



**DURHAM**  
AT **WAR**



**David Lloyd Brereton**

Narrative of events on 21 March 1918, by David Lloyd Brereton, commanding 2nd Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, describing the events and loss of men in action on 21 March

**narrative**

**27 March 1918**



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## 2<sup>ND</sup> BATTALION DURHAM LIGHT INFANTRY

Narrative of events on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1918, when the Battalion was holding the left Sub-Sector of the Morchies Section.

1 Having been warned of the probability of an attack Officers' Patrols were out throughout the night and the Battalion "stood to" at 5 a.m. At that hour a heavy gas bombardment was opened on to our trenches - especially the Reserve Line. B & D Companies occupied the front line with one platoon each in the support line (Jackal Support and Leopard Support) Battalion H.Q. and A & C Companies and the wiring platoon were in the reserve line (Autumn Reserve and Winter Reserve).

2 I was in telephone communication with my front companies up to 7.00 a.m. and they reported that they were all right and apparently were not being shelled as badly as the Reserve Line. At about 7.00 a.m. O.C. "B" Company reported that the shelling was getting much worse and almost immediately the wire broke down. About 7.30 a.m. telephone



communication with the Brigade and with the right sub-sector (1<sup>st</sup> West Yorkshires) also broke down.

3 About this time I sent two runners (Privates Matthews and Turnbull) to try and find out what was happening in the front line; they went down Leech Avenue and had to pass through a terrific bombardment but they managed to visit both the Company Commanders and to bring back a report that the bombardment had greatly increased and that their casualties were very heavy. I regret that both these runners are amongst the missing. I cannot speak too highly of their gallant behaviour.

4 As regards the Reserve Line gas masks had to be kept on till about 9.0 a.m. the casualties from shell fire were heavy. I was able to report the situation by pigeon to Brigade headquarters at this hour. The shelling now subsided a little and it was evident that the front line had been captured and enemy were advancing

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from the Support Line and up Leech Avenue. He was prevented by our fire from advancing over the open, but managed to bomb his way up Leech Avenue as far as Battalion H.Q. A counter attack was then



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organised under 2/Lt.McBain and the enemy were pushed back and a block was established about a 150 yards up the Communication Trench. The party under this officer acted most gallantly and captured 4 machine-guns and many boxes of ammunition which were used against the enemy from the Reserve Line. Many of the enemy were killed, one at the entrance to Battalion H.Q. dugout down which he had thrown a bomb. The enemy here belonged to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Prussian Guard. A map taken off an officer was sent to Divisional H.Q. later on in the day. The shelling now had subsided, but the enemy kept up a very heavy machine-gun fire on the Reserve Line.

5 A wounded man was discovered out in the front of the trench and Captain Gilpin and Corporal Robson went out to bring the man in, in spite of heavy machine-gun fire. Captain Gilpin was hit in the head and Corporal Robson in the thigh about 80 yards from the trench. Corporal Wade and L/Corporal Davis attempted to get them back but found it impossible owing to the machine-gun fire.

6 About 11 a.m. after the counter attack the Artillery Liaison Officer who was wounded as he came up to join the battalion at 5.0 a.m. from



Lagnicourt attempted to get the anti-tank gun along Leech Avenue into action but found it impossible to do so. This Officer was of great assistance to me throughout the day and I do not know whether he got back or not. I regret that I have forgotten his name.

7 It was quite evident that the enemy was advancing on Lagnicourt and threatening the left flank of the section. Guns were being brought up and German officers were riding about in

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D.13. I reported this by runner through O.C. 1<sup>st</sup> West Yorkshires who informed me that the situation on his right was just the same, and that his right flank was being rapidly turned.

8 About 3 p.m. I received instructions to prepare to carry out a retirement and I immediately arranged for this. About 4 p.m. O.C 1<sup>st</sup> West Yorkshires informed me that he was retiring into section as he was being surrounded and about the same time my post up Leech Avenue was driven back fighting. Shelling now greatly increased and were



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falling fast but the enemy's attempts to advance over the open were repulsed and our wire remained intact.

