of a variety of colours; they were smaller than ours and looked very much like a sporting cartridge, of not too large a bore. I also noticed some of their pistols which had barrels nearly twice the length of the cartridges, thus accounting for the superiority of their lights over ours of that date.

About 5.30 p.m. I was sent to a dressing station in the trenches, on the way I noticed several of our 9.2" shells lying in the mud at the bottom of the trenches; if all of these had exploded the results would have been very useful to us. The dressing station was about 50 feet below the surface and well fitted up with an operating table equipment and instruments of all kinds. There were stretchers and beds in various rooms off the passages. After waiting here some time whilst several Bosch were attended to, I was bound up and sent upstairs again. Here I found a string of lightly wounded Bosch and looked round for the sentry, with rifle, who had brought me there, expecting to be escorted somewhere. However the sentry had gone and the wounded Bosch made it plain that I was

to join their party. This I had to do being placed second in the single file. We went down the trenches in this fashion being followed by English 18-pounders. We had to wait and go down a dug-out, full of wounded Bosch, for nearly an hour, then we proceeded still with numerous shells falling near. I understood from the behaviour of the Germans and their evident "wind" that another attack was in progress. However, if there was one it was soon over and did not get anywhere near us. We proceeded and went some miles zigzagging about; we passed several small parties coming up, about 7 or 8 under an officer; some of them asked me for money, but I took no notice of these requests. We eventually came to a road and got out of the trench and went over the open going back towards some village behind the lines. This area was swept by spent bullets which whistled through the grass. On reaching the high road probably that between Bucquoy and Puisseaux, our party consisted of myself with about 6 Bosch wounded; the others, about another dozen wounded, had evidently dropped out on the way. This road was being shelled with shrapnel by our field guns. Several transport carts coming along had narrow escapes but none were hit. We reached a village about 9 p.m. by my watch.

From my own observations and from information obtained from officers, N.C.O's and men of the 46th and 56th Divisions I arrive at the following:

Ours was a subsidiary attack and kind of extra to the main attack further South, but at the same time it was intended to be successful and to capture the strong positions made about ~~the~~ the Gommecourt Wood.

The attack failed through various causes of which the following are the chief:

The absurdly inadequate strength of some of the attacking units; my own battalion went over between 500 and 600 strong. My own platoon consisted of 15.

Lack of knowledge on the part of the higher commands of the conditions prevailing in the trenches and of what was likely to take place in an attack on trenches from trenches.

The absurd distribution of equipment; those in 1st waves who got into the German lines having to wait for 4th waves who never got there.

Overloading of all attackers, especially "carriers".

Very bad management regarding cutting of German barbed wire; this was absolutely uncut on a 2 battalion front, letting down our right flank and the 56th Division's left flank. The wire on my own front was sufficiently cut owing to the energies of Lt. Lilley who had taken patrols out to do this work, the artillery not being sufficiently competent to do it properly.

Half-heartedness in regard to the attack by Divisional General (46th Division). Only 4 battalions went into attack at 7.30 a.m. They were not supported and no reinforcements were sent. I understand that subsequent attacks by the rest of the division took place during the day, none of which reached the German lines. If these troops had all attacked between 7.30 and 8 a.m. we should have gained our objectives and held them, presuming that the wire was cut.

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