

THE RAID.

JUNE 27TH, 1916.

"A particularly successful raid was carried out by the Highland Light Infantry, when 46 prisoners and 2 machine guns were captured and 2 enemy mine shafts destroyed, with the loss of only 12 men wounded."—British Official Communique.

.

Rat-tat-a-tat!

A German machine gun chattered, and a spray of bullets hissed through the air.

Wo-o-of! A *minenwerfer* exploded between the British first and second lines, a little to the right of our position, and for an instant the darkness was dispersed by the angry burst of flame.

Rat-a-tat-tat!

Some bullets drove—*zip!*—into our sand-bagged parapet, and the young officer of R.E., wedged tightly in the sap amid a crowd of our fellows, chuckled softly. He lit a cigarette with a patent lighter, and by its glow Pudd'n, who

was his neighbour, saw that his eyes were twinkling in appreciation of some joke.

Rat-tat-a-tat! said the machine gun again.

“Go it, my hearty!” said the R.E. officer; “you’ve got exactly eight minutes to spit your blinking venom, and then——” he chuckled and turned to Pudd’n. “You hear that blamed chatterbox? And you know that there’s a Boche working it? Well, our friend Fritz there is sitting right on top of umpteen pounds of high explosive, and”—a chuckle—“he doesn’t know it. And he never will know it, for in about eight minutes that mine is going to go up—up—up,—and so is our friend Fritz and his machine gun.”

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat!

There was subtle meaning as well as width in Pudd’n’s smile as he turned to his other neighbour and imparted the little joke to him; but only a very faint smile rewarded him, for his neighbour was in that state of nervousness peculiar to members of recently joined drafts who are about to go over the parapet for the first time.

Then there was a movement in front, and the party moved forward up the sap. At the end there were steps formed of sandbags that led up to the surface of the earth. The officer

in command of the party stood there and said in low tones to the men as they filed past him—"Good luck, boys!—good luck! Creep well out, but be sure to keep in touch. And keep well down while the bombardment's on. Cheeroh! Good luck!"

When they had reached the top of the world they found themselves in the middle of No Man's Land—far beyond our own barbed wire defences. On all fours, with the utmost stealth and caution, they crawled in single file through the long damp grass, and when the whispered word was passed along that the last man was out of the sap they lay still and awaited developments.

From other saps other men had similarly emerged, until now there stretched in three rows between the opposing lines of trenches a hundred and fifty silent figures. An occasional rocket from the German lines bathed them in light, but they remained unseen and undisturbed.

Rat-a-tat-tat!

A stream of bullets sang menacingly above them.

Gussie's hand trembled ever so slightly in its hold on the bucket of bombs that lay beside him. He whispered to Pudd'n, whose head was close to his:—"I don't think much of No Man's

Land as a health resort—I'd rather have Black-pool. Hear that damned machine gun?"

Pudd'n thought of what the R.E. officer had told him, and smiled and said nothing.

Whong!

The world shuddered, then heaved violently—there was an immense burst of jagged yellow flame mottled with dark masses—a stunning roar and a fierce, tearing wind—then the thud-thudding of heavy objects on the ground, and the pitter-patter of falling earth and debris.

Pudd'n got no opportunity to assure himself that the machine gun was silent, for immediately after the explosion of the mine there was a shrieking overhead as of a train with brakes tight pressed grinding to a stop. And the enemy trenches were lit up by a succession of belches of angry flame, to the accompaniment of a series of violent explosions as rapid as the crackle of a machine gun. Our artillery sprinkled shrapnel and high explosive shells over the enemy's trenches as thickly as pepper shaken from a pepper pot, until it seemed as though nothing could live in that infernal zone of spitting fire and flying steel.

The raiders lay in the flickering twilight—the twilight of the bursting shells—and watched and waited—and waited.

Thus did five minutes—ten minutes—pass : still they waited—each man with his own thoughts for company. And this was the time of their greatest ordeal—lying passive and silent, with eyes fixed on the suburb of Hell that they must soon enter. The German guns were replying vigorously to our bombardment, but their shells were passing over the raiders and were bursting in our first and second lines of trenches.

A shouted whisper passed along the line—
“ Move forward as far as you can safely go.”