9 Two Companies of the 11<sup>th</sup> Essex had previously reinforced the 1<sup>st</sup> West Yorkshires and one Company came about this time (3 p.m.) to reinforce me. In view of the intended retirement I arranged for this Company to take up a position in the open in D.25. A & C to cover it.

10 Lieutenant Colonel Boyall D.S.O. and Major Stockdale M.C. with remnants of their battalions reached my section about 4.30 p.m. and arrangements were made for covering the fight flank. The enemy up Leech Avenue continued to press on and were with great difficulty checked.

It was decided between Commanding Officers that a retirement by daylight would be impossible owing to the enemy's machine-guns which were now on three sides of us, and the only thing to be done was to hang on till dusk and then attempt to get back. The enemy were easily prevented from coming over the open from our front but they were quickly getting round our right flank and a series of blocks were made down Autumn and Winter Reserves to check the enemy. About 6.50 all the bombs had been used and it was decided that the only thing to do



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was to fight it out as dusk was not expected for an hour and the position seemed hopeless. About 7.15 a thick mist appeared and the opportunity was seized and the order was given for

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everyone to get back to the Corps Line or his own.

11 The order was given only just in time as five minutes later the whole of the Reserve Line would have been surrounded. I estimate that about 300 all ranks attempted to leave and that probably about 250 reached the Corps Line. These numbers were made up of the different units.

Directly the move was made heavy machine-gun fire opened on three sides and the Germans followed in great numbers at about 300 yards.

There was no chance for anyone who was hit. The majority reached the Corps Line by the Copse in front of Morchies.

12 The following officers are known to have started, but not to have reached the Corps Line. - Major Sopwith, Captain Fawcett, Lt. Osborne, 2/Lt. Brown, Lt. Tuffs, 2/Lt. Davis, 2/Lt. Jebb, 2/Lt. McBain. Also Lieutenant Colonel Boyall and Major Stockdale.



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13 The following numbers reached the Corps Line but were killed the following day in that Line - Lt. Eccles and 90 other ranks (approx.) of the Battalion: and the numbers who survive the two days action unwounded are two officer (Lt.-Colonel Brereton and 2/Lt.Spencer) and 58 other ranks.

The total number of the battalion who were in the trenches on night 20/21 was 30 officers and 639 other ranks.

14 As regards the two front companies their orders were to hold on to the last. The only ones that left that line were two officers who were wounded each in the morning and who after having their wounds dressed reported at Battalion H.Q. for duty - also one man accompanied these officers to the First Aid Post.

15 Not a single man attempted to leave the Reserve Line without orders until the instructions to get back to the Corps Line were given.

16 The Wiring Platoon occupied a portion of the Reserve



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Line and got back with one officer (Lt.Eccles) and 24 other ranks to the Corps Line. These were either killed or wounded on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and none returned.

17 Twenty six Signallers were with the Battalion and none returned.

18 Of the Officers of B & D Companies I am unable to speak as I saw nothing of them but I cannot speak too highly of the gallant behaviour of the following offices who were in the Reserve Line and did not return:-

Major G Sopwith M.C.	2 <sup>nd</sup> in Command
Captain R.H. Gilpin	Adjutant
Captain E Fawcett M.C.	Commanding "C" Company
Lt. D Osborne	Intelligence Officer
2/Lt. H.McBain	Bombing Officer (Since returned)
2/Lt. N.Brown	Lewis Gun Officer
Lt. E.W.Tuffs	"A" Company



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2/Lt. G.Gates	“A” Company
2/Lt. W.T.H. Davis	“A” Company
2/Lt. R.M.Hogg	“A” Company
2/Lt. H.E.Jebb	“C” Company
2/Lt. J.E. Eccles	Commanding Wiring Platoon

20 The M.O. Captain J.C.Muir went to and fro during the day between the Reserve Line and the First Aid Post. His demeanour was so calm and collected that he inspired all with confidence. He remained at the First Aid Post it's assumed when the enemy broke on the right flank.

21 After re-organising my men in the Corps Line I proceeded to Brigade H.Q. to report and was informed that Lt.Colonel Dumbell was taking command of the remnants of the Brigade.

(Sgd.) D.L.Brereton – Lt.Colonel – Commanding 2/D.L.I)

In the Field 27<sup>th</sup> March 1918



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