

Ormiston house: Harry Lyell Henry – Passchendaele

Here is another account of one of the bloodiest days of WW1.

On October 4th, a few kilometres south of Passchendaele, the battle began for Broodseinde Ridge, a position the British had abandoned in 1915.

The Australians 1st and 2nd divisions were thrown into battle again, despite their commanders' belief that they were worn out. Little did the High Command realise that at the moment of their attack the Germans also planned an advance. Both sides pummelled each other with artillery and then the infantry of each met, staring at each other from only 30metres apart.

The Australian gunners fired first and the infantry attacked the Germans in a bayonet onslaught. Broodseinde was a great victory for the Allies and the German leadership officially recorded October 4th as "a black day". The three Australian divisions lost 6500 men.



Here is another account by Green, F.C.: The Fortieth: A Record of the 40th Battalion, A.I.F. Hobart, 1922.

4th October 1917

After the 39th Battalion reached their objective, the 40th Battalion moved through without halt, as the barrage had gone on. Owing to the heavy opposition and the mud conditions we had been unable to follow it closely. From the 39th Battalion objective a stiff fight against the heaviest opposition began. On the top of the ridge the trench system and line of pill-boxes along it seemed alive with men and machine guns, and heavy fire was also coming from Bellevue Spur on the front of the New Zealanders.

The only possible way to advance was from shell-hole to shell-hole by short rushes. To add to our difficulties, there was a thick belt of wire immediately in front of us, which had very few gaps in it. On these gaps the enemy had trained machine guns, and we dribbled through in ones and twos, but dead and wounded remained in each gap. Casualties were very heavy, and when B Company swung to the left to avoid an impassable bog a big gap opened. This was filled by the prompt action of Lieut. J. J. Gatenby, who signalled to A Company, and two platoons of A Company, under Lieut. N. R. Meagher, filled the gap. On the right was a bigger gap, and the remaining two platoons of C Company, under Capt. H. J. Dumaresq, rushed forward from reserve on to our right flank. The machine gun fire had become very heavy, and B Company were singularly unfortunate in the way of casualties. In front of his company the tall figure of Capt. McVilly stood out, calling his company to follow him, but before going far this gallant officer was seriously wounded. Lieut. J. J. Gatenby was also badly wounded whilst leading what appeared to be a forlorn hope, and Lieut. E. Boyes was the only officer left with the company. The situation looked critical.

All companies were making slow progress under a perfect tornado of machine-gun fire, but D Company rose to the occasion. Captain Ruddock worked his company through the New Zealand sector along partly dead ground till he got on to the left of Hamburg Redoubt, where he was able to bring fire on to the redoubt and the enemy's line of pill-boxes on top of the ridge. The ridge appeared to be held by about 500 of the enemy, and D Company's fire, sweeping across the position, appeared to demoralise those of the enemy who were not safe in their pill-boxes. This gave the other companies their chance for a frontal attack, and Sergt. Lewis McGee, of B Company, made a start on a pill-box immediately in front of Hamburg Redoubt. This pill-box contained a number of the enemy, who had their machine gun in a recess on the top of the fort, and were firing straight at B Company, the machine gun bullets cutting the tops of the shell-holes where our men were taking cover.

Sergt. McGee rushed straight at the pill-box in the face of what looked like certain death, but he got across that 50 yards of open ground and shot the crew with his revolver. Hamburg Redoubt was the next point of resistance, and Lieut. N. R. Meagher rushed this with a platoon of A Company, but the machine guns there got them, and Lieut. Meagher fell in that gallant rush.

The assault was at once taken up by another platoon of A Company under Lieut. A. R. Grant, who rushed with his platoon and captured the redoubt, with 4 machine guns and 25 prisoners. Hamburg Redoubt consisted of a double pill-box partly surrounded by a moat. It had originally been the site of a farm, and among the ruins of the farm was a sniper's nest that was overlooked by A Company, who moved on after capturing the redoubt. As they moved on they were shot at from behind by the snipers, which was a most unfortunate occurrence for the snipers captured there.

