

The Heroic Story of the 9th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment at Gallipoli

On June 17, the 9th Royal Warwickshire, under Lieut.-Colonel C. H. Palmer, embarked at Avonmouth, and reached Mudros, in the island of Lemnos, on July 9. Four days later they landed on Beach V. near Cape Helles, where the River Clyde, from which a part of the immortal 29th Division had disembarked, still lay. For a fortnight they served off and on in the trenches, losing their colonel, who was shot by a sniper on July 25. Colonel Palmer had raised and trained the battalion, which owed much of its fighting spirit and efficiency to his unselfish enthusiasm and ability. A few days previously Lieut. Grundy had been killed, and Lieut. J. Cattnach (the doctor) mortally wounded. Of other ranks 9 were killed and 28 wounded. On July 29 the battalion returned to Lemnos, and on August 3 embarked again for Anzac Cove, where they were to take part in the impending great attack.

The 9th Royal Warwickshire, under Major W. A. Gordon, landed at Anzac Cove in the early morning of August 4. During the first two days (August 6-7) of the attack they were in divisional reserve, but advanced up Aghyl Dere. On August 8 they crossed Bauchop's Hill to the ridge beyond, part going to relieve the 9th Worcester at the head of Aghyl Dere. The New Zealanders had captured Rhododendron Ridge on the previous day, and on August 8 followed up their success by winning Chunuk Bair at the southern end of the main ridge.

The crisis of the attack came on August 9 with the assault of Koja Chemen. Three battalions—the 9th Royal Warwickshire, the 6th South Lancashire, and the 6th Gurkhas—reached the crest, whence they could look down on the waters of the Dardanelles and seemed to have victory in their grasp. But the troops on the right, through no fault of their own, were late, and when the Turks rallied to a counter-attack our men were forced back to the lower slopes from whence they started. One company of the Royal Warwickshire held on, till they were surrounded, and, as it is supposed, all perished. Next day the Turks attacked in the early morning with disastrous results. The trenches were enfiladed by machine-gun fire, and since no supports were available it was impossible to hold the remainder of the crest on Chunuk Bair. When at night the Royal Warwickshire was withdrawn to reserve no officers and only 248 men were left. Major Gordon had been wounded on August 8, and Major A. G. Sharpe, who succeeded him, was killed two days after. During the four days 5 officers were killed, 9 wounded and 1 missing; of other ranks 57 were killed, 227 wounded and 117 missing. For their service on these days Majors Gordon and C. C. R. Nevill received the D.S.O.

The fact that the battalion had lost all its officers probably explains why at the time its share in reaching the crest of Sari Bair was not recorded. But a New Zealander who had seen the exploit of the Royal Warwickshires bore witness to their heroism. He had watched them march up Aghyl Dere, and had been struck by their soldierly bearing, and, as an old Birmingham man himself, was proud of the imperishable renown which they won. He thus describes what he himself saw:-

"They had immense difficulties to overcome. They were led the wrong way, and had to retrace their steps; they had to attack in full view of the enemy; their left was exposed to enfilading fire, and, in spite of all, they reached the Rhododendron Spur, and some the very ridge of 971. They held on like grim death, held on when first one and then another unit retired. They asked for reinforcements, but were told none were available, and still they stayed. They were now by

themselves, and it was only when every officer save one was killed or wounded that three companies slowly retired. The fourth company, with its gallant major, [Major R. G. Shuttleworth of the Indian Army, who was in command of "A" Company] held on to the farm near the ridge till all were killed. With their ranks terribly thinned they came back as from parade, parched and hungry, but still undaunted. I was close by to their dressing-station, where a padre, Leighton, and a medical officer, O'Brien, and later the padre alone, worked night and day. Gurkhas, Maoris and Colonials, as well as their own men, were treated there with a cheerfulness and nerve that was amazing. As the last officer of the Warwickshire was badly wounded next day, deeds that should be known may not have hitherto found record. They are as noble as any of our own at Lone Pine. I saw a Warwickshire officer, I think Baker [Captain H. S. Baker ; he was a Canadian] was his name, dressed for wounds three times in one day, and, despite the medical officer's advice he went back to the firing-line, I saw the padre Leighton go out to a wounded engineer lying out under fire, bandage him up and place him in safety, and then, finding a wounded Gurkha, he hoisted him on his back and carried him to the Indian hospital halfway down the Aghyl Dere. This man was a sport in all conscience, and became a friend to all our boys in the gully. I saw him later wade through machine-gun fire to attend a man of the Connaughts, who lay mortally wounded. [The Rev. F. Leighton received the M.C.] Then there was a lance-corporal, Guillaume, of the machine-gun section, who stayed up near the Rhododendron Spur for six hours after all had retired, fired four thousand rounds, and then burying the tripod of his gun, walked back with the rest under his arm. I saw a quiet-mannered orderly bring his officer down the gully, and heard the latter telling how his man had seen him fall on the hill, and, dashing up under heavy fire, had carried and slid with him to safety. I saw the same poor fellow a few days later lying in the padre's dug-out mortally wounded—Greenway was his name. I saw men tended there from this regiment, who smiled at death, just because they had been to the top of the hill and seen the Maidos road. A war correspondent has kindly spoken of our deeds as epic. Well, there was an epic here. As an eye-witness, I wish to testify to the work of these men from England, whose deeds made us proud to be counted their comrades."

