

## 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks at Poelcapelle, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1917

### Introduction

By the Autumn of 1917 only a handful of officers and a few score of men that had crossed the Channel in May 1915 remained with 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Norfolk Regiment. The battalion had suffered severe casualties on the Somme from July to October 1916 and again at Passchendaele in August 1917, but it was now a hardened fighting unit, well equipped to fight in the horrendous conditions of Trench warfare. Amongst the survivors from those that joined the battalion early in the war was my grandfather, Syd Dace, now a sergeant and an experience scout. These were the soldiers that voluntarily used to go out into “No Man’s Land” at night to reconnoitre enemy positions, sometimes taking prisoners, but frequently inflicting “silent death” upon those Germans they came across. Stealth was essential. Knives and coshes were the weapons of first choice, with hand grenades as a back-up. After a quiet September, the 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks was selected for an attack on the enemy positions at Poelcapelle (now Poelkapelle) north east of Ypres, where “No man's land” now ran through the middle of the former village. The attack was to take place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> October, but preparation began earlier and the desolation of the place can be seen from the picture below.

**View from British front-line trench in Poelcapelle, held by 8th Battalion Norfolk Regiment, showing the effect on the German trenches of the British bombardment, 13th September 1917.**



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## Contemporary documents

[From 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks War Diary – WO 95/2040]

### Appendix 58 - Regimental Order No.16.

"On the night of 21st/22nd tape will be laid along these wires: markers will then take up their positions before their Platoons arrive, and the guides will lead their Platoons to their respective positions. The wires and tapes will be laid out on each night by the Battalion Intelligence Officer assisted by Sergeant Dace of the Battalion Scouts as soon as it is sufficiently dark."

[From 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks War Diary – WO 95/2040]

### Appendix 59 - Short narrative of the part played by the 8th (Service) Battalion, The Norfolk Regiment during the Poelcappelle operations on the 22nd October 1917.

"On the afternoon of the 20th, the Battalion arrived at CANE TRENCH and here bivouacked for the night. The same evening 2nd Lieut. H J CHAPMAN together with the battalion scouts went forward to our forming up area and laid the preliminary guiding wires.

By 12 noon on the 21st October, all battle stores had been issued and all plans completed. At 4 pm 2Lieut H J CHAPMAN went forward with platoon guides and markers to lay out the forming up tapes. At about 7 pm all Company Commanders together with Battalion Headquarters went along to reconnoitre the assembly area and meet the Battalion when it arrived. The first company moved off towards the line at 8.15pm, and the remaining companies followed at intervals of 15 minutes.

At 2 am a wire was sent to Brigade (FQR.10) informing them that the Battalion was in battle position.

Companies sustained remarkably few casualties during the forming up period.

The ground was a muddy desolation of shell holes and to make matters worse a light drizzle set in. Throughout the wait for zero in the assembly position, the battalion was intermittently shelled.

Our right company, ("C" Company), found that its forming up ground was nothing but a swamp and a few minutes before zero moved forward about 100 yards to more solid ground.

The barrage of the Division on our left commenced 3 minutes before zero, but punctually at 5.35am (Zero hour), when it was dusk and with rain falling, our barrage opened. The half light of dawn and the ground mist made it impossible for our men to see more than 200 yards in front of them. Our men advanced with the barrage, keeping in close touch with it as it lifted.

Unfortunately the Chinese barrage on our right flank did not lift in conjunction with our own, as had been pre-arranged and our right company ("C" Company) suffered severely. CAPT A J H PLATTEN MC, commanding this company, realised that if the men delayed their advance, the barrage would be lost and the success of the operation endangered. Therefore, regardless of loss, he kept his men close to their own barrage and carried them through to their final objective and thus cleared the way

for the 10th Battalion Essex Regiment to pass through and form up under their protective barrage.

Meanwhile the remainder of the battalion were pushing on to their respective objectives - the BLUE DOTTED LINE (in the original document this refers to an attached map - MMP06).

At 7.20am CAPT R E BECKERSON MC commanding "D Company, (right centre company) sent a message timed 6.50 am reporting that the BREWET was in our hands and that two posts had been established on the SPRIET ROAD 100 yards ahead. This message was received at 7.20 and and reported by wire to Brigade at 7.25 am under FQR.11. At about this time an F.O.O reported that he could see small parties of our men moving about the BLUE DOTTED LINE (The final objective of the battalion).

