
THE ROYAL MARINES AT THE GAVRELLE WINDMILL

28TH APRIL 1917- Triumph or tragedy?



It has been 80 years since the Battle of

Arras, it has been stated that it was the most deadly offensive battle to be in as an infantryman(1), yet it is still an unknown battle. My interest has mainly been with the Royal Marine Battalions that fought on land with the RND and everyone has heard of the Ancre and Passchendaele, but not Gavrelle, yet it was at Gavrelle that the Royal Marines suffered their greatest losses ever in their history . I first heard of Gavrelle quite by accident, I was at the library looking for a book to read and I came across "Call to arms" by Joe Murray, I picked it up and read the dust cover which described what the book was about, I stopped at the line "wounded during the bitter fighting at Gavrelle". I thought I knew a bit of history, yet Gavrelle wasn't one of the names I had heard of before or associated with high casualties. I also read the Bruckshaw diaries at the time and he died in the fighting for the Gavrelle Mill (figure 1above), so I resolved to dig deeper and to produce an article for the Royal Marines Historical Society . What struck me most was that Arras in general isn't covered well and the fighting at Gavrelle barely mentioned at all. I did produce my article two years ago, but I have been digging more since and discovered several like minded people. In the past two years I have done more research that has led me to re-appraise my original ideas and conclusions

The 23rd April saw the RND take it's first steps in the Battle of Arras and captured the village of Gavrelle, the 189th and 190th Brigades took part in this assault. The 189th Brigade were successful in their part of the plan in actually taking the Village, the 190th Brigades attack failed to the north of the village with quite heavy losses, mostly caused by a single strong point which ironically would cause such grief to the Royal Marines. The Taking of the village created a salient into the German lines but any advance forward couldn't take place as the high ground to the north east of the village on which a windmill stood was still in German hands. The capture of Gavrelle must go down as one of the great feat of arms by the RND yet most anonymous, but the official history puts the record straight "Full justice has not been done to the 63rd Division, because the details of the street fighting, in which it showed great skill and determination, are too intricate for description"(2) the official history also goes on to say " Actually, if they could

as green line. 1 RM was to advance to this spot, stop and consolidate, linking with the 2nd Division units to the North and 2RM to the south.

The southern attack was to be undertaken by 2RM with a company of Anson supporting. 2RM would start from within Gavrelle village and had two separate objectives. The first objective was the windmill on the high ground to the north east, a platoon was assigned to this task. The other objective was a group of unfinished trenches to the south of the Gavrelle- Izel road in the map reference C19d . This would bring them alongside the 1RM 3rd objective. The troops of 2RM were not to go north of the Gavrelle-Izel road as they would walk into 1RM's sector and their independent fire mission. Some of these unfinished trenches extended north of this road, 2RM were instructed to leave these until 1RM's artillery barrage had passed that point, then patrol up and take and consolidate these trenches. The Anson company were to assist 2RM by advancing behind them and deploying off to the side to face south east thus providing a flank guard, as there was still a presence of the enemy just outside Gavrelle in this area. Anson were to form a link from the cemetery south of Gavrelle to the final objective of 2RM. 2RM on their final objective were to dig in and consolidate linking with 1RM to the north and Anson to the south.

Before the attack Folly, Falcon and Flabby trenches were to be evacuated to allow the artillery to cut the wire, as soon as the main attack commenced the HAC were to occupy these trenches, whilst those trenches were unoccupied, mortar and rifle grenade fire was to be conducted on Foggy trench to keep the Germans from coming south of that point. The other services supporting were the machine gunners, 10 Machine guns were placed on Hill 80 behind 1RM's position to fire ahead 4 machine guns were in 1RM's line also to support. Machine guns were placed in the north east of Gavrelle to enfilade the Germans also machine guns were put in the south east of the cemetery in Anson's sector. A section of machine guns were also to go over the top with each of the Royal Marine battalions. Stokes and trench mortars were also to be used . Medium mortars were also placed in the N.E of Gavrelle to pound the area to the north of 2RM's starting line until 1RM's artillery barrage reached that point. Two stokes mortars were to advance with each of the two assaulting units to give local fire, a section was also retained with the HAC just in case. A section of Engineers were attached to the assaulting units. Lastly the artillery support assigned to the attack was considerable, consisting of 6 field artillery brigades plus corps and heavy artillery brigades. The RFC were to overfly the area to monitor progress and the attacking waves had a series of flares to fire to signal progress.