They crawled and wriggled over the ground until the hum of flying splinters from our own shells and the *z-zog!* as these ploughed into the earth close by, warned them to go no further.

The scene was now as light as day—a wan and ghostly day—for the upper air was scintillant with star rockets that soared and drifted and fell to earth again in prodigal profusion.

A man glanced at the watch on his wrist.

“ One minute more !”

A weakness seemed to seize on all his limbs, his heart drove against his ribs with a rapid, sickening stroke, a mist was before his eyes. He strove to pull himself together—clenched his teeth and winked his eyes rapidly and swallowed hard—“ You’ve got to go through with it, you

know," he kept telling himself. And suddenly his mind cleared, and the strength returned to his limbs: he saw only the task that lay ahead, and a raw, primitive eagerness beset him: he itched to be up and off about his work: cool, alert, tense, he waited—a hundred and fifty of him.

Whong!

A second mine had been exploded immediately under the crater formed by a previous and similar eruption. Two of our men had been lying almost on the lip of this old crater, and the shock of the explosion uplifted and hurled them bodily through the air for a distance of many yards. They lay moaning in their distress.

But their companions, immediately the great flame shot upwards, were on their feet and, some cheering madly, some in grim silence, were racing hell-for-leather towards the German trenches, the debris of the mine showering down upon them as they ran.

Some leaped straightway into the crater of the mine, and lo! it was littered with dead and dying men. A working party of Germans had been engaged in fortifying the old crater at the moment that the mine had burst beneath them—and now they sprawled in gruesomely unnatural

attitudes amid the debris, half buried beneath it, and either silent everlastingly or making strange animal moans. The few who were able to move turned and fled towards their own trenches the instant their affrighted eyes saw the Highlanders leaping pell-mell into their midst—and, with a yell, our boys were after them with bomb and bayonet.

In places the barbed wire defences before the German lines had not been entirely destroyed by our artillery, and many of the raiders were caught and held in the tangled strands. Only for an instant, however, for with an utter recklessness of personal hurt they tore their way through it, so that ere they reached the enemy parapet the kilts and puttees of many were in tatters, and their legs torn and dripping blood. But at the moment they were hardly aware that they had even been scratched.

By this time the nature of our artillery bombardment had changed, and instead of shells being scattered profusely over the entire enemy front they now formed a barrage or a crescent curtain of fire around the area being attacked. This portion was thus effectively isolated from the rest of the enemy's front, for reinforcements from either flank or from the rear could only be brought in through a storm of shrapnel and high explosive shells.

Our boys swarmed into the German first line, and within two minutes it was theirs by right of conquest.

Two bombs deftly thrown put a machine gun and its crew out of action.

A Corporal landed in the trench within two yards of a lusty German. The latter lunged with his bayonet—but the Corporal parried the thrust and savagely swung the butt of his own rifle upward. It caught the German on the point of the chin, and he dropped like a felled ox.

Earchie—who, two years ago, spent weary days in toiling up endless flights of stairs to deliver His Majesty's mail—encountered a German rounding the corner of a traverse: a moment later Erchie continued on his way, but his bayonet was dark and wet, and his heart surged with a fierce, unholy exultation.

Pudd'n was suddenly confronted by a German at close quarters—and Pudd'n's only weapons were bombs. But someone—surely it was Providence!—had placed on the firing-step, within a few feet of our warrior, a heavy wooden mallet. By the light of his electric torch Pudd'n glimpsed it—and in an instant had seized it and swung it high above his head—then drove it with smashing force full into the other's face.

Those who were not actually engaged in hand-to-hand conflict with the enemy started straightway to bomb the dug-outs. Steep flights of steps, cut to a depth of from thirty to forty feet, gave access to these underground tunnels. Our men threw a bomb or two down the stairs, and, after the explosion, "Hoch, kamarad!" they shouted, or "Allez, you blighters, allez!"

Sometimes two, sometimes three or more, Germans then crawled from their holes and up the steps, and, arriving in the trench, threw up their hands in token of surrender. Many were dazed with the shock of the bomb explosions; others were in a state of abject terror and, flinging themselves on their knees, whimpered "Mercy, kamarad!"

