

## Lecture for Zonnebeke: 26th April 1915 / 2015

[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 26th April 2015]

On 26 April 1915 the Second Battle of Ypres has already been raging for four days. ZONNEBEKE is still inside the (increasingly precarious) 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 our north. To spearhead the attack here, XXVII.RK had 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 was *Regt. von Heyendorff* (comprising the staff from RIR 245, with one battalion each from RIR 245, 246 and 247).

Following the gas attack on 24th April, *Regt. Reußner* overran 3<sup>rd</sup> 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). The *Sturmbrigade's* advance on the morning of 25<sup>th</sup> April was blunted by repeated large-scale but poorly coordinated counterattacks. However by evening the British and Canadians had been forced to evacuate the last of the original Canadian trenches north of S'GRAVENSTAFEL under heavy pressure from *Regt. von Heyendorff*, which took hundreds of prisoners. The next British defensive line lay south of the S'GRAVENSTAFEL-MOSSELMARKT road, anchored at Berlin wood by the left of 28<sup>th</sup> Division - which was otherwise facing eastward along its entire frontage against 53. and 54.RD. A force of survivors of several units under Lt.-Col. Turnbull of 1/8th DLI was still holding out east of Boetleer Farm that night due to confusion in the chain of command, but were forced to withdraw soon after daylight on 26<sup>th</sup> April.

The focus of the wider battle on the 26<sup>th</sup> was further west, where the Indian Lahore Division launched a major counterattack on XXVI.RK; this would temporarily preclude the commitment of German reserves and artillery resources in support of the *Sturmbrigade*. On Hill 32 the day's attack orders reached the staff of *Regt. Reußner* at 1am. The forces at the disposal of the energetic Oberstleutnant Kurt Reußner (a snappy dresser who was never seen anywhere without his monocle and riding crop) now included elements of *Regt. Wilhelmi* as well as some naval infantry from Matrosen-Regiment 5 who had freely attached themselves to the Saxons. Further north, *Regt. von Heyendorff* had probed forward across the Strombeke against Lt.-Col. Turnbull's positions during the night.

The course of the fighting on 26<sup>th</sup> April is confused and difficult to interpret from the available sources, in particular the frustratingly vague account in the published history of RIR 241. In broad terms, *Regt. Reußner* plus the naval infantry and elements of *Regt. Wilhelmi* advanced southeastward from Hill 32 into the valley of the Hanebeke where they came up against what was now the main British position. Meanwhile *Regt. von Heyendorff* pushed forward to the S'GRAVENSTAFEL-MOSSELMARKT road in protracted fighting with British rearguards and stragglers.

Contrary to my interpretation in *The Saxons at Zonnebeke* and to the impression given by British sources, I now believe that the claim of Leutnant Weißbach's 5. Kompagnie / RIR 244 to have reached 'the crossroads' first actually refers to the so-called 'Bombarded Crossroads' on the Langemarck-Zonnebeke road (1.4 Miles / 2.3 km northwest of Zonnebeke). The day before this company had become intermingled with III Batl. / LIR 78, which advanced on the right of Regt. von Heygendorff and therefore ended up alongside Reußner's force. Reaching the crossroads early on 26<sup>th</sup> April, Weißbach's company quickly cleared the nearby farmhouses of the enemy and captured a British telephone station - the crew of which had wisely chosen to play dead. A British machine-gun captured the day before by Krfrw. Jungnickel was brought back into action and deployed in defence of the crossroads. However Reußner's foothold south of Hill 32 was a tenuous one.

Regt. von Heygendorff reached the S'GRAVENSTAFEL crossroads early that morning, apparently together with some naval infantry. Here some of the enemy were surprised and overwhelmed while digging in, but the attackers then encountered the main positions of 1<sup>st</sup> Hampshires beyond the village. Vigorously supported by their field artillery, the defenders of the northeastern tip of the British salient prevented any attempt to cross the GRAVENSTAFEL RIDGE and relieve the pressure on Reußner's force throughout the day. Despite reinforcement of Regt. von Heygendorff by the loan of the three available companies of RIR 244 from Regt. *Wilhelmi*, the *Sturmbrigade* would make no further progress that day. Nevertheless the capture of S'GRAVENSTAFEL was a huge morale boost for the Württembergers of RIR 247. As their regimental history puts it:

*About 9 o'clock the fog lifted, and an astonishing sight met our eyes: there below lay Zonnebeke, the shot-up windmill on the hill in front of it was 'de kleine Molen'. And there in the distance, two spectral and leaden towers - that was Ypres, which we now saw for the first time! Ypres, the object of so much fighting, around which the ring of steel was now tightening. And with our binoculars we could see right into the enemy dugouts near Broodseinde. They were facing the same way as us! And now something came howling over through the air, and a black cloud of smoke erupted from the ground to our front. Our own artillery opposite was firing and hitting the enemy in front of us.*

During the night of 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> April most of the troops in the tenuous bridgehead south of Hill 32 were withdrawn, including III. Batl. / LIR 78 and 5. Kompagnie / RIR 244. A final rearguard of eighty men from RIR 241 retired from the valley of the Hanebeke the following night, carrying large quantities of captured munitions. The *Sturmbrigade* would be dissolved on 29<sup>th</sup> April (with the exception of Regt. von Heygendorff) and its elements returned to their donor regiments. The next assault on the northeastern apex of the salient would not be made until 3<sup>rd</sup> May, by elements of RIR 241, RIR 243 and Regt. von Heygendorff with heavy artillery support. After the British retirement the following night, units of XXVII. Reserve-Korps would finally enter Zonnebeke unopposed from the north and east early on 4<sup>th</sup> May.

### **53. Reserve-Division**

Meanwhile on the front east of Zonnebeke where the British 28<sup>th</sup> Division faced the Saxon 53. Reserve-Division, RIR 242 and 244 had launched a diversionary attack on the afternoon of 25<sup>th</sup> April between Broodseinde and the Ypres-Roulers railway.

In the teeth of withering defensive fire, RIR 242 had captured what the war diary of 2<sup>nd</sup> East Surreys describes as 'about sixty yards' of their line south of (but not immediately adjacent to) the railway. That evening two companies of 2nd King's Shropshire Light Infantry were committed to 28<sup>th</sup> Division to stabilise the situation. Their first counterattack was launched by two platoons of the battalion's 'X' Company with machine-gun support at about 1.30am (German time) on 26<sup>th</sup> April, and was quickly beaten off by the thoroughly alert and well-entrenched Saxons:

*The enemy was too strong and the attack failed with the loss of all the officers engaged. Lieutenant Biddle-Cope, who was killed, was last seen standing on the German parapet, with a revolver in each*

*hand, firing into the trench, having gallantly left his machine-guns, and rushed forward to join in the assault. Captain Bryant, who had a high standard of duty, and was absolutely without fear, also went over with his company, and reached the German line, where he was shot down. He succumbed later to his wounds in a German hospital, his widow afterwards receiving a letter from the German staff praising his bravery. Lieutenant Blackett, another gallant officer, was killed, and Lieutenant Spink wounded.*

Lieutenant Evans led a second assault by the men of 'X' Company at 4.30am. This too was swiftly repelled, and Lieutenant Evans wounded and captured. These desperate counterattacks cost 2<sup>nd</sup> KSLI a total of 32 men in addition to the aforementioned officers.

RIR 242 spent the rest of 26<sup>th</sup> April consolidating and expanding their position. A sap driven northwards toward the railway *behind* the adjacent British trench increasingly threatened to cut off that part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> East Surreys' line. A third unsuccessful attempt to eliminate this threat would be made by 2nd KSLI and 8th Middlesex on 28<sup>th</sup> April, before the British withdrawal on the night of 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> May left this entire area far in the German rear until 1917.

### **WORLD SUMMARY**

In the wider scheme of things, the entire offensive later known as the Second Battle of Ypres was merely a local operation and a 'field trial' for large scale gas warfare. On 26 April, the gas unit soon to be numbered as Pionier-Regiment 36 entrained at Wervik for transport to the Eastern Front. There they would join the German and Austro-Hungarian forces 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.

On 26 April, the Italian government (formerly allied by treaty with Germany and Austria-Hungary) concluded an agreement with the Entente to enter the war on their side in exchange for large swathes of Austro-Hungarian territory. Italy's declaration of war was made known to the German troops before Second Ypres was over, and generally greeted with derision and contempt.

Meanwhile in the embattled Ottoman Empire, mass arrests of Armenian intellectuals and religious and political leaders had begun on the night of 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> 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 25<sup>th</sup> April the Entente had 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]