

Lecture for Zonnebeke: 25th April 1915

[composed by Andrew Lucas to accompany the launch of *Fighting the Kaiser's War* and *The Saxons at Zonnebeke* at the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 on 25th April 2015]

On 25 April 1915 the Second Battle of Ypres has already been raging for three days. ZONNEBEKE is still inside the British salient east of Ypres, only 0.66 miles / 1 km from the front line at BROODSEINDE. The Saxon / Württemberg XXVII.RK holds the German front opposite, from the southwestern corner of POLYGON WOOD in the south (about 1.8 miles / 2.9 km south and slightly west of ZONNEBEKE) - where RIR 248 hold the line - to west of PASSCHENDAELE, where Prussian 38. Ldw. Brig. is attached to the corps.

If you try to follow the events I am about to describe on the map, you should find that the layout of the roads in this area is very much as it was at the time despite the apocalyptic devastation that followed in 1917. The main difference is the disappearance of the YPRES-ROULERS RAILWAY, which exists only as a path with occasional remnants of the track.

Sturmbrigade von Schmieden

However the focus of the ongoing battle is to the north. To spearhead the attack here, XXVII.RK secretly formed the ad-hoc *Sturmbrigade von Schmieden* on 23 April from parts of four different regiments, all of which still held their original sectors with their remaining troops. *Regt. Reußner* consisted of two battalions and the staff of RIR 241, plus one battalion from RIR 242; *Regt. Wilhelmi* of two battalions and the staff of LIR 78, plus one battalion from RIR 244. In corps reserve is *Regt. von Heygendorff* (comprising the staff from RIR 245, with one battalion each from RIR 245, 246 and 247).

Following the gas attack on 24 April, *Regt. Reußner* overran 3rd Canadian Brigade and reached Hill 32 (about midway between ST. JULIEN and S'GRAVENSTAFEL, and roughly 1.6 miles / 2.6 km northwest of Zonnebeke). However with effective field artillery support 2nd Canadian Brigade had just about held off *Regt. Wilhelmi*, and (with British reinforcements hastily inserted that evening) still occupied their old front line at the northeastern tip of the salient.

On 25 April the *Sturmbrigade* was to continue the offensive, with *Regt. von Heygendorff* committed from reserve. Together with Matrosen-Regiment 5 on its right flank and 51.RD / XXVI.RK further right, *Regt. Reußner* began advancing south about dawn. However the Germans were soon forced to halt and assume a defensive posture to beat off repeated large-scale but poorly coordinated Anglo-Canadian counterattacks. During the initial advance Major Hans-Heinrich von Wolf of II./241 was shot through the thigh leading his battalion in the front line. According to the regimental history, he snapped at a man who stopped to bind the wound - "*Was, du hast ein Gewehr? Laß das die machen, die dazu befohlen sind!*" (What, you have a rifle don't you? Leave it to those who've been ordered to deal with it). The major never rejoined the regiment and was killed on the Somme in 1916.

Due to this slow advance the planned attack of *Regt. von Heygendorff* was postponed until the afternoon while artillery was brought into position against the Anglo-Canadian line on the Strombeke. Major von Heygendorff's men moved out again from POELKAPELLE about 3pm and occupy jumping-off positions in the lines of 38. Ldw. Brig. After a thorough bombardment by field artillery and 15cm howitzers, III./245 and II./247 began their assault in conjunction with elements of *Regt. Wilhelmi* on their right. By 6pm, the commanders of A & D Coy. / 1/8th DLI and 4 Coy. / 8th Canadian Btn. concluded that they must either withdraw under cover of darkness or be overrun. Probably by this time *Regt. von Heygendorff* had stormed the *Erdwerk* (possibly KRONPRINZ FARM) on the north bank of the Strombeke. Confusion in the Anglo-Canadian chain of command meant that many of the defenders northwest of S'GRAVENSTAFEL did not join the withdrawal, and the Germans took many prisoners. RG / RIR 245 claims 300 prisoners and 4 MGs, RG / RIR 247 claims 200 prisoners and 6

MGs; it's not clear whether these are independent claims for the individual battalions, or whether that for RIR 245 is actually for the whole *Regt. von Heyendorff*.

