



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Fromelles 1916: A Glorious Failure – What really happened!*

"The English attack in the region of Fromelles was carried out, as we have ascertained, by two strong divisions. The brave Bavarian Division, against whose front the attack was made, counted on the ground in front of them more than 2000 enemy corpses. We have brought in so far 481 prisoners, including 10 officers, together with 16 machine-guns."—German communique, July 21, 1916.

"Yesterday evening, south of Armentieres, we carried out some important raids on a front of two miles, in which Australian troops took part. About 140 German prisoners were captured."—British communique, July 20, 1916.

In this form readers of "The Argus" received their first information of the great action by Australian troops on the Western front, which has since come to be known as "the attack at Armentieres," or "the fight at Fleurbaix," but was really "the battle of Fromelles." For a long time the secrecy of war kept a veil drawn over the details of this sad page in the history of the Australian Imperial Force, but closely censored letters from members of the 8th, 14th, and 15th Infantry Brigades soon began to indicate that something more serious had happened than was at first suggested. Since then more or less accurate accounts of the battle have been in circulation, but the most interesting features had necessarily to be withheld until after the armistice. The first consecutive record, prepared from official documents and elaborated by commanding officers who actually took part in the engagement, has been prepared by Captain A. D. Ellis, M.C., of the 29th Battalion, and it is included in his "Story of the Fifth Division" (London: Hodder and Stoughton). In this the movements of the various units from the day the intention to attack at Fromelles was first announced until the work of clearing up the battlefield had been completed are carefully followed with the aid of diagrams, and even the most unmilitary reader will find much to stir him in this account of "our most glorious failure."

QUICK INTO SERVICE.

On July 13, 1916 (less than a month after its arrival in France), the 5th Australian Division (under Major-General Sir James McCay) was informed that it would participate in operations intended to prevent the enemy moving troops to the Somme front. Orders were given that the artillery preparation was to commence next day, but it was not until July 16 that all the batteries could be got into position, although it had been arranged for the attacks to be delivered on the 17th. The objectives were the enemy front and support lines on a front of about 4,000 yards, which were to be taken and held. As soon as definite information was available, all ranks threw their energies into the work of making ready. One task was the concentration of over 60,000 rounds of 18-pounder shell for the artillery, and proportionately heavy stores of ammunition, bombs, stores, &c., for the other units. All of this had to be "man handled" through crowded saps over the final stages of the journey to the front lines. The 4th Australian Divisional Artillery, as well as three 18-pounder batteries of the 121st (Imperial) Artillery Brigade, were added to the artillery of the 5th Division for the operations (making 132 field guns). Judged by later standards (205 "heavies" alone, ranging from 6 *in.* to 15 *in.* howitzers, were used at Polygon Wood), this was a comparatively weak artillery support for an attacking division, but it involved a great amount of preliminary work. When in position the guns had to make their registrations on new targets and barrage lines all within two days—during which mists prevailed—and in such a way that the enemy would not suspect that routine was being departed from. Mists and fog were not, however, all to the Australians' disadvantage, for at the appointed time on July 17 preparations were not complete, and to the relief of the exhausted workers it was decided to postpone the attack, for two days, in the hope that visibility would improve.

SEVEN HOURS BOMBARDMENT.

The artillery programme was not complicated. It comprised registration and a certain amount of wire-cutting on the days before the attack. At zero hour on the 19th, an artillery bombardment of seven hours' duration was to precede the infantry attack. It was considered that this would be sufficient to flatten the enemy front and support lines to such an extent that they would offer no serious obstacle to the infantry. At stated times throughout the seven hours' bombardment a succession, of four brief lifts to barrage lines was arranged. These lifts were to be of a few minutes' duration, and were designed to induce the enemy to believe that the infantry assault was about to commence, and

thus to cause him to come out of his underground shelters and man his parapets. At the conclusion of each lift the barrage was to fall suddenly again on to the enemy front line, where it was hoped it would cause heavy casualties to his exposed infantry and machine-gunners. For this reason shrapnel was to be used for the first two minutes after each lift, instead of high explosive. During each lift the men in the front line were instructed to show their naked bayonets and dummy figures over the parapet, in order to encourage the delusion that they were about to assault. At 6 p.m. the artillery was to lift finally to certain barrage areas behind the objectives, where it was hoped that it would afford the infantry security during its consolidation of the new positions. The medium and heavy trench mortar programme was arranged on similar lines, except that their special mission was the destruction of the enemy wire that skirted in thick, impenetrable waves the entire enemy front line. The arrangements for the infantry assault were some what simple. The three brigades were to attack each on a two-battalion frontage: the third battalion was to be employed in carrying stores to the attacking troops and in garrisoning the front line after the others had moved out of it. The fourth battalion of each brigade was to be held in reserve. The assaulting troops were to go over in four waves at distances of about 100 yards. The orders provided for the commencement of the deployment of the leading wave in No Man's Land 15 minutes before the final lift of the artillery, and as near to the enemy front as our own barrage permitted.

