

5th December, 1918

STATEMENT OF PARTICULARS OF CAPTURE :

By Lieut. A.J. Fell, M.C., Permanent Supernumerary List, Late "C" Company,
34th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force.

HAPPENINGS BEFORE CAPTURE - My Battalion moved up to the front line for garrison work on the night of April 30th, 1918, to a position immediately in front of Hiely (Somme Sector) I was instructed by my Battalion Commander to remain in Billets at La Houssoye, with other officers and men of the Battalion, to form a nucleus ("B" teams).

About 7-30 p.m. on the evening of the 7th May, a runner brought instructions from the Battalion for Capt. W. Macdonald (since killed) and myself to report to Battalion Headquarters. We accordingly reported to the Adjt. of the Battalion at 9.30 p.m. At that time, my Commanding Officer was dining with the Brigade Major in the former's dug-out, and I did not see my C.O.

We were instructed to wait, and during this wait I heard rumours to the effect that there was to be an attack on the German lines at 11 p.m. with artillery co-operation. I heard nothing official as to this operation during the time I was waiting.

At 10.15 p.m. I was instructed to report to my Company Commander, Capt. McMinn, at his Headquarters. I arrived there at 10.30 p.m. guided by a runner, and he (Capt. McMinn) was then only receiving his orders for the operation from Capt. H.H. Percy, M.C., acting Second in Command of the Battalion.

My Company Commander made certain arrangements through his C.S.M. regarding the assembling of the Company.

At 10.55 p.m. Capt. McMinn and myself made our way towards the front line posts; on the way I asked him for information regarding the operation. He informed me that the Company was to attack with seven Platoons, made up as follows :-

3	Platoons	from	"C"	Company,	34th	Battalion		
2	"	"	"	"	"	34th	"	and
2	"	"	"	33rd	"		

They were to attack the Germans and endeavour to push them back to a depth of approximately 500 yards on a front of 600 (?) yards. We would have the assistance of an artillery barrage, and would have "D" Company, 34th Battalion on our left flank, and the 29th Battalion on our right flank, and when we had taken the position, we were to act as covering troops for 200 pioneers, who were to dig a line of trenches a little to our rear, which we would then fall back on and garrison.

I would like to point out that I had never seen this part of the country, and had no knowledge of where our own front line troops were posted; neither had I any knowledge of the enemy's position, and, on account of the darkness, had no opportunity of studying a map.

Captain McMinn and myself, on arriving near the front line, found two Platoons of "C" Company, 34th Battalion, under the command of Second Lieutenants R.S. Brown and L.S. McMahon, already assembled, also two platoons of 33rd Battalion under Lieut. G. Reid - in all five officers and, approximately, 50 men. The remaining 3 Platoons did not arrive.

At that moment the barrage dropped down on the German lines.

Captain McMinn then instructed me to go to a small wood on our left and see if I could see anything of "D" Company, who should be assembled near there but with whom we had not yet got in touch.

On my way, I saw two men approaching our lines from the direction of the German lines, with rifles slung. I challenged them, and received the information that they belonged to "D" Company, 34th Battalion, and were only then on their way back to the assembling point of their Company. I instructed them to inform their Company Commander, Captain Beaver, that Captain McMinn was waiting for Captain Beaver to assemble his Company and to get in touch with our left flank.

I then reported to Captain McMinn, and informed him that "D" Company were not assembled at the spot indicated by him, but advised him of the message I had sent by these two men.

In the meantime, he had sent an N.C.O. and one man to the right to see if there was any sign of the 29th Battalion.

The barrage at this time - about 11.10 p.m. - was beginning to slacken. Captain McMinn then gave the order to go forward. The non-commissioned officer and man sent to the right did not return.

HAPPENINGS DURING THE ENGAGEMENT - The Company attacked the Germans and broke through their line, from which, after some little resistance, the enemy fled.

Our casualties must have numbered:- 1 officer and approximately 11 other ranks. The officer, 2nd Lieut. Brown, I believe was killed.

In going forward the Company lost direction (as was discovered later) and went half left. This was due, in my opinion, to the darkness and absence of landmarks.

The Germans made two small counter-attacks, each on our flanks; these were beaten off with rifle and Lewis gunfire. After an interval of about a quarter of an hour, Captain McMinn gave the order to withdraw, and in doing so, the Company apparently again lost direction and unknowingly walked through the breach in the German lines.

