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NEW ZEALANDERS IN ACTION.

NEWS FROM FRANCE.

THE DIVISION.

(Extract from "N.Z. Chronicle," Nov. 22, 1918.)

We have had little in the way of description of how the Division received and celebrated the great news of Monday, November 11th, though it may be safely assumed that the boys did not permit the occasion to pass unnoticed. November 11th closed the main part of a warrior epic such as there has never been before. The tale of the N.Z.E.F. from the landing at Anzac until the fall of Le Quesnoy to the Rifle Brigade is a tale more wonderful than we ever dreamt possible when in '14 the first dim echoes of war drew us from the bush, the stations, and the towns. It will be told in many volumes; and it has been a grand foundation to New Zealand tradition. With all their sorrow, hardship and misery, these years have not been without their value; we have proved ourselves worthy sons of a fine old Empire, we feel we have rendered a good account of our stewardship, and we have gained a greater confidence in ourselves and affection for the Empire.

The last action of the Division was the heavy engagement round Le Quesnoy, in the 30-mile attack of November 4th. The following brief accounts of the New Zealanders' part in that action have been published.

"Times."—The outstanding incidents of the attack were the crossing of the Canal, and the capture of Catillon by the 1st Division, the surrounding and final reduction of Le Quesnoy by New Zealanders, and the rapid advance on Landreies and its capture by the 25th Division.

Undoubtedly, however, the most dramatic episode was the capture of Le Quesnoy. It is an old fortified town, with huge earth ramparts, which have stood many sieges. It was held in great strength, and the New Zealanders were compelled to draw back from the first attempt to storm it frontally, though they succeeded in carrying the outer circuit of the ramparts. They then proceeded to encircle the town, and worked round both north and south in the face of determined resistance, until the two parties met on the opposite side. Leaving Le Quesnoy thus beleaguered, the main body of New Zealanders went on and got among the German guns, and this division alone took about 100, with waggons and personnel of all the batteries practically complete.

Going on, the New Zealanders carried all before them, having stubborn opposition to overcome at many points, notably at Jolimetz and Herbignies. All this time Le Quesnoy, within its ancient fortifications, was still German. We dropped invitations to surrender from aeroplanes, but no response, and demands for surrender under the white flag were also refused. In the afternoon, therefore, the attack was resumed, and the New Zealanders fought their way into the streets, when the German officer commanding made formal surrender of himself and the garrison of 1,000 men. It was like a passage from some old war suddenly interpolated into a modern battle.

"Daily Chronicle."—The 4th Corps, commanded by General Harper, was the centre of the attack, with the 37th and New Zealand divisions on this side of Ghissignies and Le Quesnoy. The last-named place is a mediaeval town, defended by higher ramparts and inner and outer bastions, strengthened by Vauban, the famous engineer of military works under Louis XIV. It was garrisoned by over 1,000 Germans, with orders to defend it at all costs. The New Zealanders, however, were equally determined to take Le Quesnoy, and they set out to assault it frontally as soon as the attack had been launched with a powerful bombardment.

Those New Zealand boys, among whom I have been this morning, have been fighting with hardly a break since they went away from Hebuterne three months ago, but their spirit remains high, and yesterday they achieved one of their most heroic feats. They stormed the outer ramparts of Le Quesnoy in the old-fashioned style, with scaling ladders, and made breaches through the walls as in the old days of Henry's men-at-arms, but with more peril, because of machine-gun fire, which swept them from the inner defences. They gained part of the outer ramparts, but could get no farther, and the Germans remained strong inside their keep. New tactics were adopted by the New Zealand general, who ordered one body of his men to go round Le Quesnoy on the north, and another to work round it on the south, leaving

pickets all round the town. This was done, and the town was completely surrounded by New Zealanders, who joined hands on the east side. Some of their battalions then fought forward against determined resistance from the villages of Herbignies and Jolimetz, where they broke their way into the enemy's artillery positions and captured many guns.

Astonishing things happened there, but meanwhile the German garrison of Le Quesnoy was called upon to surrender. Messages were first dropped inside the town from aeroplanes flying low. "You are completely surrounded," was the first message dropped in this way, "and the enemy troops are far to the east of you. If you will surrender you will be treated as honourable prisoners of war." The garrison of Le Quesnoy read these words, but no surrender was given. Later in the morning two deputations were sent to them, each one consisting of a New Zealand officer and two German prisoners, and going through the breach in the outer ramparts they shouted out a summons to surrender, with a promise of honourable treatment. A few men accepted this offer and came out, but most of them remained within their bastions, and still gave no sign. So it was all day until the evening, when, after astonishing success further forward, the New Zealanders determined to close in upon Le Quesnoy, and force a surrender at the point of the bayonet. From the outer ramparts, they stormed the inner walls, very high and perpendicular, so that they were not easy to scale. They forced their way in, despite all the machine-gun fire, and after fighting in the streets of the town, received the capitulation of the remaining garrison, amounting still to nearly 1,000 men.

While this drama was in progress other New Zealanders were fighting hard in the village of Jolimetz, and other villages and farm-houses on the edge of the Forest of Metnal, and where most of the trees had been felled in the outskirts, and they broke straight through the German gun positions. The gunners were harnessed up when the New Zealanders surrounded them, and the strange sight was seen of these German artillerymen driving their batteries towards our lines as prisoners of war under escort of our dismounted men.