There was planned another attack for the evening of the 28th. When the morning battle had finished and 1 & 2 RM had consolidated their gains, 2RM were to relieve the Anson company and take over their trenches. The whole of the Anson battalion were then to assault the Germans south of Gavrelle to bring the line up the Marines line. The HAC were to assist.

THE BATTLE



It is far easier to describe each attack individually, as they were very much separate entities.

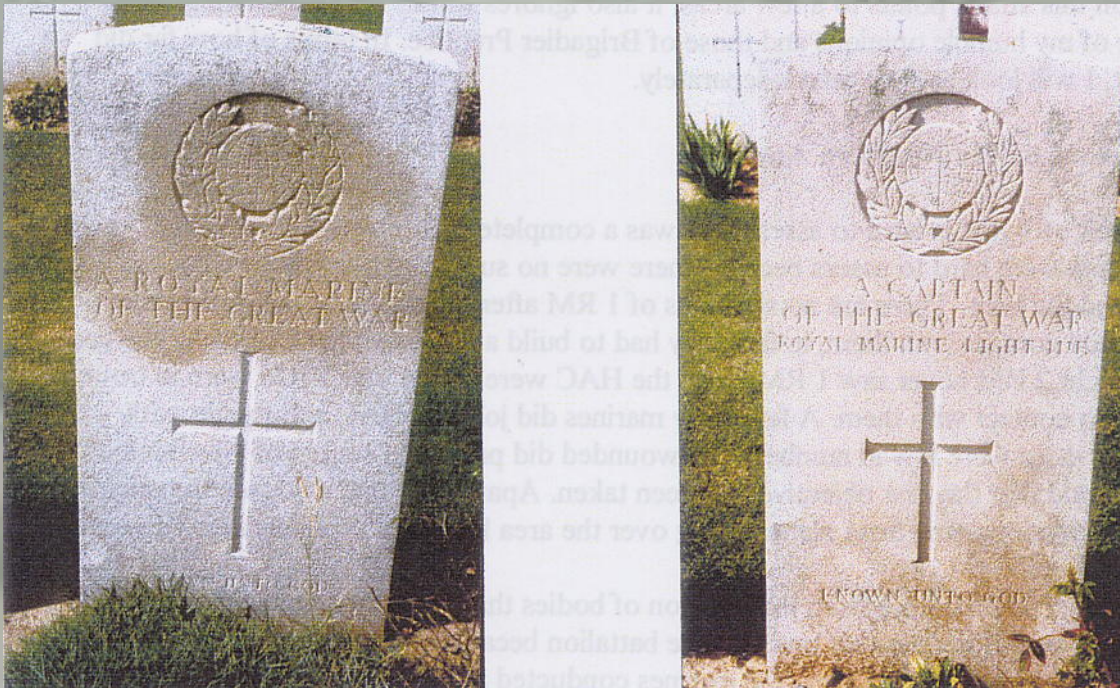
In the north, B company of 1RM moved into its jumping off trenches on the evening of the 26th/27th and patrolled immediately. It was found that the wire was uncut and strong, not a good omen. Their start line was also not taped out so they prolonged the line of the 13th Essex of the 6th Brigade further north. Also this night they were shelled causing casualties, but worse making communications and ration collecting nearly impossible. In the early hours of the 28th at 4.25 the attack started and little more was ever heard from 1 RM, piecing together the course of the attack involves much reading around. As the Brigade diary puts it "Owing to practicality at 4.25 the attack started and little more was ever heard from 1 RM, piecing together the course of the attack involves much reading around. As the Brigade diary puts it "Owing to practicality of the attack and was in a position to enfilade the Royal Marines as what happened to the 190th Brigade units on the 23rd April. Many Marines were therefore shot down quickly and the attack began to falter badly. At 06.30 AM the HAC were ordered to attack northwards along the trenches towards this strongpoint and engage it with Stokes mortars etc., to remove this strongpoint and enable a link to be established with 1RM. Around this time units of 6th Brigade had taken the first 2 objectives but hadn't seen 1RM consequently had their right flank open so had formed a defensive flank facing south. Just after 7AM the HAC had cleared Flurry and Flabby trench, still nothing was known about 1RM from either side of the attack, the very detailed HAC diary gives a clue to knowing that there was serious fighting going on to the north, and the fact that the Germans still had their first line, the 2nd Div. were trying to bomb down it to reach them. The HAC were also having no joy attacking the strongpoint, the ground around it was flat and swept by machine-guns and snipers, also the stick grenades were outranging the Mills bombs. Rifle grenades were then sent for. At 7:15 the first news of 1RM was received at headquarters and that was that a wounded marine of the 4th wave said that the wire was very strong but the others had gone on. A plane overflying the area reported seeing around 20 men at C19 a.6.7., they fired flares to the plane which was the signal agreed, these men I believe were of 1RM, they were too far south to be 6th Brigade, but it does show that elements of 1RM got through the wire. I have more evidence of this which will be discussed later. No official news was

