

BATTLE OF THE LYS.

James Ballantine private, was reported wounded G.S.W to the neck and right shoulder on the 16-4-18, he was part of the the 2nd New Zealand Entrenching Battalion.

On this occasion the weight of the German attack was directed against northern zone on April 9th the Battle of the Lys had opened from April 9th until the beginning of May, the British front was rolled back, at the extreme point of penetration, to a depth of approximately 12 miles, the 2nd New Zealand Entrenching Battalion became deeply involved in certain of its stages. This formation was comprised of reinforcements for Otago and Canterbury Regiments, and was established, with the 1st and 3rd Entrenching Battalions, under the New Zealand Divisional. In the two Otago Companies of the 2nd Entrenching Battalion were men who had at one time or another been active members of either the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Battalions of the Otago Regiment in the Field, while others were reinforcements.

The activities of the Entrenching Battalions were directed to the construction of rear defences, road formation and repair, tunnelling, cable-laying, etc. Some of this work was of a very heavy nature, established a high and lasting reputation for their great working ability.

When the German offensive was launched in March, 1918, the Entrenching Battalions were employed in the back areas of the Ypres Salient. On March 27th and 28th the 1st and 3rd Entrenching Battalions were ordered south, their destination being the area of Famechon and Pas, rear of the New Zealand Division's new sector.

At the same time the detachments of the 2nd Entrenching Battalion employed around Westhoek Ridge were recalled to Abeele. Reorganisation was effected, platoons strengthened by the inclusion, among others, of men of the 30th Reinforcement draft, which had arrived at Abeele a few weeks previously, On April 11th, two days after the German attack in the northern zone was launched, the 2nd Entrenching Battalion received warning orders to hold itself in readiness to move. At 5 p.m. on April 12th the formation, commanded by Captain (Temp.-Major) J. F. Tonkin, moved out of camp prepared for action, and headed for Meteren, with orders to report to the 33rd Division

The journey to Meteren encountered the extraordinary traffic which the tide of a rear-guard battle promotes and swells—the hurried forward march of supporting troops, the columns of motor-lorries and ambulances, the passage of artillery and transport, and, unforgettable above all else, the stream of civilian refugees fleeing, Passing through and beyond all this extraordinary movement, the 2nd Entrenching Battalion arrived at the outskirts of Meteren. Orders were received to dig in behind the village, but it was not long before the several platoons of the Battalion were drawn upon to reinforce the defensive line taken up by English troops about Meteren.

On April 15th the enemy attacked and enveloped the town of Bailleul. At daybreak on the 16th the sweep was continued in strength against Meteren. The 2nd Entrenching Battalion at once became heavily involved. At this stage half the strength of the 1st Otago Company of the Entrenching Battalion was disposed along with Canterbury mainly to the right of Meteren; the 2nd Company of Otago and the remaining strength of the 1st Company were disposed with English troops to the left front. But the whole situation on the left was soon to be seriously complicated. With the fall of Bailleul and the anticipated continuation of the enemy's advance towards Meteren, it was notified that the English troops still further to the left would probably retire down the valley. In that case the New Zealand troops on the left of Meteren were to conform by withdrawing to the newly constructed switch trench in rear of the village. The withdrawal by the English troops did eventuate during the night; but they failed to advise the adjoining posts of their action. Before daybreak on the 16th the garrisons of our advanced positions were notified by their own Headquarters that it was expected that the enemy would attack, in which case a withdrawal was to be effected, while at the same time endeavouring to check the hostile advance.

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The German attack, preceded by heavy machine gun fire, developed about daybreak. The enemy, meeting no resistance on the left, immediately exploited his initial success. It was not long before our positions were under fire practically from three sides. The opportunity for effecting a withdrawal had now passed. The platoon of the 1st Company of Otago, commanded by Sergt. T. Sounness, endeavoured to get clear by forcing its way along the Bailleul-Caestre Road, but failed. The two platoons of the 2nd

Company, now heavily pressed by the enemy, their ammunition practically expended, and all avenues of escape closed, decided that in the circumstances their only alternative was to comply with the demand for surrender. Thus three platoons, or a total of 210 other ranks, fell to the enemy as prisoners. Only two men had succeeded in getting through, one a lance-corporal who was despatched by Sergt. Sounness with a message indicating the position and asking for assistance, and the other a private of the 2nd Company.

This was the single instance in the whole of the campaign where any considerable numbers of New Zealanders were taken prisoners. Had timely warning been received of the withdrawal of the supporting English troops, this loss must have been averted. On the other hand, it must be admitted that a large number of the troops concerned, new to action; the formation suffered from a shortage of experienced leaders, and ammunition supply had been seriously reduced on the journey from Abeele to Meteren because of an impression that the Battalion was going to construct trenches, not occupy them, it is doubtful if experienced and better prepared troops would have fared differently in the same situation. The troops of the 2nd Entrenching Battalion established to the right of Meteren withstood the attack at that point and inflicted severe losses on the enemy; but the collapse of the line to the left and the fall of Meteren ultimately forced a withdrawal. Subsequent to the enemy's occupation of Meteren, half the strength of the 1st Company of Otago, which linked up with Canterbury on the right of the line, was forced to withdraw to new positions in rear of the village. From this point Lieut. J. R. Leys (commanding the 1st Company of Otago) and 2nd-Lieut. J. McGregor (platoon commander) moved out with a small party with the object of destroying an enemy machine gun post a short distance to their front. The position proved to be too strongly held, and although the party succeeded in reaching its objective and made a gallant attempt to overwhelm it, the enterprise was unsuccessful, 2nd-Lieut. McGregor was killed, and Lieut. Leys mortally wounded at the moment of shooting down one of the crew of the gun. On the following morning, on relief, the troops marched out to Berthen, and from there proceeded to Abeele, where the remnant of the 2nd Entrenching Battalion was assembled. From Abeele the Battalion entrained for Rubrouck, in the Ypres area, where the New Zealand Reinforcement Wing was

now established, and was reorganised and reinforced from surplus strength.

After a period of considerable activity in the locality of Dickebusch, the 2nd Entrenching Battalion departed from Rubrouck, commencing on May 14th, for the Famechon-Pas area, where the New Zealand Entrenching Group now became established.

The casualties of the 2nd Entrenching Battalion in the Meteren operations totalled two officers and 40 other ranks killed, nine officers and 139 other ranks wounded, and 210 other ranks officially reported as prisoners of war. For fine PAGE 308qualities of leadership displayed during the difficult period of the Meteren operations, Sergts. W. P. Motrin, M.M., and W. J. Pauling were recommended and awarded the D.C.M.