

TRANSCRIPTION.

APRIL 1917 WAR DIARY APPENDIX 6

"J" Special Company R.E.

ARRAS 6.4.17

APPENDIX No 6. Further information received on 'J' & 'H' Coys October attack

Gas Attack made by the British Army on the French Front near Nieuport (5.10.16)

A gas attack was made on Oct 5th 1916 by us on the French front at NIEUPORT. It was thought that the German Naval Division opposite might be found inexperienced in defence against gas, as it was known from the repeated statements of prisoners that a gas discharge in the neighbourhood of the area was considered to be impossible by the German Commanders.

The operation was successfully carried out after a fortnights delay due to unfavourable winds, and at a very small cost to ourselves, 8 R.E. being gassed and 2 of the French Infantry, all very slightly. 1800 cylinders of white star gas was discharged. After a successful raid made by the Germans a few days before the attack it was no longer hoped that a surprise would be effected; and the behaviour of the enemy when the discharge commenced left no doubt as to his being fully prepared for the operation. Nor was there any particular reason at the time for supposing that any damage had been done by gas.

A man of the 1st Matrosen Reg^t who deserted earlier in March of this year gave the following information (Ref 1/40,000 Sheet 12). For some weeks last autumn listening posts in the POLDER sector had reported sounds of hammering on metal in the adjacent hostile trenches. On the evening of October 2nd a party of the 2nd Battalion 1st Matrosen Regiment (then in the front line of the POLDER sector) consisting of 10 volunteers of each company, together with a detachment of Pioneers left with the following orders.

- (1) To establish what unit was in front of them
- (2) To destroy machine gun positions if possible.
- (3) To ascertain the meaning of the hammering and what preparations were being made.

The deserter himself saw the party leave about 18 o'clock and return 20 minutes later with about 20 prisoners, as he thinks of a French Regiment No 141. The raiders reported that preparations were being made for a gas attack. Prior to October 2nd there had been no special gas alarm orders. No one thought gas attacks were possible because the coast winds changed so frequently. After Oct 2nd standing orders for gas alarms were issued to all units, and a gas attack was expected daily except on the 5th when the gas officer of deserter's

battalion reported that the wind was too strong. The Deserter subsequently heard this Officer say that he had been taught that gas would be broken up and rendered ineffective in any wind more than half as strong as that of October 5th. The following was the distribution on the night of Oct 5th.

Sea Sector. 5th Mat Regiment – all Third Battalion in the act of relief. The resting battalion having come from OSTEND to take over. POLDER Sector – 1st Mat Regiment, 1st battalion in front, 3rd battalion in OSTEND, all 2nd battalion on fatigues, ie off loading cement, stores & gravel at embankment on M17, reloading on to field railway trucks and pushing latter into front line. LOMBARTZDE Sector 2 battalions of 4th Mat Regiment distributed as 1st regiment, ie the 1st battalion in the front line, the 3rd on fatigues, the 2nd in OSTEND. BAMBURG Sector – 12 battalion of 2nd Mat Regiment.

The gas affected all sectors but principally POLDER and LOMBARTZYDE. Two battalions of the 5th Regiment were in the front trenches which the gas apparently missed. The gas apparently also missed a battalion of the 2nd Regiment. At 23 o'clock on the 5th October the Deserter with a platoon of 37 men was pushing a truck about M15, and heard the gas alarm sounded. All put on their masks. The gas came on them quickly, but some had insufficient time, the masks of others did not fit, many others tore their masks where the respirator is attached to the material. 17 of the above 37 were gassed of whom 11 died on the ground and the remainder have never rejoined. The Deserter attributed his safety and that of others to finding an adjacent dressing station protected by a gas-proof curtain, where all stayed till 2 o'clock when the attack was over.

The remainder of that night, and all the following day and next night hundreds of dead and gassed were being carried out of all parts of the POLDER and LOMBARTZYDE sectors on to the road M.15 AB and M.1 OC.

Deserter's 7th Company was 180 strong on 5th Oct and lost 68 gassed of whom the majority are known to have died. Deserter believes all 8 Companies of his Regiment suffered similarly as did also the reserves battalion of the 5th Regiment, and the 4th Mat. Regiment and 1st Marine Pioneer Company suffered still more heavily. No one actually believed in the possibility of a gas attack before Oct 2nd and the men had not been adequately trained in the gas alarm nor had their masks been properly fitted and tested. The masks did not fit, and were of much inferior quality to those now issued. The respirators were so bad that men with weak lungs were forced to remove their masks. The fatigue battalions of the 4th Mat Regiment had left their masks on their rifles and packs, and the 1st Pioneer Companies had left their masks in MIDDLEKERKE.

The Deserter heard the Divisional Chaplain say at Church Parade on Oct 8th at OSTEND that the Division had to deplore the loss of 700 men dead after the recent gas attack and who

had been buried in the divisional sector. This is apart from gassed cases sent to OSTEND and BRUGES, of whom many died on route and in hospitals owing to the lack of adequate appliances for treating such large numbers sufficiently quickly.

It was currently estimated in the 1st Mat Regiment that there had been 1500 gas casualties in the division counting the 5 battalions principally affected and the divisional units, of whom the great majority ultimately died.

Before October 2nd French deserters had come over and said that preparations for a gas attack were in progress.

The gas was so strong that after the attack Deserter's Company could not unlock the bolts of their rifles, and all metal arms and equipment of his battalion were rendered unserviceable and handed into stores. Their rifles and side arms were described as 'as if they had been in a well'. The gas seemed to come in 6 separate waves, and the effects were felt as far back as RAVERSYDE. Several transport horses of the Pioneers were killed in MIDDELKERKE. Many dug outs in this sector now have gas-proof curtains fitted, and the gas-masks have been changed, fitted and tested.