One of our men was preparing to throw a bomb into a dug-out when, in the glare of his electric torch, he saw a middle-aged German, bearded of face and bald of head, laboriously climbing the stairs. The Highlander waited. When he had almost reached the level of the trench the German's unsuspecting eyes suddenly lit on the kilt of his enemy. A look of incredulous bewilderment overspread his features—a look that changed to one of horror and fear as his eyes travelled slowly upward and over the khaki tunic. His jaw dropped, a gasp that was almost

a sob escaped his lips, and he fell on his knees and whined and babbled for mercy.

Unceremoniously the prisoners were hustled and frog-marched along the trench.

A section of the raiders darted up the communication trench leading to the enemy's second line, clearing the way before them by means of bombs. Into the second line they went, killing everyone who offered any resistance, taking prisoners those who surrendered themselves, and bombing every dug-out.

Fifteen minutes after the first of the Highlanders had entered the enemy trenches they were in complete possession of them—or at least in possession of these portions of the two front lines isolated by our artillery barrage. It was their duty to hold these lines for an hour, and to inflict every possible damage on them.

So swift was the despatch of any German who showed signs of fight, and so thoroughly was the bombing of the dug-outs carried out, that most of the enemy who were lucky enough to survive this latter ordeal were completely cowed and surrendered themselves eagerly.

While Pudd'n was peering into the gloomy depths of a dug-out he felt someone tap his shoulder from behind. He turned and saw a

German. "Prisonerr — prisonerr — me!" said Fritz, holding his hands above his head. "Kamerad—me!"

"Allez, you blighter, allez!—Shoo!" Pudd'n spoke to him much as he might have done to an obtrusive hen—then, catching him by the nape of the neck, raced him along the trench at full speed, without taking any undue care as he swung him round the corners of the traverses.

"Mon Joo! this is easier than liftin' yer pey," said Pudd'n, as he handed over his prisoner to an escort. "It's a shame to tak' the money for't . . . an' the glory."

The comparative ease with which they had overcome the enemy exhilarated the men: they were elated, overflowing with animal spirits.

A bugler rushed up to the officer in command of the party and, seizing his hand, wrung it vigorously.

"Eh, whit de ye think o' Nummer Fower Company noo, Sir? Good auld Nummer Fower! Eh, man, is it no' champion? Luk at a' thae blighters skelpin' along like rabbits, wi' only yin o' oor men ahint them! O crivens, it's a terr richt enough!"

Ere the officer could stop him the bugler had seized hold of a rifle and bayonet left by a wounded man, had scrambled over the parapet,

and had attached himself as escort to a band of German prisoners being herded over No Man's Land towards our trenches.

"Allez, ye blighters, allez! Hoch!" shouted the bugler.

Like a flock of frightened sheep they scampered over No Man's Land, little Five-Foot-Nothing behind them yelling encouragement, and occasionally administering it to the laggards with his boot or his bayonet.—"Faster, ye blinkin' sods! Faster! Come on, auld Baldyheid, ye'll be last."

When the men in our front line saw the party approaching they started to cheer, and shouted further encouragement.—"Come on Fritz, we're waitin' for ye. . . . At the double, man! . . . Hooray!"

The chaser and the chased tumbled precipitately into the trench.

One of the Germans was the middle-aged man, bald and bearded, of whom mention has already been made. When he had picked himself up from the bottom of the trench, he suddenly put his hands over his face and began to weep.

The Bugler regarded him for a moment in wide-eyed amazement, and then—pity overcame him. He forgot that the man was a foe: remembered only that he was a fellow-being in

distress : for, going up to the German he patted him encouragingly on the shoulder, and whispered, "Stick it, auld son ; you're a' richt noo." Then he returned to the German trenches to escort back more prisoners.

No Man's Land had now become quite a populous highway, for parties were constantly passing between the two hostile lines of trenches escorting bands of prisoners, carrying over captured booty such as machine guns, rifles, equipment, etc., or else returning from these errands.

On the firing-step of the German trench sat two of our signallers beside a telephone apparatus. Two minutes after the raiders had reached their objective the signallers had "connected" with Battalion Headquarters, and were relating over the wire the successful capture of the enemy trench. Now they kept up a running commentary on the progress of events—making the Headquarters Staff cognisant of every incident at the moment of its happening. Shells were whistling and screaming over their heads, and the roar of the explosions was continuous, but the nonchalance of the two signallers was complete. Had they been reporting a football match their excitement would have been much greater.

