

**War Diary, Machine Gun Corps, from
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MAMETZ WOOD DAY 1 - 7th JULY 1916

Following the early fighting on the Somme the British Army had pressed the German Army back beyond the villages of Mametz and Fricourt and by the 5th July, 1916, they were facing them across the shallow valley to the south of Mametz Wood . XV Corps was given the task of capturing Mametz Wood by the morning of the 7th July at the latest. The 38th (Welsh) Division formed part of the XV Corps and by the 5th July they had moved into trenches from Bottom Wood to the edge of Caterpillar Wood and from there they could see the task that faced them. Mametz Wood was, and still is, the largest Wood on the Somme covering an area of over 200 acres with a maximum length of about a mile. It is situated on a low spur of the Bazentin Ridge and overlooked the valley separating the two forces in the early days of July, 1916. Hence, any attack made by the British forces would be, of necessity, initially downhill from their positions and then up hill to make contact with the enemy in the Wood itself. The Germans were also able to bring flanking fire to bear on any approach to the Wood from Flatiron and Sabot Copses to the east. Further, the German second line was 300 yards beyond the northern edge of the Wood and hence it could be reinforced easily since much of the movement would go unobserved through the mass of the Wood. To the west was the area held by the 17th Division. To the east was the 18th Division from Caterpillar Wood eastwards. The capture of Mametz Wood was to be the responsibility of the 38th Division though support from the 17th Division was absolutely necessary. Facing the Welshmen was the Lehr Regiment of the Prussian Guard holding the line from Mametz Wood to Flatiron Copse.

The plan for the attack of the 7th July was that the 17th Division would attack Acid Drop Copse and the left flank Wood and act as support for the 38th Division whose task was to attack the Hammerhead. Both divisions were to advance to the central ridge and then turn north to sweep through the Wood. In the 38th Division the responsibility for the attack was to rest on the shoulders of Brigadier-General Evans and the 115th Brigade. His reconnaissance of the ground made it clear to him that an attack on a narrow front was all that was possible and he decided that this would be no more than one battalion wide. He chose the 16th Welsh.

The C.O. of the 16th Welsh, Lt. Col. F.W. Smith, realised immediately that his right flank would be exposed to fire from the area of Flatiron Copse and he suggested that the plan be altered to allow him to attack at first light. This was not possible because the attack had to be co-ordinated

with the 17th Division. When the attack took place two battalions were used. The 11th SWB attacked with its left flank as close to Caterpillar Wood as possible and the 16th Welsh were tight against their right flank. Each battalion would have no more than a 250 yard frontage for the attack.

It was planned that the problem of flanking fire was to be eased by the use of a smoke screen.

Several things conspired against the attack. Prior to the attack it rained and movement became very difficult in the resulting mud. The attack was planned for 08.30 on the morning of the 7th July and the 38th Division went into the attack though the planned smoke screen did not appear. The 11th SWB and 16th Welsh rose to their task as soon as the artillery stopped and immediately came under fire from the German machine guns in Flatiron and Sabot Copses. Casualties mounted and the attack died out some 250 yards short of the Wood.

By 10 o'clock that morning the situation deteriorated as the Germans increased shell and machine gun fire across the approaches to the Wood. The 10th SWB were ordered up in support but did not reach the battle area until after noon. Artillery support was offered but actually fell on the men of the 16th Welsh as they tried to push home the attack. The arrival of the 10th SWB did help a little in the afternoon but their C.O., Lt. Col. Wilkinson, was killed in Caterpillar Wood as he brought his men forward. Gradually the attack slowed. Evans received another order telling him that an attack was to be carried out at 5 p.m. when the Wood was to be entered at all costs. Evans reported the situation to Divisional Headquarters and they in turn reported to Corps Headquarters who ordered a withdrawal to allow reorganisation. The attack had failed for a number of reasons perhaps the most significant being:

The attack was parallel to and close against the German lines.