Our left company ("B" Company under Captain H V E BYRNE) advancing well up behind its barrage met with some slight opposition at REQUETE FARM: this opposition was however rapidly dealt with and the company pushed on. After passing REQUETE FARM, the company began to incline too much to the right. This was noticed by 2nd Lt F G SYMONDS who at once hastened to put the men on their correct alignment again. At this moment however this gallant officer was unfortunately killed by a German shell. The company then pushed on to HELLES HOUSE and the concrete emplacement N E of it. Here "B" Company met with considerable opposition from 2 light machine guns and a party of enemy bombers. This second obstacle was soon successfully overcome and yielded 1 Officer and 25 men as prisoners. 11 wounded Germans were afterwards found in a concrete emplacement there. On reaching its final objective "B" Company began to consolidate and touch was gained with "A" Company (Left Centre company) on its right, who had also successfully gained their final objective.

Through out the advance a certain amount of opposition was met from occupied pill-boxes but so close did our men follow their barrage that they had surrounded these before many of the enemy had time to get out of them and the occupants were either killed or captured while still inside.

The 18 pounder barrage was good and the lifts could be easily observed by our men, but near the brewery their (*sic*) was a stationary barrage of our own 4.5 howitzers which did not lift as the 18 pounders passed and our two centre companies had considerable casualties whilst following the 18 pounder barrage through this.

"Mopping up" was carried on expeditiously under the leadership of Company Commanders and when the final objective was reached posts were pushed forward to clear the way for and give every assistance to, the 10th Bn Essex Regt which was to pass through and capture a further objective.

Along the whole of our front, Companies carried on with consolidation and each company got in touch on either flank.

Following the pre-arranged plan of re-organisation, a message was sent forward from Bn H Q that as soon as the 10th Essex had moved to the attack on the 2nd objective, "D" Company were to take over "C" Company's front, (right company) and the latter were to move to a position west of REQUETE FARM in support of "B" Company (Left Coy). These movements were reported completed at about 9.30am. When "C" Company arrived in its new area it suffered heavily from enemy shell

fire. It left its former position 36 men strong but was soon reduced to 14 men.

At about 10.30 am the OC 10th Essex Regiment requested the CO if possible to take over the front on the HELLES HOUSE - NOBLE FARM - SPRIET ROAD, as owing to casualties he required some men to hold his line south of the SPRIET ROAD. (8th Norfolks had previously been ordered by Brigade to do this at dusk).

The OC, 8th Norfolks, however ordered O C's "B" and "D" companies to do this as soon as possible, This movement was reported completed by 3pm. With the exception of one post on the SPRIET ROAD, which 10th Essex continued to hold ad "D" Company had not sufficient left to do so. From this time onwards our front line was heavily shelled by the enemy with 77mm and 10.5 cm hows: the fire being directed by hostile aeroplanes flying at a height of about 500 feet from which height the positions of our men could easily be observed. None of our aeroplanes were in the air in the neighbourhood at this time.

The battalion was relieved the same night by the 12th Battalion Middlesex Regiment. Relief was reported complete to Brigade by 1.21am October 23rd and the Battalion, with the exception of "A" Company, moved into bivouacs at CANE TRENCH. "A" company moved to trenches in the vicinity of PHEASANT FARM, rejoining the Battalion at CANE TRENCH at 9 am.

It was estimated that the battalion captured 1 Officer and 81 other ranks and three machine guns, but as the area behind the front line was heavily shelled it is not known the number that actually reached the Divisional P-O-W cage.

The following casualties were incurred during this action:-

Lieutenant Robert Stuart Mark INCE MC killed

2nd Lieutenant Frederick George SYMONDS killed

2nd Lieutenant Alfred Morgan THORNLEY Wounded

2nd Lieutenant Frank Godwin Free PLATTEN Wounded

2nd Lieutenant Godfrey Palgrave BROWN Wounded (Slightly - at duty)

Other ranks

Killed.....32

Wounded .....155

Missing.....39"

**[From 53rd Brigade War Diary – WO 95/2034]**

**Appendix XII, Short Narrative of Operations Carried Out ... October 9<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Inclusive.**

"1ST. PHASE.

Zero hour 5.35 a.m.

The morning was dark, and there was a thick mist.

8TH. NORFOLK R.