Meanwhile D Company had worked forward in sections on to the objective, and there had a short hand-to-hand fight among the wire, pill-boxes, and trenches on the objective. Dab Trench and Dagger Trench were taken by a rush by D, A, and B Companies, while two platoons of C Company arrived on the right of the objective about the same time. C Company had worked forward under heavy fire to the shelter of the winding road which ran across our front about 150 yards from the objective, and were under cover from the heavy machine-gun fire from the objective. From here they worked forward from shell-hole to shell-hole.

A Lewis gun team, under No. 665, Pte. J. A. Freestone, got out on the right flank and opened fire on the enemy among the pill-boxes in front, and under cover of this fire the right of the objective was gained by small parties rushing forward. The honour of getting on to the objective first in C Company was won by Cpl E. D. Weston, who beat everybody else over 100 yards of open ground. He was wounded during the race, but that did not stop his offensive spirit, for he captured the first pill-box single-handed, and was then reinforced by his section.

Capt. H. J. Dumaresq also successfully led a similar party, and after a short fight the enemy surrendered. Too much credit cannot be given to Cap. H. H. Dumaresq for the admirable manner in which he handled his company. Although in reserve, he personally kept in touch with the leading companies, and at the right moment and in the right place threw his company into the fight with telling effect, clearing up the unsatisfactory position between the 40th Battalion and the 11th Brigade.

The capture of the final objective on the Broodseinde Ridge was probably one of the hardest fights the battalion ever had. The line of pill-boxes with the wire and trenches along the front made a very strong defensive position. It was gained by sheer determination. It was impossible to take it by a frontal attack, and the action of D Company in taking advantage of the dead ground and working round the flank from where they gave covering fire, was probably the action which turned the scales in our favour. Approximately 300 prisoners were captured there with 17 machine guns.

When the objective was finally won at 9.15 a.m., two incidents happened in front. Immediately in front of D Company was a concrete building, from which came a party of about 12 of the enemy, who fired with rifles and revolvers. One of our Lewis guns opened and wiped the party out. A couple of men went across to attend to any of them who might be wounded, and found that eight of them were officers.

Another big pill-box was seen about 100 yards on our left in front of the New Zealanders, and C.S.M. H. Boden and No. 956, Sergt. S.J. Barrett, went out to see what was in it. A shot was fired at them from a loophole, and Sergt.-Major Boden had a flying shot at the rifleman in the loophole with his revolver. The rifleman withdrew hastily, and a stick with a piece of white rag was waved vigorously from the loophole. They went to the door and invited the occupants to come out.

A Battalion commander and 70 men came out, and were sent towards our line. The New Zealanders who were coming up on our left saw this large body of men, and apparently thought it was an attack coming, and a Lewis gun opened fire. The enemy prisoners ran for the shelter of our line, which increased the Lewis gun fire of the New Zealanders considerably, and explanations had to be made to Zealanders before they would attractive target.

Our casualties had been heavy and we were reinforced by two 39th Battalion shortly after objective. This party remained following day. There was at the shortage of ammunition, but the good deal relieved by the efforts Battalion behind us, who sent up spare, and continued to assist us whole operation by foraging for supply of which seemed to have some unknown reason. For the Battalion we were more than

Covering parties with Lewis guns about 100 yards in front of the Lewis gunners had a busy time the enemy making back towards and dodging about among the Augustus Wood. Our snipers in sniping the enemy in front. bang" guns were also located

in front, near Friesland Copse. An enemy machine gun was mounted, and did some useful sniping at the crews as they moved out of the gun-pits for ammunition. These "whizz-bangs" were firing at point blank range, and seriously interfered with the work of consolidation, till our own artillery had a shoot at their position and silenced them.

The captured pill-boxes along the objective, were very strong. Most of them were machine-gun positions, but there was one Brigade headquarters, two Quartermasters' stores, and various other places interesting to the many "souvenir" hunters. At the captured Brigade headquarters our forward signal-station was set up, where the signallers on duty smoked large cigars and drank good bottled beer at the enemy's expense.



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