Lines of communication between Corps, Division and Brigade were long and increased confusion in orders.

Artillery control was not close enough and resulted in the loss of men in the 16th Welsh.

The lack of the planned smoke screen; apparently the day was too windy for its effectiveness.

No effective measure taken to nullify the effect of the machine guns.

Hastily prepared plans.

Besides all these problems there was the added matter that the attack by the 17th Division also failed so the co-ordinated effect also failed. The attack had cost 400 casualties in the three battalions engaged and nothing had been achieved as these battle weary units were withdrawn to lick their wounds and count the cost. Haig was unimpressed by the performance of the Division. At the end of the day Lt.Gen. Horne (XV Corps) informed Haig that he was not happy with the conduct of Gen. Phillips who was removed from command on the 9th July, 1916.

THE INTERLUDE - 8th& 9th July, 1916

A plan for an attack on the 9th July, 1916 had been worked out by the 38th Divisional staff. The unused Brigades, 113th and 114th, were to be used. The 114th were to provide the main attack on the central ridge while the 113th were to capture Strip Trench. This plan was cancelled when Phillips was replaced and nothing of significance happened on the 9th except for the command of the division passing to Major General Watts. An unsupported attack by the 17th Division on the 9th July was completely unsuccessful.

Day 2 - 10th JULY, 1916

The following day it was to be the turn of the 38th Division. Major General Watts had taken over command of the Division in the afternoon of the 9th July and immediately set about organising an attack on the Wood. The attack was essentially the same as that which had been worked out by Phillips the day before but he placed importance on the equal status of the two Brigades to be engaged (113th and 114th). The artillery plan, however, contained two novel features:

Lifting off the main trenches to their rear as if an infantry attack was to commence - then returning on them- after a few minutes to catch the Germans as they emerged from their dugouts. This approach had been used successfully by the French.

The use of a creeping barrage to accompany the attack. That apart, there was little subtlety to the attack and was simply relying on the weight of numbers to carry the day. In this area it has been estimated that the Germans were outnumbered by as much as three to one and so the weight of numbers argument would seem to be valid. However, these figures took no account of the fact that the Germans were fighting from prepared defences and had numerous machine guns in supporting

positions about the Wood and, in general, had better trained and experienced men in the front line - remember, this was the first time the 38th Division had been used in an attack and it had not had a great deal of trench experience.

However, the plan for the attack went ahead:

114th Brigade

14th Welsh and 13th Welsh RIGHT

113th Brigade

16th RWF leading, 14th RWF close behind LEFT

At 3.30 am on the 10th July, 1916 the artillery barrage opened up followed twenty minutes later by the planned smoke screen which drifted from Strip Trench towards the north-east. At a little after 4 am the 114th Brigade started to move as they were somewhat further from the Wood. This created confusion in the 113th Brigade area but Lt. Col. Carden (16th RWF) sorted out this in short order and the attack was carried out with "perfect steadiness". In the time this took to sort out the 16th RWF lost a measure of the cover offered by the artillery fire and subsequently the battalion lost heavily in the advance to the Wood. Amongst the casualties was Lt. Col. Carden who was wounded at the start of the attack but carried on right up to the edge of the Wood where he was killed.

On the right the 13th Welsh came under fire from the machine placed in the Hammerhead. They suffered heavy casualties and were beaten back on two occasions but a third attempt was made and they managed to get a foot hold in the Wood. The 14th Welsh were attacking in the centre and were to some extent covered from enfilade fire by the flanking battalions and managed to reach the Wood more or less as the artillery barrage was lifting from the edge. On the left the 14th RWF had suffered heavily as it attacked close behind the 16th RWF and Brigadier Price-Davies committed the 15th & 13th RWF to the attack almost immediately so that they were then in close support to the battalions already engaged. On the right the 10th Welsh were added to the attack making a total of seven out of eight battalions of the two brigades engaged in action. The attack was a reasonable success with all the objectives being taken ahead of the schedule. It had not been without cost. Casualties had mounted throughout the first hour of the attack such that in the seven battalions that went into battle five of the commanding officers had been killed or seriously wounded. Added to this was the loss of many of the junior

officers which resulted in the control of the thousands of men in the Wood becoming increasingly difficult.