After continuing for perhaps 200 yards, we came across some of the wicker baskets in which the Germans carry the ammunition for their field guns, and we knew then that we had lost our way.

Hearing an 18-pounder field gun firing some distance away, we made in that direction, and still having a suspicion that we were behind the German lines, two scouts were sent towards this gun to investigate, and in due course returned with the information that it was a German battery, and that they were apparently using one of our captured 18-pounders.

We then made towards a small copse in which we took cover, and after being there about three-quarters of an hour, we were obliged to move on account of gas shelling from our own artillery.

We then moved to a small wood about 50 yards square situated some 1,200 yards behind the German front line, as we found next morning upon taking our bearings, and remained there till daybreak. After daybreak we saw numbers of enemy soldiers passing from time to time within 30 yards of this wood, and it was possible that we should be discovered any moment; furthermore, there were foot-tracks through the wood.

A consultation of the officers was called by Captain McMinn to consider our position, and the following points were discussed:-

- (1) Whether to attempt to return to our lines during daylight,
- (2) or wait till dark and attempt to return,
- (3) or surrender.

These points were discussed, but on account of all ammunition having run out, and for several other reasons, no unanimous decision could be arrived at, and, at the suggestion of Lieut. Reid, the matter was left to the decision of the men, who un-animously decided to surrender.

Steps were then taken to destroy maps, equipment, Lewis gun part, rifles, etc., and Webley ammunition belonging to the officers, was also buried, and at about 8 o'clock on the morning of the 8th May, Capt. McMinn and myself formally surrendered to the German artillery.

The party, consisting of 4 officers and 38 men, was taken to a German Divisional Headquarters, a little east of Bray, where some of the men were questioned.

After a stay of about 3 hours, we were marched to Etricourt, at which place we arrived about midnight and received a meal of hot "coffee", "bread" and "jam".

Two and a half days after, the whole party was sent to Cambrai, where we were interned in what had once been a ladies seminary. After 5 days internment there, the officers were sent on to Karlsruhe in Germany.

At Karlsruhe we officers spent 6 days locked in a room in an hotel, and during our stay there, were interviewed by an Unter-Offizier of the German Intelligence Department, who endeavoured to "pump" us for information, and I can quite safely say that he was treated more or less as a joke, and did not, I think, get any information from any British Officers P.O.W. who were in that hotel.

Regarding the interview I had with him, the first thing he did was to show me a map of France, in relief, and tell me the movements of my Battalion from the end of September, 1917, up to the date I was captured. He was right in every detail, and no doubt wanted me to confirm what he had told me - this confirmation he did not get.

At the end of the 6 days, we were sent to the Karlsruhe Camp proper (Distributing Camp), where we received an issue three times a week of English Red Cross food, as supplies were on hand in this Camp.

We were at this Camp for one week, and on the 1st June, we were sent, with other British Officers, to a Lager at Graudenz, West Prussia, at which place we arrived mid-day June 4th.

This was a new camp, and consequently we had to subsist on German rations. I received my first Red Cross food parcel on July 26th, which consisted of two loaves of bread from Copenhagen, and at that time I was in a state of semi-starvation. The arrival of food from England at regular intervals put new life into me, and it is my firm opinion that I owe my life to the Red Cross Society for their aid.

The quarters at Etricourt and Cambrai were very bad and infested with vermin, but at Karlsruhe and Graudenz they were good.

The only other Australian Officers whom I met while a Prisoner of War were :-

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| Captain H.H. McMinn | 34th Battalion |
| " P.H. Auld, | 50th " |
| Lieut. C.C. Dight, | 24th Machine Gun Co. |
| " Myers, | 24th " " " |
| " E. Robinson, | 47th Battalion |
| " J.E. Smith, | 47th " |
| " Goodsall, | 47th " |
| " Allen | |
| " L.S. McMahon | 34th Battalion |
| " G.C. Reid, | 33rd " |
| " K. Love, | Australian Flying Corps |
| " J.N. Jennings, | 46th Battalion |
| " Kilpatrick, | 19th " |
| Pte. Watson | |
| Lieut. Ward, Australian Flying Corps (who had been wounded but did not go on to Graudenz with the party of British Officers) | |

(sgd.) A.J. Fell

Lieut. P.S.L. late 34th Batt. A.I.F.
Repatriated Prisoner of War

(sgd.) W. Paddock.....Witness.
4, Lloyds Avenue,
LONDON. E.C.3.