With the 37th Division they made an advance of 10,000 yards, against 10,000 yards up to yesterday evening, fighting all the way for 7,000 yards against stubborn enemies, and this morning they have gone much farther, with the Germans retreating before them.

DESPATCHES.

(From the Official Correspondent).

LE QUESNOY.

October 15th.—Wellington troops improved their positions slightly this morning and captured a few prisoners. Yesterday, in addition to their front, they held a flank of 3,000 yards, against which two lines of 500 Germans were seen preparing to attack. Vickers guns were turned on them, and nothing eventuated. To-day this flank was reduced by half and the position made more secure, but the enemy was holding the ridge ahead and was shelling. Last night he shelled out one of our regimental aid posts at a farm north of Viesley. This morning we passed them digging in under the bank of the road leading to the front. Warfare is now entirely open, and for miles there are no signs of trenches or barbed wire. Great craters have been blown in roads and railways, which our engineers are filling in. For miles the enemy had destroyed his telegraph lines, sawing down posts and breaking wires. Civilians, liberated in the villages, are still unrestrained in their joy. Strange to say, they learned from the conversation of German soldiers that the New Zealanders were coming. The Hun has looted freely and has left behind a trail of destruction. There is an abundance of vegetables, which have been very scarce for many weeks. There are fields of sugar-beet and turnips, and winter wheat which is pushing its leaves above the soil.

The men are tired, but still cheerful. They are due for a spell after the long advance.

October 28th.—Yesterday afternoon Major J. M. Richmond, D.S.O., M.C., R.N.Z.A., was killed by a 5.9 shell. His

death was instantaneous. This afternoon he was buried in a French cemetery at Solesmes, the Bishop of Nelson reading the service. General Russell and many artillery comrades attended. His loss is greatly deplored throughout the whole Division. He joined the N.Z.F.A. in 1910, and left with the main body. He landed on Gallipoli from the first boat taking New Zealand troops ashore. He remained there continuously until the evacuation, leaving in the last boat. In October '15, he was appointed Brigade Major to the Divisional Artillery, which appointment he held until August this year. At his desire for more experience in the field he took command of a battery, and on the day of his death had just taken over the temporary command of a brigade of Field Artillery. He served continually through Egypt, Gallipoli, and France from 1914 until his death. He was engaged to a second cousin in England, and had decided to resume his profession of law.

October 29.—Our latest V.C. is truly remarkable, having almost in one month gained the D.C.M., the M.M., and the V.C. He was awarded his D.C.M. for a gallant action in the front line between Commeourt and Hebuterne, when, on July 24th, he led a patrol by daylight along a sap leading to an enemy position. By bombing, he forced the enemy to retreat 600 yards, enabling the following troops to garrison and hold the captured trench. For twenty-four hours he was untiring in his efforts to organise and hold the trench. Next morning, almost at the time his unit was to be relieved, the enemy pierced the line to the left, and he went alone to see what was taking place. He found six survivors of the garrison, whom he organised and posted by fighting his way forward into the old position. Finding the officer dead at his post, he remained with these men until visited by an officer, who asked him to stay until the situation had been readjusted. This he did under heavy bombing and machine-gun fire. The enemy again collected for assault, so he crept forward alone and threw six bombs amongst them, thus drawing their bombs in his own direction, and so saving his men. Subsequently, on the same night, the enemy continued putting up flares from the position sixty yards in front of the post, so he again crept forward and threw bombs. For forty-eight hours his gallantry and energy enthused his men at a time when they had occasion to be most depressed. Largely through his action and initiative the attack resulted disastrously for the enemy. On the 16th of the following month, near Puisieux, he exhibited courage of the highest order. In order that the troops on our left might advance it was necessary that the enemy machine-guns should be promptly silenced. Any attempt to outflank the guns would result in severe casualties to troops on our left. Judson with his section following, rushed straight at the positions, disconcerting the enemy capturing three machine-guns and 17 prisoners without loss to our side. For this he was awarded the Military Medal; now for his action on the 26th of the same month he has won the V.C.

One of our bravest soldiers was killed in the fighting which gained us the Escaillor bridgeheads—Sergeant Henry James Nicholas, V.C., of the 1st Canterbury. He was shot through the head while demanding surrender of enemy soldiers whom he saw vaguely in the darkness.

October 30.—Our line remains almost stationary in the vicinity of the railway north-west of Le Quesnoy. Since the Rifle Brigade went into the line there have been only patrol actions. Posts were established across the railway; but some had to fall back in face of opposition from superior numbers, the enemy apparently thinking it important to hold this position. One of our platoons exploiting beyond the railway was cut off, and apparently several were captured. Enemy shelling—including gas—has been heavier than during the past six weeks, and machine-guns are active along the whole corps front. Our men have been thrice counter-attacked; each attack repelled, and amends made for losses. One following heavy minenwerfer and artillery bombardment was repulsed with rifle and Lewis gunfire, the enemy suffering severely.

Recently, a large wooden cross has been erected at Factory Corner, near Fiers, in memory of the New Zealanders who fell in the second battle of the Somme. The scene was a remarkable one. The party arriving at nightfall, the cross was erected by candle-light amidst a scene of desolation in which there was no sound of gun nor sign of living man. Some skulls and bones which were found on the battlefield were buried by the party.

One of our field artillery batteries has been selected as the model of the whole Army, and will proceed to the base for two or three months as to act as such. The General, in addressing them just after coming out of the line congratulated them upon the honour.

(To be continued).

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