Pte. Herbert Tustin of "A" Company, 1/8th DLI was cut off in a sandbagged shelter near BOETLEER FARM with half a dozen other men and a Canadian officer. His inexperienced territorial battalion had only left England a week before and been thrown into the battle a few days ago, so they were utterly unprepared for this situation. After much anxious discussion Tustin ventured out to investigate about 8pm:

'I stepped from the door of the shelter with my bayonet lowered, and then I saw a rifle muzzle not ten yards distant, a ring of steel with a hard grey eye above it. As the ring steadied, I saved my life by flinging myself to the ground. Before I could rise I was seized by rough hands, disarmed, and dragged to my feet, to find myself surrounded by sinister looking men in the hated field grey. I realised my life was mine no longer, that I was a prisoner of war.A few minutes previously we had been trying to kill the men who now had us in their power. What hope could we have that they would forego their revenge? Yet our lives were spared, and we were subjected to no worse brutality than a playful prod with a bayonet. We were jeered at by our triumphant captors and menaced with fists, rifle butts, and pistols, but, so far as I know, none of our little group suffered serious damage.

There were cases in other parts of the line where no quarter was given. We heard later that our wounded were dispatched without mercy, even our battalion's medical officer and his orderly being shot at close quarters [they survived] as they were bandaging the wounded.

... Atrocious deeds have been committed by soldiers of every nation, and in the suspense and stress of the moment, I felt our lives were hanging on a very slender thread, for our captors were in a state of wild excitement, cursing and shouting, pulling and pushing, as they wrenched open our ammunition pouches and examined the clips of cartridges we had remaining. I resented their insults bitterly, unable at the time to make any allowances. I felt they were Huns manifesting Hunnishness, but though I longed to resist, I realised that any attitude other than sheep-like passivity would be fatal.'

He goes on to describe how he and another man were taken aside to a hollow and threatened with summary execution. The German infantrymen apparently believed that some of their comrades had been shot with dum-dum bullets (filed down to expose the lead core and cause more serious injuries) and were eager for revenge. Such accusations were common on both sides, usually based on misinterpretation of gunshot wounds - for instance ricochets would often deform in a similar way to 'dum-dums'. And of course, one idiot found with actual filed bullets on his person would be enough to convince an angry enemy that 'they were all at it'. Fortunately for Tustin however, a German officer rode up and angrily dispersed the would-be executioners with a wave of his sword.

'He looked us up and down contemptuously as though we were dogs, but, moved by the sight of my companion's hanging shoulder and blood-stained tunic, tore out his own field dressing and threw it to me, signing that I was to bandage the wound. Then after shouting orders to two men to look after us, he galloped away into the darkening shadows, leaving two Englishmen hastily revising their opinion of his race.'

Tustin would survive the war in German captivity, and his book ***Escaping from the Kaiser: The Dramatic Experiences of a Tommy POW*** is heartily recommended.

53. Reserve-Division

25th April also saw serious fighting on the front east of ZONNEBEKE. Due to the donation of four battalions, one regimental and one brigade staff for the *Sturmbrigade*, the 53. Reserve-Division (holding the front from east of S'GRAVENSTAFEL to east of MOLENAARELSTHOEK) was much weaker than it appeared. However it was under orders to appear as active as possible, in order to pin as many enemy troops as possible to its front. For several days the division had therefore been busy

with probes and mock attacks, intended both to draw the enemy's attention and to assess their vulnerability to a real assault. For instance one of our featured diarists in our book, Ersatz-Reservist Hans Georg Brückner of RIR 242 (a young teacher from Bautzen, who tragically died of illness on his first day home from captivity in 1920) describes a mock attack on either 22 or 23 April:

'We set up dummies... by hanging greatcoats on scaling ladders with helmets tied on the top. At 9pm precisely we held them up a little above the parapet - as if we intended to launch an assault - and when the whistle sounded the entire battalion occupying the regimental positions began to bellow "Hurra!"'

This immediately provoked half an hour of frenzied small arms and artillery fire; Brückner continues:

'Under such circumstances our leaders declined to make a further "assault test" of this sort, which should have taken place at 2 o'clock, as well as a real attack in the morning, and so our position only has to be held against a breakthrough.'

The attack on 25th April was made by 106. Reserve-Infanterie-Brigade (RIR 242, RIR 244 and RJB 25), which held the front north of BROODSEINDE. It seems that the decision to attack was made at quite a late stage. The British 28th Division opposite had been bombarded all morning, mainly with shrapnel and later with high explosive shells and *T-Granaten* (tear gas shells). However there weren't enough heavy guns to do serious damage to a well-entrenched opponent, and in places the trenches were so close together that the Saxons had to evacuate their front line during the bombardment. This made it difficult to coordinate the attack, while RJB 25 was put out of action altogether when about five 21cm *T-Granaten* landed in their midst, collapsing a dugout and flooding their trenches with tear gas.

About 2pm the bombardment lifted to the British rear, before the Saxon infantry had reoccupied their front line. Such intense British rifle and machine-gun fire followed that on the right (north of the railway line) the partly-gassed *Jägers* judged it 'insane' to proceed. Nevertheless RIR 242 in the centre and RIR 244 on the left both attacked, each regiment with the majority of its two available battalions divided into two waves. South of Broodseinde, three companies of RIR 243 and some attached *Pioniere* made a small supporting attack.