Brief outline of operations in which the 34th Bn. A.I.F. took part on above dates:

On the morning of April 4th the Battalion was ordered to move from the Bois L'Abbe to a position (very exposed) on the left of the town, and while waiting in a terraced field suffered a number of casualties. The Headquarters Officers, i.e. the C.O. (Lt.-Col. E.E. Martin), the A/2nd in Command (Maj. H.L. Wheeler) and Adjutant (Lt. J.G. Farleigh) were all wounded and evacuated. Shortly afterwards the Battalion, then temporarily commanded by Capt. N. Gains (O.C. "B" Co.) moved to a more forward position in a sunken road, still to the left of the town. This position was occupied for the greater part of the day, the Battalion suffering further casualties and witnessing horrible carnage all around, the toll of Officers and men of English Artillery, dismounted Cavalry and Infantry regiments being very heavy, and the slaughter of the horses being a most pathetic sight. German planes were spotting for their own Artillery, who were making things most unpleasant. The M.O. of the 34th Bn. (Capt. Watson) established an R.A.P. in the sunken road and treated many English troops - for this he was recommended and received the decoration of the M.C. He and his aides did sterling work that day.

The situation looked so black that no surprise was shown when Major W.A. Fry who had assumed command of the Battalion was ordered to move to a position on the high ground behind the town. This change was actually taking place when the orders were countermanded, the bearer being Lt. Col. Morshead of the 33rd Bn. who conferred with Major Fry - the outcome of this conference was that C and D. Companies, (Lt. A.J. Fell and Capt. C. Bennett respectively) were ordered up to the front line to relieve the pressure on the 33rd and 35th Bn's, who had been fighting all day and unfortunately had been obliged to fall back slightly. After the two Companies were in position and commenced digging trenches, as darkness had now fallen, fresh orders were received that the 33rd Bn. (Capt. Duncan in command of that Battalion's front line) were to reoccupy that portion of the line taken over by "C" Coy 34th Bn., who were to move to the right, having the railway line on the right flank, and their left flank contacting with the 33rd Bn. at road on left. "D" Coy. crossed the railway line and faced the enemy lines with the railway as their left flank, the remnants of 35th and 36th Bns. on their right. When the two Companies were in position, they attacked at about 1 a.m. April 5th without a Barrage, depending on the element of surprise - the attack was a complete success, the line being straightened on about a 600 yards front, and trenches lost during the day were retaken - most opposition was met on "C" Coy front where the enemy suffered his heaviest loss. His losses in this night operation were 1 Officer and about 10, 0/Rs. killed, 1 Officer and about 30, 0/Rs. made prisoners of war, and about 12 machine guns captured. In the actual attack there was only one casualty in the ranks of "C" Coy. viz. Sgt. Duthie, who was killed instantly from a burst of machine gun fire; a number of men were wounded during the day and the task of evacuating these casualties was one of great danger for the stretcher bearers, who were obliged to move in the open or in the Railway cutting (which was shelled continuously) These stretcher bearers did wonderful work under very hazardous conditions; everyone of them earned the V.C. that day - one of my Company officers, Lt. Bruce (afterwards killed in action) was recommended for and received the decoration of the Military Cross; a number of the N.C.O's and men received decorations of the D.C.M. and M.M. - I was considered worthy of reward and also received the M.C. and Capt. Bennett, O.C. "D" Coy. was mentioned in despatches.

The Company strength of "C" Coy 34th Bn. was under a 100 for this night attack, and although I do not remember the number of awards made for gallantry, I know there were sufficient to almost create a record for so small but important an operation. Before the two Companies mentioned had taken over the line in the first instance - some casualties were suffered by "C" Coy., an officer and several men being wounded by one of our own long range guns firing short. It took two hours to locate this gun and have it silenced. It was from a French Battery of Naval Guns, so we were informed.

The territory retaken in that night attack was held all the next day until we were relieved by the 5th Brigade. During the whole of that day the enemy shelled us continuously. The position was held until the 24th April, when the enemy attacked and actually occupied the town until he was kicked out on Anzac Day.

Capt. Duncan, 33rd Bn. (who is now an Indian Army Officer) did splendid work during the two days Apl. 4/5th and I believe was awarded the D.S.O. The capture of the German Officer by "C" Coy. 34th Bn. was not without humour, but that is another story.

Formerly

all M.C.
34th Bn. A.I.F.