The 8th. Norf. R. advanced under our barrage at Zero hour and went straight through almost without a check to their objectives.

The Village of POELCAPPELLE was found to be practically demolished, and a very large number of dead Germans were seen in the Streets amongst the ruins. Those who remained fought well, throwing bombs to the last minute. The chief obstacles to the advance of our troops was the enemy artillery fire and the mud.

The Left Company which was attacking the HELLES HOUSE group, moved forward to the North of REQUETE FARM, swung right-handed 500 yards beyond it, and attacked HELLES HOUSE from the N. This difficult manoeuvre which was forced upon them by the impassable state of the ground W. of HELLES HOUSE, was carried out exactly according to programme, except that the platoon detached to hold REQUETE FARM, after "mopping it up", went forward with the remainder of the Company to the Final Objective."

## Post war history and recollections

[Imperial War Museum Catalogue No. 7457]

### Papers of Major C F Ashdown.

"On the night 21/22 October it moved into the line with orders to take the village of POELCAPPELLE on October 22.

This engagement which was the last in which the Battalion was to participate was singularly successful.

In the attack on a village certain box barrages are nearly always essential and two of these supplied by guns of the flanking Divisions failed to lift at the prearranged time.

The attacking companies were therefore faced with the alternative of passing through those barrages or of waiting until they lifted, but thus risking losing our own creeping barrage.

They rightly chose the former, suffered remarkably few casualties, and close behind the creeping barrage stormed the German positions with marked success. Casualties were as under:

Officers Killed		Lieut. R.S.M. INCH. M.C. 2/Lieut. F. SYMONDS.
Wounded		Capt. W.A. TODD. R.A.M.C Lieut. O.P. BROWN 2/Lieut. A.M. THORSLY 2/Lieut. F.G.F. PLATTEN
Other Ranks	Killed	32
	Wounded	155
	Missing	<u>39</u>
	Total	<u>226</u>
		<u>Grand Total 232."</u>

**[G. Nichols, *The 18<sup>th</sup> Division in the Great War* (1922), p.241.]**

“It was thought wise to lay the forming-up tapes before darkness set in on the night of the 21st. They were studded with aluminium discs to prevent them being lost in the mud. The Roche was sending over a lot of heavy stuff when the platoons crept to their allotted "leaping-off" places, and the men were told to dig in for protection. One could not dig far without reaching water - two or three feet at most. Yet the digging-in proved a valuable precaution. Had the men been lying out in the ordinary way they must have been killed like flies.”

“Everywhere could be heard the popping of gas shells. The Norfolks went over first, and the Essex companies made ready to follow with "C" on the right, "A" in the centre, and "B" on the left. "D" lay low some distance away to the south, where the dummy figures were worked with ostentatious energy to take the enemy's attention off the march upon the Brewery. That stronghold had to be seized first, and - joyous inspiring news! - it was not long before the Norfolks sent back word that it had yielded.”

**[F. L. Petre, *The History of the Norfolk Regiment, 1685–1918*, ii (1926), pp.243-246.]**

“Hitherto the fragments of the village of Poelcappelle had defied all British efforts to complete their capture. Of the village there was practically nothing left, hardly a brick remained upon a brick, and only here and there, where the church or a larger house had stood, was the site marked by a larger heap of rubbish, amongst which “pill-boxes” had been planted by the enemy. Everywhere the whole area was pitted with shell holes, and even the metalled road to Langemarck, passing through the length of the village from south-west to north-east, was practically unrecognizable. The attacks hitherto had been from the south; this time it was decided to attack from the north, at the same time deceiving the enemy by a “Chinese” attack towards the south, which consisted in drawing the German fire by the use of dummy figures.

The British front line on October 22<sup>nd</sup> ran due north and south through the centre of the long village, which had extended along the road from south-west to north-east. It passed right through the site of the church. Here the British were holding on against constant counter-attacks, with varying success. The whole country was waterlogged, as the result of persistent rain in an area always liable to this fate. The final capture of the village and beyond was reserved for two battalions of the 53<sup>rd</sup> brigade, the 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolk and the 10<sup>th</sup> Essex.

The Norfolk battalion formed up at 2 a.m. on the 22<sup>nd</sup> on tapes which had to be punctuated at short intervals with aluminium discs to prevent their being lost in the mud. Such protection as the men had been able to dig for themselves had been limited by the water level to a depth of two or three feet. “C” company was in an absolute swamp, and had to be moved forward a hundred yards before zero hour to harder ground. Though there was heavy German artillery fire, the casualties in forming up were few.