“Another batch of five prisoners is being escorted over.—The sappers have discovered a mine-shaft and are preparing to blow it up.—They’ve blown it up.—The front line is entirely in our hands now; there are no more Allemands left in it, except the dead and wounded down in the dug-outs.—No, we’ve no idea how many of the enemy have been killed, but there must be a devil of a lot of them. One of the prisoners says there were about twenty men in his dug-out, and after it was bombed he was the only one able to crawl out. He says the others were heaped around him dead and dying.—Three more prisoners are on their way down from the second line; that makes thirty-eight now. And another machine gun has been found and is being dismantled.—Nothing at all doing just now; the boys are hunting round for souvenirs.”

When the allotted time had expired forty-six prisoners had been safely escorted over to our own lines, besides two complete enemy machine guns, and a miscellaneous collection of rifles, revolvers, bayonets, anti-gas helmets, and other equipment; two mine-shafts and numerous dug-outs had been destroyed, and the trenches broken down and their fortifications rendered useless as far as was possible.

Then above all the din of the bursting shells a bugle call rang thin and clear—and was repeated many times. It was the signal for the raiders—those of them who had penetrated into the enemy's second line of trenches—to retire to the first line.

But little Five-Foot-Nothing, the bugler, was not satisfied with his performance. The prearranged signal did not suffice to express all the exuberant joy that possessed him; and, putting his bugle to his lips, he blew another call—which, when they heard it shrill above the din of battle, set a-laughing all the raiders in the enemy's trenches and their waiting pals in the British lines. For "Come to the cookhouse door, boys!" was the call that the bugler played.

A few minutes later the clear shrilling blasts of a whistle were heard, and at the signal the raiders leapt over the enemy parapet, and set out on the return to their own trenches. The instructions had been that they were to crawl back on all fours, but in this one particular only was authority set at naught that night and instructions disregarded. It had not been foreseen that not a single German capable of firing a shot would be left in that part of the enemy front, and in this unexpected circumstance the need for caution was eliminated—or nearly so.

The return of the raiders to their own trenches resembled more than anything else the return of a football team to its own half of the field after a particularly hot scrimmage around the enemy's goalposts resulting in a hard won goal. They ran hither and thither in gleeful excitement, shaking each other by the hand, and all talking rapidly in high pitched voices ; some danced and capered ; one essayed to turn a Catherine wheel ; the bugler and his pal strutted arm in arm, a little round German forage cap perched perkily on each of their heads, while their free hands brandished aloft their own steel helmets, which they clanked together in the manner of cymbals as accompaniment to the song that they sang full-throatedly—the refrain of which was to the effect that—

“ D Compan-y is the finest Compan-y
That ever—came out of—the H.L.I.”

It was surely as strange a crossing of No Man's Land as was ever made.

On reaching the sap-heads from which they had originally emerged, the raiders clambered into the saps, and thence made their way into their own trenches.

At one moment there was a slight delay as some of the raiders were clustered around the

sap-head. A German prisoner in the sap was blocking the way; either from fear or from animal stubbornness he refused to move forward. It was no occasion for argument: the men above were waiting to get into the shelter of the trench, and at any moment it might be expected that the Germans, having regained possession of their front line, would open fire.—A pistol shot rang out, and the party descended into safety.

Half-an-hour later, when the raiders were displaying their souvenirs—rifles, revolvers, bayonets, anti-gas helmets, forage caps, buttons, German newspapers, and what not—before the eyes of their envious comrades, and when they were relating with gusto and adjectival artistry the incidents of the raid, the sound of bombing in the German trenches was heard.

“O hokey! listen to that,” cried one; “they’re bombin’ their way up the communication trench to the front line noo, an’ there’s no sae much as the button o’ a Hielander in the place. O hokey! whit a bawr! That’s a guid ane!”

