

40th. BATTALION MACHINE GUN CORPS.REPORT ON OPERATIONS 9th - 14th. APRIL 1918.

Reference Map CROIX DU BAC 1/20,000.
HAZEBROUCK 5a. 1/100,000.

The action of the 40th. Battalion Machine Gun Corps during the operations of the 9th-14th April 1918, naturally divides itself into 4 periods.

- (1) The enemy attack of the defensive systems east of the River LYS on April 9th. 1918.
- (2) The enemy attacks on the crossings of the River LYS, April 9th and 10th 1918.
- (3) The operations in the STRENNWERCK Switch and the withdrawal to line running East of LE VERRIER, April 10th, 11th and 12th 1918.
- (4) The operations in front of STRAZEELE subsequent to the withdrawal of the remainder of the 40th Division from the line, April 13th and 14th 1918.

The general dispositions of Machine Guns prior to the enemy attack were as follow :-

- (a) A forward System of 24 guns sited behind the general line of the River Lyses.
- (b) A rear System of 16 guns running from WINDY POST in front of FLEUREAUX to CANTEN FARM.
These guns were organized in two groups - one to each Brigade holding the line. Each group having 4 guns in immediate Reserve.
- (c) 16 guns (one Company) and the details of the Battalion some 150 in number in Divisional Reserve at SAILLY SUR LA LYS.

The enemy after a short but very heavy bombardment commenced at 4.15 a.m. on the 9th instant, attacked the 1st PORTUGUESE DIVISION and our Right Brigade at dawn. He made rapid progress on the Portuguese Front but was held by our forward Infantry Posts till 7.30 a.m. when he began to press back our right flank.

About 9.30 a.m. the enemy succeeded in forcing his way through the Infantry Post near V.C. CORNER and advanced along RUE DELVAS, the RUE PETILLON and the road leading to CROIX BLANCHE.

The three Machine Gun Posts on the right flank of the forward system now found themselves practically surrounded, and with the exception of 1 gun (Cpl. WALLACE) were destroyed after fighting to the last. Cpl. WALLACE however succeeded in rejoining his Company Headquarters with 1 gun and 1 belt box. The further progress of the enemy in this area was however very considerably delayed by the actions of these Machine Gun Posts, while hostile attempts to deploy from the RUE DELVAS was stopped by the guns of B.2. Post in A.32.c. This Post remained in action until 2 p.m. and inflicted very heavy casualties on the enemy before finally every gun was destroyed.

Meanwhile on the extreme right B.1. Machine Gun Post, 4 guns 2nd. Lt. DUNN in N.I.d. near WINDY POST were in action against the enemy who having pressed back the PORTUGUESE were gradually encircling our men. This Section when last heard of was fighting at 1.30 p.m. but was practically surrounded by the enemy.

Meanwhile the 4 Reserve Guns of the Right Brigade were brought into action at FACTORY POST where they were heavily attacked at 1.30 p.m. They succeeded in inflicting heavy losses on the enemy but finally at 4 p.m. were nearly surrounded and under orders of the Infantry Commander fought a rear-guard action covering their retirement with Lewis Guns - taking up positions on the NORTH of SAILLY covering the bridgehead. During this retirement in conjunction with 4 guns of the Reserve Company which had been sent to co-operate with the 2nd. ROYAL SCOTS FUSILIERS they did most effective work at the cross roads in SAILLY whereby the withdrawal of the Infantry to the NORTH BANK of the River was covered and heavy casualties inflicted on the Germans.

At 12 noon hostile forces had penetrated just SOUTH of CROIX BLANCHE and were moving in considerable numbers on BARLETTE FARM. Here Lt. BAIN and 2nd. Lt. ELLIS with the gun brought back by Cpl. WALLACE and with 50 Infantry whom they had collected put up a most determined stand but finally fresh parties of the enemy came into action against them with Light Machine Guns from the rear, and orders being received from the G.O.C. 119th. Infantry Brigade they fell back to YORK POST. On the left Brigade Front our Machine Guns first came into action about

(2)

9.15.a.m. to the right of BOIS GREENIER and as the enemy attack developed NORTHWARD a defensive flank was formed running along SHAFESBURY AVENUE towards CANTEN FARM.