GERMANS ALERT.

The morning of the 19th was calm and misty, with the promise of a clear, fine day later. Reports from patrols in No Man's Land during the night indicated that the damage done to the enemy's wire was as yet inconsiderable, but no great importance was attached to that, as the chief part of the artillery preparation had still to come. The patrol reports disclosed also that the enemy was very vigilant, and that close inspection of parts of his wire was impossible owing to the presence of strong enemy posts in No Man's Land. At a quarter past 2 p.m., however, there was a marked increase in enemy counter preparation, and by 3 p.m. a heavy and continuous volume of fire was falling over the front and support line and the saps leading to them, now filled with the assembling infantry. The assembly was reported complete on the 8th Brigade front at 26 minutes past 3 p.m., on the 14th at a quarter to 4 p.m., and on the 15th at 4 p.m. The men had received specially good breakfasts and dinners, and were in high spirits. The enemy fire continued to increase in volume on the front trenches, where already three of the four company commanders of the 53rd Battalion had become casualties.

Punctually at 5.45 p.m. deployment into No Man's Land commenced, and it was hoped that the artillery barrage would be sufficiently intense to keep enemy heads down until the deployment was completed. On the extreme right of the 5th Divisional frontage the 59th Battalion was scarcely over the parapet before a little desultory musketry fire was opened on it, coming chiefly from the Sugar Loaf. Before the men had gone 30 yards this fire had grown in intensity, and a machine gun added its significant voice to the rapidly increasing fusillade. The waves pressed forward steadily, but just as steadily the enemy fire grew hotter, and the enemy front lines were seen to be thickly manned with troops. The losses mounted rapidly as the men pressed gallantly on into the withering fire. Lieut.-Colonel Harris was disabled by a shell, and Major Layh took charge of the dwindling line, which, finding a slight depression about 100 yards from the enemy parapet, halted in the scanty cover it provided, and commenced to reorganise their broken and depleted units.

THE THINNING LINES.

The deployment of the 60th Battalion was attended by similar circumstances. Heavy fire was encountered almost from the moment of its appearance over the parapet. Into this the troops pressed with the same steadiness as that displayed by the 59th, and with the same result. The ranks, especially on the right, where they were most exposed to the Sugar Loaf, thinned rapidly; but the later waves followed on without hesitation or confusion. On the left flank more headway was made. To halt in No Man's Land in these circumstances was to court certain death, and Major McRae led his troops towards the enemy parapet. It was his last act of gallant leadership. Just at the enemy wire the enfilade fire from the Sugar Loaf became intense, and there, almost at his goal, he fell. His adjutant fell beside him, and there, too, the greater part of the 60th Battalion melted away. Only on the extreme left were the enemy trenches entered by elements of the 60th. They appear to have had some temporary success, for they sent back a few prisoners; but, as the official report significantly states, "Touch with them was subsequently lost." Thus on the entire front the 15th Brigade, within half an hour from the time of assault, it was apparent that the 61st Imperial Division had failed to take the Sugar Loaf strong post, which was its allotted task, and that it was beyond human power to cross so wide a No Man's Land in the face of the machine-gun fire that streamed continuously from it. By 6.30 p.m. the remnants of the two battalions were doggedly digging in as near to the enemy parapet as they could. Thirty-five out of 39 of the assaulting officers were already killed or wounded, and

with them most of the N.C.O.'s. In these circumstances the survivors could only hold on determinedly to what they had won and await such further action as their trusted brigade commander might devise to meet the situation.

The troops of the centre and left brigades, although they had suffered heavily under the preliminary bombardment, experienced in their assault a vastly different fortune. Immune from the fatal enfilade of the Sugar Loaf, the 53rd and 54th battalions completed their deployment with comparatively slight additional casualties, and as the barrage lifted the leading wave dashed into the enemy front line. The enemy was caught in the act of manning his parapets, and some bitter hand-to-hand fighting followed.

"AS IT ALWAYS DID."

It terminated, as all such hand-to-hand fighting terminated throughout the war, in the absolute triumph of the Australians and the extinction or capitulation of the Germans. The front line thus secured, the later waves streamed over it and made for the enemy support trench, which, according to their information, lay about 150 yards behind his front line. The intervening country, torn with shell holes, and intersected by communication trenches, was difficult to cross, and it was swept by a certain amount of machine-gun and musketry fire. A careful search of the terrain failed to disclose anything in the nature of an organised enemy support line at the place indicated on the aeroplane maps, and both 53rd and 54th Battalions spent considerable time in searching for one. Except for certain fragmentary trench sections, all that could be found was an old ditch, containing a couple of feet of water. Whatever the purpose of its original construction, it was now used as a drain to convey away the water pumped by pumping plants from the deep dugouts of the front line. The non-existence of an organised support line at the place indicated in the orders was an immediate and fruitful source of complications, aggravated particularly in the 53rd Battalion by the dearth of senior officers. Instead of stepping into a definite and well constructed line, the men became dispersed in the search for one, and with night closing in and the enemy counterattacks impending the necessity to consolidate somewhere became pressing. This was done, but the line taken up lacked the continuity and lateral communications that a good trench would have afforded. In the circumstances, the 53rd Battalion's touch with the 54th on its left became intermittent, and finally ceased, while even between the elements of the 53rd itself, communication was irregular. The position of the 54th Battalion was materially better. Although three of its four