For the attack the Norfolk battalion was to lead off. The Essex would follow later, when the 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolk were on the first objective, a line running, from a point on the left divisional boundary 800 yards forward, south-west to rejoin the starting line 300 or 400 yards south of the church. In the capture of the second objective, a line from the same point in the left boundary to one on the right

boundary 350 yards in front of the starting line, the Essex were to play the leading part by “leap-frogging” the Norfolk battalion. The latter were to attack on a front of all four companies. Beyond the left, the 14<sup>th</sup> corps was also attacking.

At 5.35 the 53<sup>rd</sup> brigade barrage opened, three minutes after that of the 30<sup>th</sup> division on the left.

The Norfolk battalion had “C” company on the right, then “D”, “A”, and “B” to the left, the last-named passing through Requête Farm on the extreme left. As they dashed forward after the barrage, “B” encountered some opposition at Requête Farm which they over-came, and then inclined rather too much to their right. Lieutenant Symonds was killed by a shell as he was correcting this direction. The company then pushed on to Helles house and the concrete emplacements north-east of it. The house was taken, but a strong resistance from two light machine guns and a bombing party was met with at the emplacements. This, too, was crushed and an officer was captured, with twenty-five men. Later, eleven wounded Germans were found in the emplacement. Throughout the advance “pill-boxes” had been a source of trouble, but the Norfolk men were so quick that the boxes were surrounded before the garrisons could get out, and all were taken or killed inside.

Meanwhile “D” had got rapidly forward and was in possession of the stronghold of the Brewery by 6.50 a.m. The 18-pounder barrage had lifted properly, but near the Brewery a stationary 4.5 inch howitzer barrage failed to lift as the 18-pounder passed, and the centre companies suffered some losses from it.

“Mopping up” was done quickly, and, as the first objective was reached, posts were pushed on to clear the way for the Essex to pass through. When they had passed, soon after 7.30 a.m., “D” took over “C’s” front on the right, and the latter company passed over to a position west of Requette Farm, in support of “B”. There it suffered from enemy shells; it had left its former post with thirty-six men, who were very soon reduced to fourteen.

At 10.30 a.m. the C.O. 10<sup>th</sup> Essex requested the 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolk battalion to take over his line in front of Helles Farm and Noble's Farm to Spriet Road as, owing to casualties, he required more men to hold his front south of Spriet Road, where, after taking the whole line of the second objective, his right had passed forward as far as Tracas Farm, which it had occupied.

This request was complied with at 3 p.m., though the brigade orders had only required the farther advance of the Norfolks to be at dusk. “B”, “C”, and “D” took over this line.

The rest of the day was passed under a heavy German bombardment, directed by aeroplanes flying at a height of 500 feet which found no British planes opposing them.”

## Officer Casualties

Robert Inch was born in Gorebridge, Scotland, in 1896, son of a doctor. He attended George Watson's College, Edinburgh and won the Military Cross in 1916 for conspicuous gallantry in action when he was wounded in three places. He is commemorated at Tyne Cot cemetery.

Frederick Symonds, born 1881, was from Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex. Prior to becoming an officer in July 1917, he had already won the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Military Medal twice. He is also commemorated at Tyne Cot cemetery.

## Aftermath

Generally regarded as model action, this was the last major battle that the 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks fought. In February 1918, the battalion was broken up when the number of infantry battalions in a brigade was reduced from four to three, and the troops were redeployed.<sup>1</sup> Disbandment caused some ructions at home but a Confidential Report sent to the Mayor of Norwich reassuring states:

“In every engagement in which this battalion took part it upheld the brilliant and glorious traditions of the Norfolk Regiment to which it belonged.”

My grandfather had left the battalion before this happened. He was posted to the 5<sup>th</sup> Army School for Scouting, Sniping and Observation for a course, and he then joined the staff. It was only in April 1918 that he was called back to frontline service.

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October 2017

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<sup>1</sup> Fifteen officers and 300 men (B & D coys) went to 7<sup>th</sup> Norfolks, five officers and 100 men (2/3 of C Company) to 9<sup>th</sup> Norfolks, and 3 officers and 16 men to 18<sup>th</sup> Entrenching Battalion.



