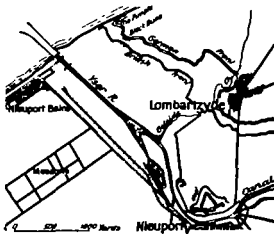


APPENDIX No. 2

THE 2ND TUNNELLING COMPANY IN THE AFFAIR AT NIEUPOORT¹

In 1917 the Allied line on the coast still lay along the Yser, the small river² along which the Belgians and French in 1914 held back the extreme right flank of the German advance. The Belgian Army still held the flooded lowlands along it from Dixmude to within a few miles of the sea. Near the sea it traversed the zone of sandhills which, before the war, had been studded with bathing resorts, each neighbouring village on the meadows having at least some mushroom watering place—a few terraced blocks and many speculative building plots—along the shore. Thus the small Belgian port of Nieuport, on the Yser, had its corresponding Nieuport Bains, on the dunes south-west of the river-mouth. In this sector, which the French had never entrusted to Belgians or British, they held beyond the river a small foothold, very narrow on the dunes, but slightly deeper in the meadow-flats, where it reached the outskirts of the village of Lombartzyde.



In order that the offensive at Ypres should be assisted in its final stage by a coastal attack³ the French agreed to hand over the sector to the Fourth British Army under General Rawlinson. The XV British Corps accordingly took over from the XXXVI French Corps on June 20th. British staff officers, visiting the French headquarters before the change, had ascertained that the sector would not be an easy one to attack from, as, except for a few concrete shelters and the numerous well-sited observation-posts of the French artillery, no safe shelter existed there. The trench parapets were in places only three feet thick, and the head of the British mining service, Brigadier-General Harvey,⁴ who on June 6th enquired into the deep digging, reported:

"I find that the French have done none, and the C.R.E., 29th (French) Division, says that the Germans have not done any either. There has been no mine warfare. Neither side have been able to cope with the difficulties of the sand in the dunes and the waterlogged nature of the ground further south (*i.e.*, in the meadow)."

The Fourth Army's project was a difficult one—a thrust from the narrow foothold beyond the Yser, and a simultaneous landing of one division on the coast; and General Rawlinson was particularly anxious to help it by undermining a prominent German strong-point in the dunes; Australian miners, and probably others, had assured General Harvey that they were accustomed to tunnel through sandy drift, and he concluded his report:

"It may be possible to drive a mine gallery under the Grande Dune. This work will be attended with great difficulty and will be slow, but

¹ See p. 701.

² Formed by all the small streams flowing from the Mount Kemmel-Passchendaele semicircle.

³ See p. 695.

⁴ Major-Gen. R. N. Harvey, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. Inspector of Mines, G.H.Q., B.E.F., 1916/17; Chief Engineer, VI Corps, 1918/19; Engineer-in-Chief, India, 1924/28. Officer of British Regular Army; of London; b. Clifton, Glos., Eng., 17 May 1868. Died, 15 Feb. 1937.

with care, and the right sort of men, I think . . . it is worth while to make a trial

"I would be prepared to recommend that half a tunnelling company be detailed . . . to make a real trial of the possibility of mining in the dunes. The company selected should be one accustomed to working in soft ground, and I recommend either 171st Company, R.E., or 2nd Australian Tunnelling Company"

The Australian company was chosen, and was sent to report to the 29th French Division, and made a preliminary experiment on the beach at Coxyde Bains a few miles behind the front. This was completely successful and, on the 1st British Division relieving the French, work was at once begun in the small area of sand dune held by the British beyond the Yser.