The RWF were held up at point J by machine gun fire and Price-Davies ordered the last two companies of the 13th RWF forward to assist in the situation.

To the right the Germans reinforced the Hammerhead and this created havoc for a while amongst the attacking Welshmen. To ease this situation the 15th Welsh, the eighth battalion to be committed, were sent in to the attack. Nonetheless, progress was good and by mid morning the line held was JFD and then to a point between A and X. Lieut. Col Hayes (14th Welsh) succeeded in capturing the central ride though his right was held up since there was little by way of support. Marden committed the reserves at his disposal to the attack. These were the 17th RWF who went to support the 113th Brigade on the left and the 10th SWB who went to support the 114th brigade on the right of the attack. They arrived in the fighting by about 2.40 p.m. and added fresh impetus to the attack such that the 10th SWB reached a point to the north of the second cross ride and were able to get patrols out to the northern edge of the Wood.

By 6.30 p.m. that day the 17th RWF had reached to within 20-30 yards of the northern edge of the Wood and the Hammerhead had been taken by the 10th SWB as the German troops were forced to withdraw. The bulk of the Wood east of the central ride was in the Welshmen's hands though to the west it was necessary to turn a flank along the railway line facing the north-western corner of the Wood . The rest of the division came under heavy fire from the German second line and withdrew to the cover of the Wood for some 200 to 300 yards. The day's fighting ended there but it left the men tired and jumpy and throughout the night there was much wild firing.

DAY 3 - 11th JULY, 1916

At 5 am Brigadier Evans (115th Brigade) took over the command of all the troops in Mametz Wood establishing his HQ on the junction of the central ride with the first cross ride. He brought up into the Wood the 16th Welsh and the remaining companies of the 11th SWB to replace some of the tired units of 113th Brigade and 114th Brigade. He was expected to complete the capture of the Wood with the remaining tired troops at his disposal. He established a line, from the left, as follows:

16th RWF - 16th Welsh - 17th RWF - 11th SWB - 10th SWB

An attack was planned for 3 p.m. with the 16th Welsh, 17th RWF and 11th SWB taking the lead. The centre left was expected to meet with the greatest difficulties. Evans had planned the attack without artillery support but at 2.45 p.m. an artillery barrage was opened up the barrage could not be stopped and Evans' infantry units began to suffer from the drop shorts of 18 pdrs firing on the limit of their range. This bombardment carried on until 3.30 p.m.

As soon as the bombardment stopped the battalions moved in to action. The 11th SWB reached the north east corner of the Wood by 5.40 p.m. but the other two attacking units had much less luck and were held up. The attack was not a success though there was fierce fighting throughout the rest of the day. By 9.20 p.m. all the troops were back in their starting positions. The German reaction to the attack that they had halted was to realise that to continue to defend the Wood was fruitless and costly and at 8 p.m. orders were issued for their withdrawal. The evacuation began as darkness fell leaving only a few patrols within the boundary of the Wood. As dawn broke on the 12th July the units of the 62nd Brigade (21st Div.) entered the Wood to relieve the tired troops of the 38th Welsh Division and in no time at all they had moved through the Wood - hardly surprising since the Germans had already left the area.

The fighting for Mametz Wood was over. It had cost the 38th (Welsh) division 4,000 casualties - about a third of the infantry strength. The Division was relieved to a quiet part of the line for in spite of the effort that had been expended in the capture of the Wood it was to get no credit for the work. The Division was considered by some to have been inferior for a number of reasons and all neglected the fact that the wood had fallen to them in a relatively short time. Another year was to pass before the Division was given the opportunity to show its worth and at Pilckem Ridge near Ypres their honour was restored but not before many more men of the Division had fallen.