

The Coldstream Guards in 1918

The Second Battle of Bapaume was launched on 21 August and is described in an account attached to a memorial in Easenhall, Warwickshire where L/Cpl George Plant of the 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards also died on 27 August, 1918.

"On the 21st March 1918 the German Army launched a massive offensive on the Western Front in a last desperate attempt to score a decisive victory. The results were spectacular. They advanced up to 40 miles, further by far than the British and French had managed in their offensives on the Somme, the Aisne and at Ypres. The British Fifth Army was crushed, and the Allies suffered 212,000 casualties. The French suffered a humiliating defeat at Chemin des Dames and plans were made for the evacuation of Paris. The British were seriously concerned that the French might sue for peace and were uncertain whether they could continue the struggle, and plans were drawn up for the evacuation of the British Army from France if Dunkirk, Calais or Boulogne fell. The German line before the offensive was about 20 miles East of Noyon, on the western edge of St Quentin, 15 miles East of Peronne, 20 miles East of Bapaume, 7 miles East of Arras, 5 miles East of Armentieres, 25 miles East of Bailleul and 12 miles East of Ypres. Then the offensive gradually lost momentum, the French counter-attacked in July, the British in August and the Germans finally lost the initiative. After the offensive the German Army had reached positions some 15 miles West of Noyon, 45 miles West of St. Quentin, 20 miles West of Peronne, 12 miles West of Bapaume, still 7 miles East of Arras, 28 miles West of Armentieres, 8 miles West of Bailleul and 4 miles East of Ypres.

The Counter-Attack in Champagne by mainly the French Army was from 20th July to 2nd August 1918.

On the 8th August 1918 the Allied forces launched the surprise attack, sometimes known as the Battle of Amiens, that heralded the end of the First World War. With skill and daring 21 Divisions breached the German lines and advanced eight miles, supported by 500 tanks (the largest number to have been seen in any one battle of the war) and 1000 aircraft. In their wake they left 50,000 dead or wounded German soldiers along a stretch of 11 miles. On this "black day" for the Germans the Allied forces began to see a glimmer of hope and the dawn of victory that was to come only 100 days later with the Armistice on 11 November 1918.

The Advance to Victory can be divided into 7 phases, The Advance in Picardy 8th August-3rd September, The Advance in Flanders 18th August-6th September, The Breaking of the Hindenburg Line 26th August-12th October, The Pursuit to the Selle 9th-12th October, The Final Advance- Flanders 28th September-11th November, The Final Advance-Artois 2nd October-11th November and The Final Advance-Picardy 17th October - 11th November 1918.

The Guards Division, with the 59th and 2nd Divisions formed VI Corps, part of the Third Army. The opening of the offensive on the Front of the Third Army began on the 21st August 1918 but the 1st Guards Brigade did not become involved until the evening of the 25th August when the Brigade relieved the 3rd Guards Brigade, and the Battalion took over the front line trenches at St Leger about 3 miles North of Bapaume. In the evening of the 26th August, orders were issued from divisional headquarters for the attack to be renewed the following morning, the objectives being the high ground north and south of Longatte and Ecoust, but the advance was not to be pressed if the enemy's resistance proved obstinate. The 62nd Division was to advance on the right and the 56th Division on the left of the 1st Guards Brigade, zero hour being 0700, and the line from which the attack was to be launched ran from Camouflage Copse to the Crucifix and then bent north-eastward through St Leger Wood at the northern extremity of which the line of the 56th Division began. At 0500 the 1st Guards Brigade HQ was informed that the attack by the 56th Division was being postponed to 0930 as it was thought, having captured some prisoners on the 56th Division Front, the Germans may have

established the exact time of the attack, but it was impossible for the Brigade to change the time of their planned attack as the attacking battalions were in their starting positions. It was impossible to get in touch with them all quickly enough to prevent some of them at any rate from advancing at the original time. On the right the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards were to attack, the Coldstreams on the left with the 1st Battalion Irish Guards in reserve. The Coldstreams had No 4 Company in front, No 2 and No 3 in left and right support and No 1 in reserve. As soon as the British field gun barrage came down at 0700 the leading company advanced, followed by the supports at 200 yards distance and by the reserve company 400 yards in rear of the supports. The enemy was expecting the attack and immediately opened upon the men a very heavy fire. The postponement of the attack by the 56th Division enabled the Germans in the village of Croiselles, which commanded the left and centre of the advance, to concentrate on the Coldstreams. In a short time the right was held up, by machine-gun fire from Banks trench which appeared to have been little damaged by the British shell fire; the centre got somewhat further forward, gaining the crest line beyond St Leger reserve trench when it was also checked; the extreme left made most progress and captured many prisoners on the sunken roads running south from Croiselles. Bunhill trench was gained and consolidated under heavy fire which came from Croiselles, east of that village and also from Bunhill reserve trench.

One company of the Coldstreams reached the final objective, but without sufficient support and, being counter-attacked on its exposed flank, had to withdraw. The situation could not be restored by companies in support or reserve who were soon absorbed into the fighting line while the Germans, moving up machine-guns under cover of their trenches, swept the ground and brought the attack to a standstill. Withdrawal from this untenable position was safely accomplished, but not before severe losses were inflicted on the enemy both in prisoners taken and men killed. A heavy bombardment was maintained upon the British line throughout the morning and the position was becoming critical as some of the Coldstream groups were taken in the flank by hostile fire. Two platoons of No 2 Company were reduced to 18 men; another of No 1 Company was enfiladed from both flanks; most of the officers were casualties and the whole Battalion now barely mustered 140 all ranks. In these circumstances the left and centre were withdrawn to St Leger reserve, which was close to and joined Banks Trench, and which was then occupied by a company of the Irish Guards, though still partly held by the enemy. For the rest of the morning the British heavy guns put down a concentration on the sunken roads and did great execution among the enemy.

Owing to the heavy casualties suffered by the Coldstreams, two companies of the Irish Guards were ordered up to make good the line of St Leger reserve, reinforcing the British right group and protecting that flank. The 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, on the right of the Coldstreams, had an equally heavy task to perform and also found themselves engaged in very severe fighting. However the check which the Brigade sustained during the day did not last very long, and the determined resistance of a few brave Germans armed with machine-guns, and concealed under cover, was overcome in the evening. At 1900 an intense barrage was put down on the hostile position for ten minutes and the moment it lifted the Irish Guards and the Coldstreams on the right rushed in and immediately captured it.

The garrison, consisting of one German officer and 93 other ranks, surrendered with their machine-guns. During the night and the next day, the 28th, the enemy retired pursued for nearly a mile by the Brigade who then halted and consolidated the positions gained.

The losses in the Battalion were 3 officers killed in action, 7 officers wounded and 111 other ranks killed in action, 189 wounded. "

(Easenhall Memorial text extract)