

## Messages on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1916

The National Archive file contains manuscript copies of a number of messages between Brigade and Battalion and between Battalion and Companies. These were conveyed by runners. They indicate how direly the battle was progressing and how little the top level seemed to understand about what was happening on the ground. The messages from Company level are quite poignant and matter of fact in their content and style. They also emphasise the confusion that could arise in the mud and heat of battle and the problems of poor communication, radios not yet being available.

The War Diary pages are split between messages from Brigade, Messages to Brigade and Companies and messages from companies (Appendices I II and III in the original which makes it difficult to follow the train of events. The minutiae of the full file can be accessed [here](#). Some examples are given below, roughly in chronological order.

The initial intention was to take ZENITH trench:

**At 5.00 am** Lieutenant GC Martin reported his company had reconnoitred ZENITH and found that the trench to be practically a continuous line from N28 d52 – N34b87. This line was held by 1 rifle every 50<sup>x</sup> as far as could be seen.

*There was some wire out just in front of the parapet but of very little importance. This would not have been noticed but that a very light went up and showed what appeared to be a one strand fence.*

The first battle for ZENITH and the BROWN LINE took place during the afternoon of 12<sup>th</sup> October. The situation quickly became dire:

**At 3.30 pm** 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt RW Anderson of "C" Company reported that "B" Company are in a serious situation. All officers are killed or wounded. Reinforcements are required

Similarly depressing messages came in from the other companies.

**B 6.00pm** Sgt W Russell a message : "I am awaiting orders about 80 yards in front. Germans have been reinforced. I have about 11 with me."

**By 6.10pm** Lt JW Watkins of "C" company wrote having returned to SPECTRUM trench: *Attack failed; odd parties have got forward about 200 yards but are outflanked and will have to return or be surrounded. Have only found 6 of "C" Coy up to present. Casualties are very heavy. Stretcher bearers badly needed.*

SPECTRUM was filling up with casualties and was over crowded; attempts were made to withdraw some troops.

Meanwhile, Brigade Headquarters happily assumed that ZENITH would be captured, sending the following messages at or just after 4.50pm:

**To 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers**

*Are you holding ZENITH. Brigade on left are held up. 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade have no information of their left Battalion but they have progressed as far as HAZY and 35D. Reports say DEWDROP is held by us.*

**To 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers**

*Endeavour to push patrols into ZENITH*

Following these up at 7.30pm with:

*ZENITH trench will be taken and held tonight. OC Units will arrange a combined raid in the part that is in front of our sector. RECKON will send 2 companies to help to consolidate captured ground, they will report at the Windmill N33D at 9.30 from where OC Lancashire Fusiliers and Dukes will meet them with guides. Acknowledge.*

This was met with the following somewhat ironic response from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancashire's CO, Lieutenant Colonel RR Willis:

*Am I to capture ZENITH trench tonight with 2 officers and 80 men which is all I can lay hands on at present. Suggest the disorganising action resulting from 50% officers and 70% men is unlikely to produce desired effect.*

Later messages implied Zenith had indeed been captured:

Lt/Col Willis asked Lts Watkins and Higson "Will you state what positions if any of ZENITH, i.e. the trench just in front of SPECTRUM, were captured".

The uncertainty was compounded by a message from the adjutant:

*It is reported by wounded that ZENITH trench is in good condition and untenanted. If this is so it seems a pity not to take it over. Please send patrol each to ascertain condition. If correct send 1 covering party each and take over the trench. Report early*

At 5.50 pm on the 13th October Brigade told Lt/Col Willis:

*Aeroplane reports very confidently that we have troops in ZENITH. Patrols will be sent out by RECORD and REDAN to verify this and ammunition should be dug to them tonight by REFORM.*

Only to receive the following terse reply from Willis:

*My patrols report that ZENITH held in strength by Germans. Suggest the Germans deceived the aeroplanes by wearing our helmets.*

Confusion reigned elsewhere:

In their message at 4.50pm Brigade had said: *Reports say DEWDROP is held by us.*

In reality:

*"C" Coy reported: The DUKES are in SPECTRUM not in DEWDROP as they thought. They are now sending out patrols to ascertain if DEWDROP is held by Germans or not. When the DUKES came back after the attack they occupied SPECTRUM, thinking it was DEWDROP.*

And:

*The Germans are in DEWDROP. The DUKES are now sapping through the gap and intend to re-take DEWDROP bombing. I have sent "A" Coy to support trench as well as "D" to relieve congestion. Wounded are being evacuated as quickly as possible and communication trench is being deepened. I am sapping out to the front but work is slow as not much can be done by daylight.*