

THE BATTLE OF DOIRAN – 24-25 April 1917

Meanwhile, preparations were being pushed vigorously on for an attack in force on the Doiran-Vardar front. Success here, as already explained, was specially to be desired, but it was just here that the Bulgarians had their best troops and their heaviest guns, not to mention their most formidable positions, both naturally and artificially.

Whatever ideas may have prevailed at the Allied Headquarters the Twenty-Sixth Division, who knew the Pip Ridge and the Petit Couronne, could not be under any illusions as to the task before them, though realizing its portentous difficulties did not diminish the 10th's determination to achieve success.

But the Salonica Army was an international force : General Milne, the British G.O.C., was not an independent command and had to fall in with his Commander-in-Chief's projects; and without further knowledge of General Sarrail's ideas it would be futile to inquire into his motives for hurling at such a position two British Divisions, inadequately supported by heavy artillery, and not even assisted by simultaneous attacks at other points. Suffice it to say that if, as one might suppose, it was intended to follow the British attack up by attacks elsewhere, to use it to draw the Bulgarians' attention and cause them to denude other portions of the line, it is difficult to understand why neither French nor Serbians nor any other contingent attempted to profit by the great sacrifices which the British had been called upon to make.

The attack was delivered by the Twenty-Sixth Division on the right and the Twenty-Second on their left. Once again the d 10th Devons' objective was Petit Couronne, only this time it was to be attacked, not from La Tortue, but from Rockley and Sidbury Hills, and to be held, not raided. The battalion was to assemble in the Green Pan, and on the barrage lifting off O4. A and D Companies (Captains Passmore and Lovett) were to storm that point while the guns continued shelling O5 ; twenty minutes later B and C (Captain Moore and Lieut. Partridge) were to push on to O5. Battalion headquarters formed the middle of the column, in rear of which were to come carriers—there was to be no inability this time to retain a position from want of bombs and ammunition—and a special party under Captain Lyons detailed for various tasks of consolidation.

Had it been possible to conceal the preparations from the enemy the chances of success would have been much improved; unluckily, there was little the Bulgarians could not see from Grand Couronne, and their artillery activity, their frequent barrages and constant turning on of searchlights proclaimed their watchfulness. " Already a liberal user of Verey Lights," one officer writes of them, the enemy " became even more extravagant."

The 10th had come up to Rockley and Sidbury Hills some days before the night fixed for the attack, April 24th, and at 8 p.m. were awaiting the signal to advance. " There was no elation in the air," writes one account, " rather a sullen determination ; the wags were silent and there were fewer jokes than usual.

The battalion had been on Petit Couronne before and thought itself extremely lucky to have got off with 140 casualties, and that was only a raid." But there was no hanging back when the order came, and the battalion pushed steadily forward up the Ravine, forming a column over 600 yards in length. Its head had reached a waterfall North of Rockley Hill with more and more Verey lights rising on the hills above, when suddenly the enemy turned on searchlights and saw the thin line of men struggling forward. Promptly their barrage descended with most disastrous results. In that confined space, with the men pent in between precipitous rocks, the bursting effect of the high explosive was multiplied many times, bullets and fragments of bombs and shells ricocheting off the hard rock instead of burying themselves in the ground. Casualties were terrible. One shell alone accounted for nearly the whole battalion headquarters, Lieut. Miller, the Signal Officer, was killed with most of his men, Lieut. Mercer, the Adjutant, was badly wounded, the R.A. Liaison Officer was missing. Fortunately, Colonel Howard survived and carried on, though himself concussed and wounded and deprived at the start of the fight of the machinery for controlling his battalion in action.