coming back from 1RM only information from the wounded, the information was then out of date. However the information was that the first 2 waves of 1RM got to their objectives, they were then hit hard by a massive counter attack from the direction of Oppy wood (North). The right hand battalion of the 6th Brigade was overpowered and so were the marines despite severe hand to hand fighting. The Germans had a large number advantage and the attackers were ejected or killed and were now in their starting lines. It was now coming up to 9AM and the HAC finally took the strongpoint with around 50 prisoners, it was too late though the damage had been done, the HAC then proceeded to work northwards in order to get in touch with friendly troops. The HAC were not in contact with 1RM but individual marines joined them, also 6th Brigade were not sure of where 1RM were. The truth was 1RM was now basically wiped out with remnants holding its jumping off trench, isolated pockets of men were trapped behind the German counter attack. An overflying aircraft received a flare from C19 a.3.5 at 09:40 which could only be from 1RM members in their second objective. The Germans were now hitting back in force, the attack had failed and the few surviving attackers were now defenders. Germans were now counter attacking in the region of the jumping off trenches, and continuing southwards down their old front line. By 10:20 the troublesome strongpoint was back in German hands. Twenty minutes later Germans were reported west of the British old front line, it looked like the RND was going to end up losing ground. The situation was now serious, the northern attack was now a defensive battle for survival. At 12:30 the HAC had formed a strong defence around folly trench, the Howe battalion were ordered up to the hill behind 1RM's jumping off trench, the 14th Worcester's were put on short notice to move and the 18th Durham Light Infantry were also earmarked to come up in support. Little is reported of what happened next except that the Germans pushed probing patrols steadily westwards but seemed reluctant to push a weak line. The RFC reported various signal flares in the 1RM sector of attack, but these gradually tailed off as one little garrison after another was overcome. By nightfall, the HAC held the majority of the old 1RM line with the Howe close by, the 18th DLI were on hill 80 behind the old front line. Things were back to as they started in the morning, only 1RM as a formed unit ceased to exist.

The southern attack entrusted to 2RM with C company of Anson assisting commenced on time at 4:25 with 2RM attacking, Anson were to follow later and peel off to form defensive strongpoints. The wire was found to be cut only in one place and A,C and D companies of 2RM poured through. At around 5AM C company of Anson moved out to perform their task but found difficulty virtually immediately as 400 yards in front of the front line near to the Gavrelle-Fresnes road there was a strongpoint which was resisting with Machine gun fire and rifle fire. This was overcome by 2RM and at 7AM it was reported from a wounded man that the Windmill and first trench objectives had been taken and the final objective was under attack. It was also reported that there was heavy machine gun fire and sniping from both flanks and therefore no information could be got back. A little later at 7:25 it was reported that 2RM had taken all of its objectives but had sustained many casualties getting this far. At 7:30 AM Anson were in serious trouble, the enemy were seen to advance 100 yards from trenches in C25 b & d and were opening a heavy fire and Anson were taking heavy casualties, so much so that Anson's CO ordered up another company and put another on standby. They also hadn't found the flank of 2RM where they believed it would be. The situation was that the defensive series of outposts that was meant to secure 2RM's flank wasn't in place and they (2RM) were exposed. 2RM now were reporting at the same time that they had taken all their objectives and were now being subjected to machine gun fire from both flanks and there was no sign of 1RM on their left. At 8:30 30 prisoners were sent down from the windmill, whilst at the same time final confirmation was received that all objectives were taken but anyone including stretcher bearers that moved in the open were machine gunned or sniped at. The situation stayed as of that for an hour or so but at 10 AM Anson still hadn't secured the 2RM flank and had suffered badly, their CO decided to