Had not the attack at Suvla Bay failed through the fatal delays (whatever their reason) on August 8 and 9 the ground won on Sari Bair might have been held. But the brief space when the men of the Royal Warwickshire looked down on the Maidos road was the nearest approach to decisive victory which the British in Gallipoli were to achieve. More than three trying months of exposure to the enemy's attacks and to the weather still remained before the final evacuation.

The 9th Royal Warwickshire was withdrawn to reserve, on August 10, 1915 and it was temporarily commanded by Sergt.-Major Collicott. [sergeant-Major Butler was in charge at the dump]. On August 12 Major W. B. Gover of the Cheshires took over the command. A number of the missing men rejoined, some drafts arrived from Lemnos and England with fresh officers, and the strength of the battalion gradually increased. The rest of August was uneventful except for occasional service in the front trenches. On August 31 came a move to reserve trenches at Salt Lake near Suvla Bay. On September 19 the battalion, now over 500 strong, went up to trenches near Chocolate Hill, and for the next three months occupied the same piece of ground without the possibility of rest or change. There was little to break the monotony till, on November 26, there came a terrible storm of rain. The narrow trenches, often cut in rock or hard clay, were flooded; the saps up the steep slopes become cascades; and the gullies which had furnished paths from the beach returned to their natural character as water-courses. No fires could be lighted or

food cooked; then when all were drenched to the skin, the wind shifted to the north and brought a piercing frost. After the frost came a blizzard of snow, and in the storm and bitter cold sentries were found frozen at their posts. Fortunately for themselves half the Royal Warwickshire were in the reserve trenches, where some movement was possible. Even there dug-outs were flooded and their contents swept away, whilst the parapets were washed clean into the trenches. The officers did what they could, making the men march up and down and rousing those who had fallen asleep in sheer exhaustion. Cases of frost-bite were of course frequent, and nearly two-thirds of the battalion were sick. When the storm abated it took ten days to restore the ruined trenches, whilst the men sheltered in holes and hedges by day and had to dig in mud and water all night. It was fortunate that the Turks suffered no less, so that these days were practically an armistice.

After the blizzard came the evacuation, for which preparation had been silently in progress. During the early part of December the greater part of the guns and stores were shipped away by night. Happily, when the last day came on December 18, the weather had turned mild and calm. Early that morning the main body of the Royal Warwickshire marched down to the beach. A rearguard of fifty men was left under Captain Marshall and Lieut. Gething to hold their lines; they had two anxious days; but one-half under Lieut. Gething withdrew at night on December 19, and the remainder under Captain Marshall followed a few hours later, the whole party embarking without the loss of a single man. [The rearguard went first to Imbros].

Ten days of welcome rest and peace followed at Lemnos, and then on December 28 the Royal Warwickshire was sent to help in the evacuation of Helles. They landed once more near the River Clyde, and marched up to hold the same trenches which they had held five months before, only with rain and mud in place of dust and flies. They were six days in the front line and had six men killed, but when, on the eve of the evacuation the Turks attacked the trenches of the 13th Division, the Royal Warwickshire was in reserve. At Cape Helles the 13th Division again furnished the rearguard; though the weather was less favourable and the Turks more active than they had been at Suvla, the evacuation was equally successful. On the night of January 8/9 the last troops embarked, and the enterprise of Gallipoli, heroic for endeavour and endurance if not for victory, came to an end.