Unluckily, there was not much of his battalion to control. Pushing forward to the Green Pan he found most of the leading companies, A and D, collected there and that Captains Lovett and Passmore had their men well in hand ; D, indeed, had escaped fairly lightly. The R.E. party had, fortunately, also arrived, and at " Zero " their Bangalore torpedo blew a gap in the enemy wire, whereupon A and D streaming through stormed O4 as if a whole intact brigade was behind them. The Bulgarians fought hard, but Captains Lovett and Passmore gave their men a splendid lead and the hill was carried, dug-outs and shell-holes being carefully searched. Had reinforcements been forthcoming O5 might have been taken too, but B and C had caught the worst of the barrage and had been almost wiped out. The enemy's guns could not reach the Green Pan, but lower down the Ravine they dealt havoc. Captain Moore fell terribly wounded, but did not cease to urge on his men, crying, " Stick it, B." From above," writes one officer, " it looked like a huge cauldron, to those within it rapidly became a living shambles. The explosions in its rocky bowls were deafening, and flying rock dealt death just as surely as metal." Still, there was no hesitating and, in Colonel Howard's words, "it is to the everlasting credit of the 10 th Devons that a few small groups managed somehow to get through the inferno in the Ravine and to find their way to their comrades on the hill top." More men would have probably got through, but that to add to the confusion, some of another battalion, whose attack had been repulsed, first withdrew through the remnants of B and C, and then rallying and going forward again made matters worse than ever.

Meanwhile, Colonel Howard had established an improvised headquarters at the top of the Green Pan and Lce.-Cpl. Trounson, one of the few surviving signallers, managed, by using the Colonel's electric torch, to get into touch with the brigade and report the capture of O4 ; but the position on that hill was none the less precarious. A and D had ousted the enemy from a trench called Z34, on the neck between O4 and O5, but could get no further. Bombing parties of the enemy worked along YII, a trench running along the reverse slope of the neck, while Z35, on the Eastern edge of O5, was held in force. Four Lewis guns had reached O4 and did good work, while 2nd-Lieut. Greenslade contrived to get one of the brigade's trench-mortars into position, and was most effective till he had fired away all his ammunition whereupon he blew up his mortar. Corporal Bennett, who had been prominent in the attack, reorganized his platoon after its officer and sergeant had fallen, and did great work in bombing dug-outs and mopping up. Ptes. Barker and Seager also, the only survivors of a bombing party, were conspicuous in repulsing counter-attacks. But to maintain the foothold the Devons had secured reinforcements and supplies were needed, and neither were forthcoming in sufficient quantity, though 2nd-Lieut. Maunder, of the D.C.L.I., brought up about 40 of his men, who lent valuable help, and despite the dispersion of the carrying party by the barrage a few men made a second attempt to get forward and this time got their ammunition through. Moreover, the attack as a whole had failed ; no other battalion had accomplished as much as the Devons, and accordingly, about 2 a.m., the brigade sent orders to Colonel Howard to withdraw.

Shortly before this, Captain Lovett and Lieut. Hancock had made a final and desperate attempt to rush O5 at the head of a handful, some 20 or so, whom they collected. It was a gallant but hopeless effort. Both officers were killed and nearly all their men. Captain Passmore, by this time the only un wounded officer on the hill, maintained the defence for some time longer, clinging on even after the headquarter party had quitted the hill, for the Colonel's message telling him to withdraw never reached him ; but as it got light he realised the position was untenable and decided to evacuate the hill while he could still save some of his men. Just before they went, the Bulgarians, who had been massing in Z35, advanced against Z34 with much bugling, cheering and shouting, but apparently no great stomach for the fight, for they were easily repulsed. Two Lewis gunners covered the withdrawal, one of them, Pte. Matthews, remained till all the rest had gone and actually got away himself; the other, Pte. Glanville, acted as a flank-guard to cover the retirement against molestation from O3. Even after Captain Passmore left, some isolated men seem to have remained on the hill, for as late as 9 o'clock they were seen making their way down the slopes and trying to run the gauntlet of the enemy's rifles and machine-guns which were sweeping the ravine.

When all survivors were gathered in, little over 200 answered their names out of 650 who had

started to the attack. Of the officers, Captain Lovett, Lieuts. Partridge, Miller and Hancock, 2nd-Lieuts. Crimmin, E. D. Wilson, Prynne and Thorne, were killed or missing, Captain Moore died of wounds shortly afterwards, Captain Lyons, Lieuts. Mercer, Ditmas and Nichols, 2nd-Lieuts. Isaac, Mathews and Green-slade were wounded, a total of 16. Over 300 men were wounded, the remaining 150 being killed or missing.

The 10th's second attempt on Petit Couronne had cost far more than its first venture and had achieved nothing, except that the Twenty-Sixth Division's attack had absorbed the attention of many of the defenders and had so contributed to the partial success of the Twenty-Second further to the left, where a small portion of the front line was captured and retained.