company commanders and three of its four seconds in command were casualties prior to the assault, Lieut. Colonel Cass had happily escaped injury, and was thus able to direct the consolidation of his position. By strenuous efforts the line of the drain was improved, and a moderately good fire position along the whole of the 54th Battalion frontage was soon in course of construction.

SUCCESS AND A HANDICAP.

On the left sector, Major-General Tivey was faced from the outset with the heavy responsibility of securing the extreme left flank of the entire battle frontage. At 6 p.m. the battalions stormed over what was left of the enemy wire, and were soon masters of the enemy front trench. Many Germans were killed, and a good number of prisoners taken. Pressing on to their next objective, they met with an experience precisely similar to that of the battalions of the 14th Brigade. An open ditch, containing about 3 ft. of water, 150 yards behind the enemy front line, was the only trace of enemy works in the vicinity, and though Lieut.-Colonel Toll personally explored the country for several hundred yards farther, he found no trace of an enemy support line. The search for the expected system took many of the officers and men of both battalions into the area of our own protective barrage, and not a few casualties were suffered thereby. Constrained to make the best of things, Colonel Toll ordered his battalion to consolidate along the ditch.

The general position of the 5th Divisional front at 7.30 p.m. on the 19th was that the attack was definitely held up from the right brigade sector, and successful on the central and left sectors. The 59th and 60th Battalions had suffered terribly, and in the 53rd, 54th, 31st, and 32nd Battalions, the percentage of losses, especially amongst the officers, was very high, and still mounting steadily. The line held was an indifferent one. Consolidation was difficult; the line was not continuous, and later communication along it was irregular and uncertain.

General Elliott received official news of the failure of the 61st Imperial Division (on the right) at about 7.30 p.m., by which time he was also aware that the 59th and 60th Battalions were badly cut up, and quite unable to advance without assistance. On receipt of information at 7.52 that he could use two companies of the 58th to support his attack, in conjunction with the attack of the 184th Imperial Brigade on the Sugar Loaf, he took immediate steps to make the necessary arrangement. Command of the attack was entrusted to Major Hutchinson. Few more gallant episodes than this dashing, hopeless

assault exist in the annals of any army in the world. The attack of the 61st imperial Division had been abandoned (without the battalion knowing it), and the Sugar Loaf defences were thus enabled to concentrate the whole of their organised machine-gun fire on the one thin Australian line which now endeavoured to penetrate it. With wonderful dash the companies pressed on, losing at every step, but undaunted to the end. They reached the remnants of the 59th and 60th Battalions, where they lay grimly waiting in their shallow, improvised positions. They caught them up and carried them on towards the enemy by the impetus of their own heroic charge. Impeded by broken ground and shell holes, the thinning line searched brokenly forward, reeling under the enfilade, enduring everything but the thought of failing. It was in vain. At the enemy wire the fire became hellish, irresistible. Major Hutchinson perished gloriously close to the German parapet. The attack melted into nothingness.

A STAUNCH REARGUARD.

The information that the 8th Brigade could no longer maintain the left flank against the increasing enemy pressure was received at Divisional Headquarters at about 5 a.m. on the 20th. At this moment General Munro, commanding the 1st Army, was, with Major-General McCay and other officers, at Saily, in conference on the situation, and it was immediately decided that the 14th Brigade should be withdrawn forthwith, from its precarious position. Communication was difficult at this time, and none of the first seven runners despatched succeeded in reaching Lieutenant-Colonel Cass. The eighth runner had better success, and Lieut.-Colonel Cass acknowledged the receipt of retiring instructions at 7.50 a.m. He instructed Lieut.-Colonel McConaghy, who was still in the enemy

front line, to provide from his command a rearguard to hold back the enemy during the withdrawal, and Captain Gibbons and several other officers, with about 50 men of the 55th Battalion, were detailed for this desperate duty. Long before the movement was completed. Captain Gibbon's small rearguard found itself fighting bitterly against overwhelming numbers of the victorious enemy. No one thought of himself—no one thought of yielding. No one thought of anything save holding on with his last ounce of strength till the brigade could be extricated. So one by one they fell at their posts, and of this gallant band scarce a man was left alive when the last file of their comrades had passed through the trench to safety. Thus it was at about 9 a.m. on July 20, 1916, the survivors of the 14th Brigade regained their old front line and the battle of Fromelles ended.

The total casualties among the Australians from noon on July 19 to noon on July 20 were 178 officers and 5,335 of other ranks.

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