

Lieutenant Colonel Bertram Best-Dunkley by Colonel Mike Glover of the Fusilier Museum

The offensive known as Third Ypres or Passchendaele, commenced on 29 July 1917, concluding on 10 November.

On the opening day of the offensive The Lancashire Fusiliers were represented by the 2/5th Battalion, a second line Territorial battalion in the 55th West Lancashire Division, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bertram Best-Dunkley.

The plan for the 55th Division was for two brigades of the division to clear up to what was designated the 'Black Line'. The brigade to which the 2/5th belonged would then pass through and advance up to an objective some 800 meters further on known as the 'Green Line'.

On the night of 29 July the Battalion moved up to the start-line and arrived without loss at 01:30am on the morning of 30 July. At 03:50 on 30 July the Division advance commenced. All went well, and by 09:00 most of the Black Line objective had been taken with the important exceptions of Spee Farm and Wine House, which lay to the south east of St Julien.

The second phase of the operation began at 08:30am on 30 July when the 2/5th Battalion, as part of the 164 Brigade, began their attack. The advance began at the rate of 100 yards in four minutes. Many German prisoners were met but progress was otherwise without incident until the Hanebeek stream was reached.

The Battalion then met with very heavy rifle and machine-gun fire from many directions but chiefly from strong points on the Black Line at Wine House, Spee Farm, Pond Farm and Hindu Cot that had not been taken during the initial phase. The fire inflicted many casualties and caused much confusion. Nevertheless, commanders of the leading troops took prompt steps to deal with the German strong points at Wine House and Spee Farm.

When all the officers of C Company had been knocked out, Lieutenant Colonel Best-Dunkley himself dashed forward, took command of its leading wave and personally led them on through intense machine gun fire. After stiff fighting, in which much gallant leadership was displayed by commanders of all ranks, the Black Line was finally secured.

It was at this point with a secure Black Line that the Battalion had to be prepared to launch its own attack; however, it had by now lost half its strength and was in a very disorganised state. Nonetheless, it was imperative not to lose the creeping barrage and therefore the advance to the Green Line was begun without delay. After some sharp fights to clear German strong points the Green Line was reached with a few further casualties by noon.

Consolidation was put in hand and outposts were pushed forward. The battalion had been in possession of its objective for less than an hour when the first German counter attack was delivered. Under intense German artillery and machine gun fire supported by aircraft, repeated attacks forced the battalion throughout the following day of 31 July, to conduct a fighting withdrawal back to the Black Line.

Battalion headquarters were at this time at Spee Farm on the Black Line, and received very little warning of the approach of the German counter attack. Lieutenant Colonel Best Dunkley collected all available men and personally led them to the attack which succeeded in driving the Germans back. It was at this time that the Commanding Officer was wounded. It also began to rain in torrents.

As there was no officer known to be alive or unwounded, it was the Orderly Room Sergeant, Sergeant F. Haworth, who took command of the survivors and organised a defensive position. He brought the remnants of the Battalion out of the line at about 09:00 the following day on 1 August, known as Minden Day. Minden Day was spent in great discomfort in a position appropriately called Bilge Trench where, in spite of heavy rain, the survivors wore roses on their helmets.

Of the 19 combatant officers who went into action, three had been killed, two so severely wounded that they later died of their wounds, eleven wounded and two missing, a total of eighteen casualties. Out of 593 other ranks 473 were casualties.

Lieutenant Colonel Bertram Best-Dunkley died of his wounds on 7 August and was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, the second but not the last to be won by this Second Line Territorial battalion.