The general situation about 1.30.p.m. 9th instant was that the Forward Machine Gun Posts of the Right Brigade were surrounded but that the enemy was held on the line of our Rear Machine Gun Posts and by our Reserve Sections on the Right flank, but that he was succeeding in working round these from the NORTH WEST.

FLEURBAIX though practically surrounded was still holding out.

During the morning the two remaining sections of the Reserve Company, moved with all the details of the Battalion a total of some 200 men to the RUE DES BRUGES. On their way however they were very heavily shelled and their limbers were hit, the animals killed and several guns destroyed. Nevertheless they came into action about 3.p.m. against the enemy and fighting as Infantry they succeeded in greatly delaying his advance, counter-attacking him twice successfully until finally linking up with the Infantry, they were withdrawn to the NORTH Bank of the River LYS.

About 2.30.p.m. a limber Corporal reported to Battalion Headquarters that 2 limbers were near BAC ST MAUR, the animals killed and the limbers partially destroyed by shell fire, Lt. J.G.DUNCAN with a small party of employed men at Headquarters very gallantly succeeded in extricating 5 guns which he brought into action to cover the BAC ST MAUR bridgehead, where he was joined by Captaining E.G.HERBERT and Major D.J. AMERY-PARKES, M.G.C., who had been ordered by the G.O.C. 119th Brigade to take command of the troops defending the bridgehead.

The general situation about 5.p.m. therefore was that 11 guns were covering the BRIDGEHEADS across the LYS while 14 Machine Guns were in action on the line held by the Left Brigade running along SHAFESBURY AVENUE northwards towards FORT ROMPU., the remaining guns either having been destroyed or being still in action though completely surrounded by the enemy.

2.

DEFENCE OF THE LYS RIVER BRIDGEHEADS.

On the right the Bridgeheads were successfully held throughout the night but on the left the enemy about 5.30.-6.p.m. succeeded in crossing the river about square H.13. and in establishing himself in a farm near the FACTORY in H.13.a.

As a result our line on the left was forced back about dusk behind CROIX DU BAC. A Brigade of the 25th Division then relieved our troops on this flank who concentrated at LE PETIT MORTIER.

On the right at 10.a.m. on the 10th instant the enemy succeeded after a heavy bombardment in crossing the SAILLY BRIDGE after destroying by Shell Fire the Machine Guns and Lewis Guns manned by Machine Gun Corps personnel who were guarding it. The Infantry then withdrew but 2nd. Lieut E.R.HARRIS having found a section of the 50th. Battalion Machine Gun Corps who were without an officer, fought these guns until all the guns and teams were destroyed.

The situation about noon of the 10th instant was therefore as follows. - Remnants of the 40th Battalion Machine Gun Corps with 9 guns were concentrated at LE PETIT MORTIER, while 11 guns on the left had been linked up with the 34th Division and were co-operating in their gradual withdrawal to conform with the general line.

3.

ACTION IN THE STEENWERCK SWITCH AND IN FRONT OF LE VERRIER.

During the 11th and 12th. instant our Machine Guns on the left co-operated with the Infantry and covered them, as under pressure of attacks delivered from the South East they gradually fell back on LE VERRIER, while our guns on the 34th Division Front also fought with the Infantry, who took up a line South East of PONT DE NIEPPE along the railway. On a number of occasions during this period our guns were able to deal most effectively with considerable bodies of the enemy as they massed for the attack.

The guns which had been operating on the front of the 34th. Division were ordered to rejoin the Battalion and this they did at HAZEROUCK on the 13th instant. While the guns operating on our own front were during the night of the 12th instant concentrated at VIEUX BERQUIN.