Still later the enemy plastered our trenches with shrapnel and high explosive as a return for the ill we had wrought him, and by a strange irony the only result of this bombardment was

that one of the German prisoners being escorted down a communication trench was hit and killed instantaneously. A volunteer party, consisting of the sturdy Regimental Pioneers, was struggling up the communication trench with dixies of hot tea for the raiders, and experienced the full force of this intense bombardment; but, almost by a miracle, no man of them was injured, and the raiders received the precious tea while it was still piping hot.

Immediately they arrived in our lines the prisoners were conducted to Battalion Headquarters, a dug-out between our second and third lines of trenches, and there they were systematically searched and deprived of any documents or articles that might yield information of value. Questions were asked of them concerning their units and Army formations, and these were generally answered readily enough.

The first ten or twelve prisoners stood huddled together in a side trench, with armed sentries over them, waiting—they knew not what. A thin rain was falling, and in their wet clothes they looked cold and dejected and infinitely miserable. One of them wore no shirt under his damp tunic, and his teeth chattered and his limbs shivered with the cold. Some of

the younger men—mere boys—wept quietly when they thought themselves unobserved.

One of the latter leaned heavily against the trench as though in weariness; occasionally he slipped down a little, and would then pull himself together again; a sentry flashed on him the light of an electric torch, and it revealed his face as white and drawn. "Poor little beggar," thought the sentry, "he's all out with fatigue." Then a comrade, an older man, put his arm around the boy to support him, and whispered to him encouragingly. The lad's head fell on the friendly shoulder, and he began to sob pitifully. A question from his companion elicited a faint answer—and the older man began to talk excitedly in German to the sentry, who grasped sufficiently the sense of the words to understand that the boy had been wounded by a bayonet. Immediately he was carried into a dug-out and his wound dressed—only just in time, for he was bleeding and had bled profusely. Under the surveillance of a guard he was allowed to lie there on a heap of sandbags until such time as he could be carried away on a stretcher. Other wounded prisoners similarly had their hurts attended to, and the knowledge of this seemed to revive a little the spirits of their comrades. Probably they argued that,

since this care was being taken of their wounded, their lives were to be spared.

The prisoners as they came down the trenches were in a state of the utmost nervousness and fear, and it was obvious that they dreaded the approach of every armed Highlander, not knowing what it might portend. Not infrequently, when a prisoner rounded a traverse and came suddenly upon a Highlander, his arm rose protectingly as though to ward off a blow, and he shrank and cowered in to the wall of the trench. But this diffidence wore off in part when they experienced from their captors a marked consideration and kindness. They were huddled together in dug-outs, sheltered alike from rain and from fragments of flying shell; cigarettes were offered to them, and drinking water; conversation was carried on by means of Tommy's own peculiar mixture of Anglo-French and of expressive gesture, which, if the Germans did not wholly understand, they knew at least to be friendly in intention.

Our prisoners were a heterogeneous collection—boys in their teens, men in all the splendour of robust youth, men of mature years, men whose features bore the stamp of education and refinement, and dull boorish clowns; men of fine physique, and others but ill-developed.

One spoke English perfectly; he had been in the United States for seven years, and at the outbreak of war was on a business trip to Germany: he was conscripted against his will, and forced to fight for the Fatherland.

“Well, are you glad you’ve been made a prisoner and are out of the war?” a Highlander asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“That is a question that a man does not answer. But one doesn’t grumble at anything in war. It’s the luck of the game. And one has got to take it like a man.”

Later, he said in reference to the success of our raid, “It was well done—your plans must have been carefully made and carried out to the letter. We didn’t get a chance to show much fight. You were in our trenches and killing and stunning us with bombs before we knew the artillery bombardment was over. You Scotsmen have plenty of dash and bravery.—Oh, yes, it was well done.”

Other prisoners were mainly concerned with asking, “Me go Angland?” And on receiving a reply in the affirmative, “Good! good!” they ejaculated gleefully and burst into rapid and excited converse with their fellow-captives.

A few days later Erchie was discussing the raid—acknowledged by G.H.Q. to have established a record, in point of view of material results, for any single battalion. But Erchie was not concerned with the glory accruing to him and his comrades; he was thinking of the captured Germans.

“I suppose,” he said, “that thae blinkin’ Allemands ’ll be in Blighty by this time. The lucky bounders!”