The British dune area beyond the river was only 600 yards deep by a mile wide. Bordering the beach a long dune ran through the British into the German line; and 250 yards inland another, known as

the "Black Dune," also ran curving across No-Man's Land, the two enclosing a curiously circular flat which had formed part of a well-known golf-links. Any digging in the level sand almost immediately ran into water; but by tunnelling into the dunes, and keeping a few inches above water-level, 15 or 20 feet of head-cover could be obtained, and the German strong-points on those dunes might be undermined. The Australians at once began tunnelling from an entrance near the beach. But the work was immediately seen and shelled, and the shafts had therefore to

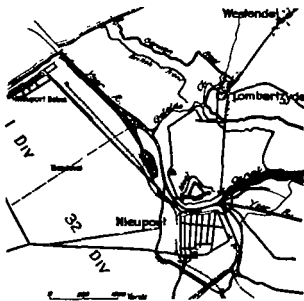
be sunk from a support trench. The German line was only 80 yards from the British on the seaside dune, and 65 yards at the Black Dune, but the seaside tunnel had to be driven 160 yards and the Black Dune tunnel about 230 (on an angular course following the dune), to reach their objective. In addition, two underground communication trenches and a safe battalion headquarters for the infantry were begun, and, on the near side of the river, several dugouts for reserves and some wells.⁶

The Australian miners of the 2nd Company, like those of the 1st and 3rd, were, on the average, older than most infantrymen, but were marked by a capacity for very fast work and a willingness to take great risks. The company, 566 strong, had been increased by the attachment of 160 of its reinforcements and working parties of 500 British infantry. Three-quarters of this force worked beyond the Yser, and, within two and a half weeks, their tunnels were approaching No-Man's Land and General Harvey's doubts had been dispelled. In addition the battalion headquarters was practically completed, and one underground communication trench⁶ had gone 100 yards with five entrances at intervals, and was being simultaneously worked on at several points farther ahead.⁷

⁶ A British tunnelling company, the 257th, was at a later stage attached to the 32nd Division in the inland sector at Nieuport and the meadows, to work on dugouts for the infantry there.

⁶ This was begun as a 6 feet by 4 feet gallery, but changed, on General Harvey's suggestion, to 6 by 3.

⁷ The great danger of the face falling in was avoided by driving spiling ahead of the work and boarding up the face, except the portion worked on.



The Germans, by raiding, had discovered the presence of the British in this sector on the day after the XV Corps took over. The 1st and 32nd Divisions for three weeks vigorously strengthened the thin parapets, but protection was still badly wanting when, on July 8th, General Rawlinson and the staff of the Fourth Army assumed control. The French artillery had been relieved, but only 176 of the 636 British guns for Rawlinson's offensive had yet arrived. Among the heavy artillery in position was the headquarters of the Australian Siege Artillery Brigade (36th H.A.G.) and one of its two batteries, the 54th.⁸ The 3rd, 6th, and 12th Australian "Army" Brigades were among the field artillery due to arrive a few days later. The artillery had orders to fire as little as possible for fear of warning the Germans as to the project, but German activity was noticeably increasing. On several nights Dunkirk, the northernmost of the French Channel ports, twenty miles in rear, had been bombed by German aeroplanes, and a big naval gun⁹ at Leugenboom had at intervals thrown 14-inch shells into the town. It was thought that the Germans were retaliating for the increased activity of the British infantry. The British artillery replied, without disclosing its full strength.

But at day-break on July 10th the German fire, instead of diminishing, increased. By 6.45 it was intense, and, although sometimes it appeared here or there to ease, it lay in general all day on the whole area. German naval guns barraged the Fourth Army's communications for miles back. Telephone lines were quickly cut. One by one the three narrow floating bridges, which were the only means of access to the 1st Division's front beyond the Yser, were sunk or cut adrift. Only rare pigeon messages now arrived from the inferno beyond the river.¹⁰

At 11 a.m. the British artillery was ordered to cast aside its concealment and shell the enemy's supposed approaches and points of assembly. Many batteries were themselves under heavy fire. The 54th (Australian) Siege Battery had three of its four howitzers put out of action, but it continued to fire the fourth gun, the men lying down as much as possible between the rounds. Some batteries suffered through the enemy's use, for the first time, of what was to become his most dreaded gas-shell—"which smells," notes the diary of the 36th H.A.G., "like new mixed mustard."¹¹ The British Air Force, which also had had orders not to disclose its strength, was not able to protect its army this day, and German aeroplanes had it all their own way, flying low after the British fashion, and shooting to barrage the bridges.