withdraw them, so all the Anson members came in except a small force that was furthest out that couldn't be withdrawn, these managed to get back after dark later. This action though left 2RM out in a deep salient with no support either side and therefore they were in a serious position. At 10:10 the windmill was subjected to a counter attack by about 150 of the enemy but it wasn't seriously pressed home and was beaten off with the help of the artillery. At around this time 2RM were starting to be counter attacked and an SOS signal was received from them. Things were holding up well but B company of 2RM couldn't fight their way through the original gap and dug in, in the old German front line. It seemed that A, C and D companies of 2RM were in a bag which was being drawn shut. By 11:30 these three companies were in effect isolated, B company held the old German front line, the jumping off trench was held by 2 privates and the quartermaster sergeant. The windmill still held solid and another 100 prisoners were sent in from there. The line held by 2RM was reported as being from B24a 2.8 to C25.b.2.7 with the HAC holding Foxy trench to the 2RM lines. At 11:45 Anson were counter attacked to the south and this was beaten off, slightly later a large gathering of German troops was seen to the NE of the windmill, but this attack was stopped dead by the artillery. By 11:58 another German attack was in the offing as troops were seen massing in the area of 2RM's final objective, this was broken up by Artillery. Things reached a stalemate as things quietened down a bit, a fair portion of the cut off companies surrendered. The event I believe was witnessed by Able Seaman Downe of the Anson. His account in Hammertons "I was there" is attributed wrongly in my opinion to the events of 23rd April, I feel they relate to the attack of the 28th. Downe was one of Anson's men desperately trying to get back to his own lines when he witnessed the surrender of large bodies of troops who could only be 2RM "Khaki figures crossed the ditch behind the enemy line-Marines with their hands up, it looked as though the flank of the attack was giving way" (5). This piece also gives graphic descriptions of the close quarter fighting, how there were no clear lines, Germans were mixed in with British. At 2:10 ring of German troops was seen to the NE of the windmill. Downe was one of Anson's men desperately trying to get back to his own lines when he witnessed the surrender of large bodies of troops who could only be 2RM "Khaki figures crossed the ditch behind the enemy line-Marines with their hands up, it looked as though the flank of the attack was giving way" (5). This piece also gives graphic descriptions of the close quarter fighting, how there were no clear lines, Germans were mixed in with British. At 2:10 ring of German troops was seen to the NE of the windmill Gavrelle at 7PM saw some flare in a pre arranged signal from the 2RM final objective, it meant that a small pocket of resistance was still there but were now well cut off with no hope of rescue. The Germans launched one final attack on 2RM and Anson at 8:30 and this was beaten off again with the help of the artillery. The 14th Worcester's came up and took over the line of Anson and 2RM and that was the end of the attack on the southern front. Needless to say that the attack scheduled for later in the day by Anson did not take place.

