

LE TRANSLOY AGAIN 2nd Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers

23rd October 1916

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Yet a third time the 2nd Battalion was to endure destruction in the Somme battle.

Its losses on 12th October were partly made good by the arrival on 17th October of a draft of 176 non-commissioned officers and men from the 5th and 6th (Territorial) Reserve Battalions of the Regiment. On the 19th Major C. J. Burke, D.S.O., Royal Irish Regiment, took over command of the battalion, which moved forward that day to reserve trenches known as "John Bull" and "Cow," south-east of Flers. For three days it was employed in digging trenches. **On 22nd October it moved to Thistle Trench, close to Lesboeufts, its assembly trenches for the big attack on 23rd October.**

The battalion, with the 2nd Essex Regiment on its right and the 1st King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment on its left, was to attack and take part of Dewdrop Trench to the south-east of the sunken road which joined Lesboeufts to Le Transloy. Included in this objective were several subsidiary trenches, one of which was called Rainy Trench. Dewdrop Trench lay about four hundred and fifty yards from the British front line. When it had been captured, the other units were to go forward to another objective, while the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers took over and consolidated the whole of Dewdrop.

The strength of the battalion available for the attack was no more than 5 officers and 250 other ranks, with 48 more in battalion reserve. "A" Company was commanded by Second-Lieutenant T. E. Parry, "B" by Second-Lieutenant R. N. Higson, "C" by Second-Lieutenant F. G. S. Watson - all three of whom were killed that day - and "D" by Second-Lieutenant J. W. Watkins, who had been transferred to it on Captain W. D. P. Mansell being killed on 12th October.

The attack was to take place in four waves. Lieutenant-Colonel Burke felt that its real difficulty would arise after the 2nd Essex had passed on from Dewdrop Trench and his line had to be extended and that position consolidated. He therefore left Captain W. P. Salt in the assembly trench with twenty-five non-commissioned officers and men of the reserve, with the role of directing them on any portion of Dewdrop Trench which might not have been cleared of the enemy and of generally helping in its consolidation and the reorganization of the troops in it.

The attack had been timed for 11.30 a.m., but at that hour a thick fog lay over the ground. In March, 1918, the Germans carried out their most successful attacks in fog and mist. **But on 23rd October, 1916, the attack was postponed till the weather was clear, and at 2.30**

P.M. the battalion went over with a loud cheer, and had to "double" in order to catch up the creeping barrage, which appeared to begin a minute too soon. The German "S.O.S." went up practically at zero. Enemy machine guns opened fire immediately on the assaulting troops; their artillery began a few moments later to search the roads behind the British lines so as to prevent the arrival of reinforcements.

Before many yards had been covered, men began to fall fast from the machine-gun fire. A few, however, under Second-Lieutenant J. W. Watkins, with a Lewis-gun team, managed to get within eighty or a hundred yards of Rainy Trench, but were there held up. At 3.30 p.m. he reported to Salt where he was, and added that the attack appeared to have failed and that the troops on his right had fallen back. This message, the first news of the attack to arrive, reached the battalion headquarters at 5.10 p.m. Shortly after 5.30 p.m. the situation appeared to be that Watkins and fifteen men had dug themselves into a new trench in front of Rainy Trench, that Salt had thirty men (including all the unwounded men he could find) in the front line, and that the rest of the battalion reserve close by had dwindled to some twenty men as a result of losses. In short, there were 2 officers and 65 men left to the battalion in formed bodies out of the 6 officers and 298 men in the line at 2.30 p.m. All were tired; some were exhausted.

At about the same time, Lieutenant-Colonel Burke received information that the 2nd Essex Regiment had two companies digging in on its final objective, and that another was about to attack Dewdrop Trench from the east. He also received a message from 12th Brigade urging the supreme need of capturing Dewdrop. At 5.50 p.m. therefore he ordered that every available man should be used to attack and clear Rainy Trench and then to push on to Dewdrop. No sooner had he done so than he discovered that the information about the Essex was not true; and he received orders to clear up the situation and to re-form his line in conjunction with the Essex and the King's Own in readiness for an attack on Dewdrop, in which the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders of the 10th infantry brigade were to help. At 6.15 p.m. he cancelled the attack orders which he had issued at 5.50 p.m., and went forward to see for himself things stood. He found what he described as "a good deal of debris of units". In the front line he came upon Salt, who had collected nearly all the unwounded men and had extended them to link up with the troops on the right and left. Thanks to the leadership of Salt and Watkins, these survivors were in good spirits.

The situation as regards Rainy and Dewdrop Trenches was still obscure, and at 7.45 p.m. Watkins took out fifteen men to find out whether there were any British troops in them. After vigorous efforts to get information he came back with a definite report they were both held by the enemy. During the night the trench dug by Watkins's party during the afternoon was extended to join that of the King's Own, with the effect that three hundred yards of trench were held by eighty men and five Lewis guns. Lieutenant Colonel Burke ordered the digging of a communication trench from the original line to this

new trench.

The net result of the day's operations was an advance a hundred and fifty yards at the cost of 3 officers and 205 other ranks killed, wounded and missing. The total casualties between the 10th October and 25th October—when the battalion was relieved and marched to the brickworks at Montauban—had been 16 officers and 542 other ranks. The only officers left on the 24th were Lieutenant-Colonel C. J. Burke, D.S.O., Major A. J. W. Blencowe M.C., Lieutenant G. C. Martin, M.C. (the adjutant), Major W. Bows (the quartermaster), Second-Lieutenant J. W. Watkins, and Captain W. P. Salt, who, however, was killed by a shell on the afternoon that day together with a captain of the 1st Middlesex Regiment which was relieving the battalion. The actual number brought out of the line by Watkins, whose splendid work was a foretaste of his achievements as commanding officer of this battalion, was forty six all ranks.