About 7 in the evening it was evident to observers stationed southwest of the river that a change had come over the action. Shortly afterwards they saw groups of Germans crossing the area in rear of the British front, here and there deploying as if under fire. About 8 the Germans appeared close to the river, and were seen fighting near a headquarters there. Hours later, at dusk, a few men who had swum

⁸ This battery, however, was under another headquarters.

⁹ A 35-centimetre gun, similar to that captured by the Australians in 1918 east of Amiens.

¹⁰ The 1st British Division had raided the German lines the night before and captured a prisoner, but killed him on the way back. Had he been brought in alive, the intention of the Germans to attack would doubtless have been discovered by the intelligence officers examining him.

¹¹ The same diary says: "The enemy was using a new gas-shell freely. Shell bursts like a small H.E. Gas makes you sneeze and run at the nose and eyes. Smell is like cayenne pepper." This actually was the "blue cross" shell, a different type from the mustard ("yellow cross") shell. Both new shells were used in this action.

the river, began to bring news. With others who crossed in the following nights, totalling about 80, they were all that escaped of two battalions of the 1st British Division and a section of Australian tunnellers in the dunes-sector beyond the river. The 32nd Division in the meadow-sector lost only its two front trenches, the German commander having decided not to attack the low ground behind them, since his opponents might be able to flood it.

The story of the 1st Division and the tunnellers is a short one. The sandbagged trenches had given little protection from the bombardment, and the infantry losses had been very severe; the Germans easily overran the position. The Australians and attached working parties in the tunnels were fairly secure, except where tunnels were broken in by *minenwerfer* shells; indeed, for some of these the first evidence of the attack was the non-arrival of reliefs to dig them out. Recognising then that they were cut off, Lieutenant Mortensen¹² and Corporal Dunn¹³ with a dozen men in one of the tunnels barricaded the gallery and held out until dawn next morning, when the exhaustion of the air and its pollution by German smoke-bombs thrown from the sap-head forced them to surrender. In one of the tunnelled communication trenches, which served as headquarters of the left battalion, a number of British officers and men under Captain Smith¹⁴ of the 2nd King's Royal Rifles¹⁵ offered some resistance to Germans who penetrated thither, Sapper McGlinchey¹⁶ of the tunnellers playing a leading part. Another tunneller, Sapper Minogue,¹⁷ fought the Germans with his rifle until wounded through thigh, abdomen, and ankle.

It was largely the survivors of this party who escaped across the river. As some could not swim, two Australians, Sappers Burke¹⁸ and Coade,¹⁹ obtained a rope. Burke swam across with it and Coade remained to hold it taut while the non-swimmers escaped, and then followed them.²⁰ Of necessity the wounded were left; but when a party of Germans was seen working round the river bank, and it was explained to those in shelter that it was a case of swim or be captured, an Australian, Sapper O'Connell,²¹ who lay there bandaged after fighting with bombs and being wounded and burnt with a *flammenwerfer*, to the surprise of everyone, stood up. He made his way across part of a broken bridge, and then swam across. As he climbed out he heard a British soldier in the water calling for help. He at once swam out again, brought the man in, and then fainted. Sergeant

¹² Lieut. W. M. Mortensen, 2nd Tun. Coy. Mining engineer; of Many Peaks, Q'land; b. Mt. Perry, Q'land, 20 Nov., 1888.

¹³ Cpl. M. G. Dunn (No. 543; 2nd Tun. Coy.). Railway employee; of Ballarat, Vic.; b. Ballarat, 12 Jan., 1872. Died 1 July, 1928.

¹⁴ Lieut.-Col. H. F. E. Smith, D.S.O.; 2nd Bn., King's Royal Rifle Corps. Officer of British Regular Army; of Tidworth, Hants., Eng.; b. Lexham, Norfolk, Eng., 28 April, 1888.