It seems that the *Jägers* had been correct. Most of the attackers soon ended up pinned down and hastily digging in in the muddy morass between the lines, and would later either retire to the German trenches or connect their rough positions back to them during the night. The failure of the attack was very quickly apparent, and Oberst Straube of RIR 244 was able to stop his regiment's second wave from advancing and adding to the butcher's bill. However in three places the attackers had broken into the British line.

10. Kompagnie had been the first of RIR 244 to break cover, and Hptm. Krause, Lt. Seifert, Offz. Stv. Reichelt and about fifty men reached the lines of 2nd East Surreys. Here they were cut off and overwhelmed in hand-to-hand fighting, during which *Bataillonstambour* (battalion bugler) Uffz. Heilmann brained two Tommies with his signal horn and Offz. Stv. Reichelt was killed. Hptm. Krause and about thirty survivors were ultimately taken prisoner while trying to break out.

On the left flank of RIR 242 was the 12. Kompagnie under Hptm. d. L. a.D. Doktor Oskar Dähnhardt, a distinguished classical scholar and rector of the Nikolai-Gymnasium in Leipzig, who had voluntarily transferred to the front from a Landsturm battalion so as not to 'stand behind' his pupils. His company managed to occupy part of the British line, taking some prisoners and several machine-guns. However they were soon driven out in a counterattack by 8th Middlesex and Hptm. Dähnhardt killed; his body was not recovered until the advance of 4th May.

In the centre of RIR 242's attack front was the 10. Kompagnie under the remarkable Oltn. a.D. Harry Link. Born in New York, he had travelled from South America via Italy in December 1914 while ill and

'under the most difficult circumstances' to report for duty. He would later command the divisional *Sturmabteilung* (assault detachment), and ultimately win the Ritterkreuz of the Militär-Sankt-Heinrichs-Orden (the highest Saxon and oldest German gallantry award) as a company commander in Sturm-Bataillon 8. Accompanied by elements of 4. Kompagnie on their left and 9. Kompagnie on their right, Oltn. Link's men took and held about sixty yards of the British line south of the railway, despite stubborn resistance and repeated counterattacks in which Oltn. Scheube (commanding 9. Komp.) was severely wounded and Leutnant d.R. Scholze (commanding 4. Komp.) killed. This captured position was prepared for defence and joined to the old front line via saps during the night, in the expectation that the British would not take its loss lying down.

54. Reserve-Division

In their sector south and east of Polygon Wood, 54. Reserve-Division was on high alert all day both to support the operations of 53.RD and for a possible gas attack. A thousand chlorine cylinders had been emplaced by the so-called *Stinkpioniere* in the RIR 246 and 247 sectors since 8th March, but the wind there had never been favourable. This situation would not change before the British withdrawal from Polygon Wood, and ultimately the unused cylinders would be dug up unused for use elsewhere.

However the day did not pass without losses even for 54.RD. The unit I represent today, RFAR 54, had been firing in support of 53.RD. While acting as forward observers in the trenches south of Broodseinde, Vizewachtmeister Kramer of 7. Batterie was killed in action and Ltn. Schmid of 8. Batterie wounded.

WORLD SUMMARY

While the operations of 53.RD to our east here were merely diversions for the major attacks taking place to our north and northwest, the entire offensive later known as the Second Battle of Ypres was also merely a local operation in the larger scheme of things. German strategy was focused on the Eastern Front, where German and Austro-Hungarian forces were concentrating for the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive which was to open on 2 May. This devastatingly successful campaign would force the Russians to withdraw from Poland and most of Austrian Galicia by September. Here too gas was to be used on a large scale, having proved its value under field conditions in Flanders.

In London, the Italian government (formerly allied by treaty with Germany and Austria-Hungary) was concluding a secret agreement to enter the war on the side of the Entente in exchange for large swathes of Austro-Hungarian territory. Italy's entry into the war would be announced before Second Ypres was over, to be greeted with derision and contempt by the Germans.

Meanwhile in the embattled Ottoman Empire, mass arrests of Armenian intellectuals and religious and political leaders had begun on the night of 24th-25th April. Within a month a massive campaign of deportations and exterminations was underway against the Christian peoples of the empire, which would ultimately claim over a million lives.

And of course as you all know, on 25th April the Entente opened a second front against the Turks at Gallipoli. I will now hand over to my father Michael Lucas for a vivid eyewitness account of the landings.

[my father would have given a version of his talk on Captain Pirie and his diary at this point]