

## A Soldier's Story – Frederick Peplow

(Story thanks to Lee Pinder)

FREDERICK PELOW: Battle of Messines (June 1917), West-Vlaanderen, Belgium

The Ypres Salient was a flexible front line on the Belgian part of the Western Front established in 1915. The Third Battle of Ypres an offensive was mounted by Commonwealth forces to divert German attention from a weakened French front further south. The initial attempt in June to dislodge the Germans from the Messines Ridge was a complete success, but the main assault north-eastward, which began at the end of July, quickly became a dogged struggle against determined opposition and the rapidly deteriorating weather. The campaign finally came to a close in November with the capture of Passchendaele.

By the middle of May 1917 preparations for the great attack on the Messines Ridge were everywhere

in progress. Additional roads were being constructed, light railways were being built to bring up

stores and ammunition, and assembly trenches were being constructed. At such tasks the platoons of



the 3rd and the 10th Worcestershire laboured constantly during the closing weeks of May 1917. All those preparations were matters of great difficulty, since from their commanding position on the Ridge the enemy's observers were able to watch closely every movement to their front.

One preparation, however, eluded the enemy's observation. Under the feet of the German defenders on

the Ridge a series of great mines had been laid. The mines were carefully concealed, and so secretly had they been prepared that our own troops were unaware of their existence.

On May 20th the 10th Worcestershire again moved forward to the line and took over their former trenches facing Wytschaete. The British artillery had steadily increased its activity, and our heavy shells were bursting continuously all along the ridge. Constant patrols were ordered to ascertain the state of the enemy under the continual bombardment, and on the night of May 25th/26th the 10th Worcestershire carried out a very successful little raid.

Opposite to the Battalion's lines, the German trench ran out in a small salient known as the "Nag's Nose." Two parties, each of eleven picked soldiers led by a subaltern (the two subalterns were 2/Lt. H. J. Luckman, and 2/Lt. J. Froggatt), rushed a crater, which formed part of the enemy's line. The crater was found to be held by a small party of the enemy (the 33rd Fusilier Regiment),

eight in number. Six of them were killed with bayonet or butt; two surrendered and were dragged

back. The raiders suffered no loss (2/Lieut. Luckman was awarded the M.C. On the following day Lt.



B. J. Ellis was wounded).

After that little success the Battalion moved back to camp in Locre. A week later the 3rd Battalion scored a similar success. From the camp near Dranoutre "B" Company of the Battalion, under Lieut. A. J. B. Hudson, marched forward to the trenches after dark and carried out a raid on the enemy's lines just south of Kruisstraat Cabaret. The point chosen was that at which a big communication trench, called "Nutmeg Avenue" joined the front line. The raid had been most carefully planned, and the battalion then holding the line (8th Loyal North Lancashire) was to make a simultaneous raid a little further to the left.

At 10.45 p.m. on the 2nd of June the attacking party left our trenches and lay down in the open. Five minutes later the British guns opened an intense fire, and the raiders dashed forward. There was but little opposition. The raiders easily cleared the front trench, made their way down "Nutmeg Avenue," and bombed up and down "Nutmeg Support."

A German machine-gun came into action and opened fire, 2nd Lieutenant C. Greenhill attacked it single-handed from the flank with bombs, drove away the crew and captured the weapon. Sergeant S. Thompson bombed his way alone into a dugout, killing or capturing all its inmates (2/Lieut. Greenhill was awarded the M.C. and Sergt. Thompson was awarded the D.C.M.). After a hectic nineteen minutes the raiders withdrew, ran the gauntlet of the enemy's barrage on our front line, and regained safety, bringing with them twelve prisoners (Casualties, 3 killed, 10 wounded. Lieut. Hudson was awarded the M.C.).

On June 3rd the 3rd Worcestershire moved south to camp at Ravelsberg once more. There the Battalion

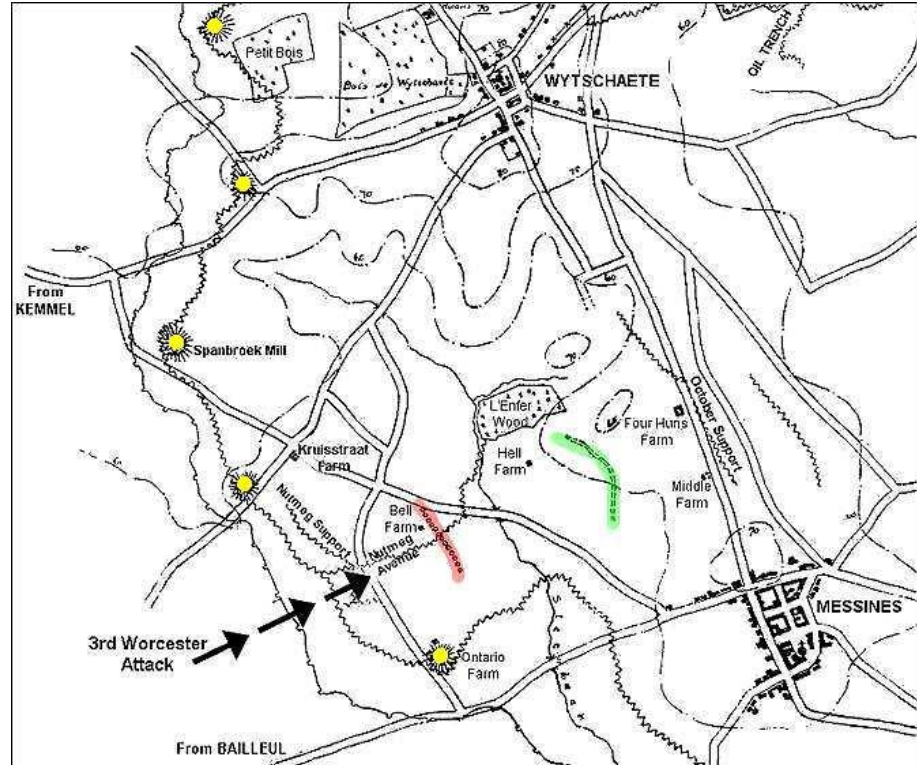


remained for the next three days while final preparations were made for the battle. Four miles to

the northward similar preparations were being made by the 10th Worcestershire at "Epsom Camp" near

Westoutre, where they had moved to from Locre on May 29th. The Battalion was not to be in the front

line of the attack but was to form part of the Divisional Reserve.



On June 6th both Battalions moved forward to take up their positions for the morrow's battle.

The 3rd Battalion marched forward after dark from Ravelsberg Camp through Neuve Eglise to the front line at the point they had raided opposite" Nutmeg Avenue."The 10th Battalion, after a preliminary move early in the day to a camp near La Clytte, marched about midnight to their allotted position of assembly between Vierstraat and the front line.

By 9.30 p.m. on June 6th the 3rd Worcestershire had reached the assembly trenches, after running the gauntlet of some intermittent shell-fire. The companies settled down behind cover in four lines of assembly trenches; newly dug behind the front line. The hours of waiting in the darkness seemed endless. Some slept, others busied themselves with cooking; for each man before leaving had been issued with a patent cooker, to enable them to find occupation during those trying hours of suspense.

Gradually the hands on the officers' watches crept on towards 3 o'clock, and all made ready for the

battle. The British artillery had fired continuously throughout that night in order to cover the noise of the marching troops, but the bombardment gradually increased in intensity as the hour for attack approached. Then the Battalion was reorganised. In one company all the officers and all but one of the sergeants had fallen. The surviving sergeant, Sergeant J. W. Forrest, took command and did gallant work throughout the day (Sergt. Forrest was awarded the D.C.M.).