¹⁵ The battalion commander went up to the front and did not return

¹⁶ Spr. C. G. McGlinchey (No. 2830; 2nd Tun. Coy.). Miner; of North Broken Hill, N.S.W.; b. Newcastle, N.S.W., 1885.

¹⁷ Spr. P. Minogue (No. 3988; 2nd Tun. Coy.). Miner; of Bendigo and Little River, Vic.; b. Bendigo, Vic., 16 May, 1878.

¹⁸ Spr. T. F. Burke, M.M. (No. 2441; 2nd Tun. Coy.). Miner; of Springdallah, Vic.; b. Allendale, Vic., 15 Oct., 1892.

¹⁹ Spr. J. Coade, M.M. (No. 2442; 2nd Tun. Coy.). Coal miner; of Korumburra, Vic.; b. Malmesbury, Vic., 29 June, 1878. Killed in action, 9 April, 1918.

²⁰ McGlinchey, trying to escape at 1 a.m., ran into Germans and was captured.

²¹ Spr. J. O'Connell, D.C.M. (No. 2432; 2nd Tun. Coy.). Horse driver; of Hunter's Hill, N.S.W.; b. Lismore, N.S.W., 24 Dec., 1887.

Birrell²² and three other Australians²³ and a British working party, trapped by the falling in of a tunnel, dug themselves out by next morning only to find Germans in their rear. Their rifles had been destroyed and most of the infantrymen decided to surrender, but the four Australians and two of their British comrades asked the others to give them ten minutes' start before putting up the white flag. Though they were bombed by the Germans and Birrell was wounded, the six reached the river, but Germans followed them and, having no weapons, they were captured. Of 50 tunnellers beyond the river, only Lieutenant Hargraves²⁴ and the three men already mentioned escaped.²⁵

It was now known that this attack was suggested by the Fourth German Army before the British relieved the French. The Allies' bridgehead at Nieuport, says Ludendorff, was the "weak spot" of the German Naval Corps, which held the coastal sector. The Fourth German Army desired to remedy this weakness before the British offensive at Ypres, but was uncertain whether it could get its stroke in first. It was temporarily furnished with a large force of artillery, and was permitted to use two new types of gas-shell which were being saved to resist the Ypres offensive.

The Nieuport bombardment began on the 6th. At dusk on the 10th the 3rd Marine Division attacked, captured the bridgehead in the dunes and 1,284 prisoners, and for the first time discovered the undermining operations.²⁶ The Germans suffered 700 casualties, mostly light wounds.

This German success still left the British with a bridgehead in the meadow-land, and their project was merely modified. It was now proposed to cross the river in boats²⁷ in conjunction with attacks from the meadow-land and from the sea; but, as the Ypres offensive never reached the stage for this co-operation, the project was eventually cancelled.

²² Sgt. F. Birrell (No. 492; 2nd Tun. Coy.). Miner; of Adelaide, b. Adelaide, 29 July, 1876.

²³ Sappers J. O'Neill, T. O'Neill, and L. G. Hinds. (The O'Neills belonged to East Fremantle, W. Aust., and Hinds to Beaconsfield, Tas.)

²⁴ Lieut. E. P. Hargraves, 2nd Tun. Coy. Consulting mining engineer; of Melbourne; b. Auckland, N.Z., 23 Aug., 1877.

²⁵ The company lost only one man killed; 4 officers and 3 others were wounded; 1 officer and 41 others were missing (a few of these were wounded).

²⁶ The diary of the 3rd Marine Division, which mentions the discovery, does not do so until July 14, and then speaks only of the seaward gallery. It is possible that the German staff never learnt of the existence of the second gallery.

²⁷ The coastal landing was to be made by the 1st Division, but the river crossing by a new division, the 66th. (The Germans guessed that the operation was still projected, as the British still kept two divisions in the line, which had previously been held by one French division.) The Fourth Army intended to use the Australian tunnellers to carry material to the bridges that were to be thrown over the Yser. Although they would have made a determined carrying party, they were not intended for such employment, and Major E. N. Mulligan (Double Bay, N.S.W.) protested and was supported by General Birdwood.