THE CASUALTIES



During any battle there are casualties, Killed , Wounded and Missing. It is stated in the division records that the action of the 28th cost the division 23 Officers and 862 other ranks this would be killed, wounded and missing primarily from 1&2 RM , Anson, HAC and the supporting units. Hindsight and with the benefit of my sources I can prove that those figures are on the low side and 200 other ranks can be added to that. The loss of 1000 men in a brigade was a serious one. I have looked up my old sources(6) and found several new ones and I have come up with my breakdown of the casualty figures. The only ones I can go into detail over are those suffered by the RMLI where I can be virtually 100% accurate as I can put names to all the Killed, Wounded and Missing, indeed during the course of research for this article I found 2 men who were unknown to the CWGC and these are currently being investigated by them(7). In the immediate aftermath of this large action getting casualty returns off within a day or two must have been difficult. It would have been difficult to ascertain how many of the missing were dead and how many were prisoners, also with the wounded being picked up and shipped down many medical channels. After the action the units were mixed, there are reports of Marines fighting with the HAC, and some up with 6 Brigade units, some of these would have been listed as missing. An idea as to what happened when the unit left the line and the reckoning was taking place was given by Pte Hubert Trotman RMLI " The General and his staff were sitting at the table and the add few of us that come back from Arras , he gathered us around and he knew who the dead were who had been picked up and who the wounded were that had gone back but what he was worrying about was the missing men. -Who was last to see Sgt so and so ,and somebody would give a reply, I saw him etc. Anyway lots of names of officers and men were missing and he went through them" (8). In fact with the Marines 253 men were still listed as missing in December in 1917 and were therefore assumed to be dead (a fair few of these were found after the war in battlefield clearance). Unless you took and held all the area you were attacking it was difficult to know the fate of men. In September 1917 a patrol of 1 RM found the bodies of Lt Lion ,2ndLt Fielding and 11 OR's who were missing since 28th April, these men were buried near a trench called Viscount St., (9). I have been able to identify 6 of the other ranks. After the war their identifiable bodies were not recovered except 1 who is in Orchard Dump Cemetery(10) where the casualties of the Gavrelle area were exhumed to, there are many unidentified Marines there (fig3), it is reasonable to assume that the others were moved there also.

The last major hurdle when considering casualties is how many men did the units start with. I have not been able to get a figure, on the Ancre it was around 500, but many units had been seriously depleted by sickness. Figures of the pioneer unit which took over the line on the evening of the 28th give company strengths as about 120 men and if you count HQ and others gives a rough company size of 500 men. When looking at my casualty figures below bear this figure in mind. My interpretation of the casualties are as follows:

Anson:

Officers : 1 KIA 4 Wounded

O.R's : 23 KIA 76 Wounded 6 Missing(who probably were dead) (11)

These figures may seem "light" when compared with the RMLI, but remember only one company was engaged directly and probably equates to the number of men in a front line company.

1st Battalion Honourable Artillery Company:

OR's: 11 KIA ,I have no figures for wounded (12)

Royal Marines Medical Unit:

OR's : 4 KIA 24 Wounded 6 Died of Wounds(13)

Machine gun unit :

Officers: 2 wounded

O.R's: 16 KIA 32 Wounded 2Missing(14)

1st Battalion Royal Marine Light Infantry:

Officers: 6 KIA 7 Wounded (3 of whom died of their wounds) 1 Taken prisoner

O.R's: 157 KIA 153 Wounded (3 of whom died of wounds) 28 Taken Prisoner

One of the officer casualties who died of wounds on 30th April was Lt.Col. Cartwright who was wounded in the stomach whilst climbing out of a trench to direct Lewis gun fire. This was a serious blow. It should also be added that 1RM had taken around 30 casualties, mostly dead the two days before the attack.

2nd Battalion Royal Marine Light Infantry:

Officers: 6 KIA 3 Taken prisoner

O.R's: 155 KIA 157 Wounded (5 of whom died of wounds) 173 taken prisoner

It should also be added that 2RM had also taken 30 casualties on the run up to the attack

The figures for the Germans is not known to me, but the number of prisoners taken by the brigade was 7 officers and 208 O.R's.(15) Also the Germans tried many counter attacks which were broken up by the artillery with heavy loss of life, so I feel that the Germans also had a bit of a black day also. Another point is the ratio of killed to wounded in the RM battalions was 50/50 which is unusually high, this bears testimony to the ferocious nature of the fighting. Many of the men have no known graves and are commemorated on the Arras memorial. Those with graves can be found over a wide area with the majority being at Orchard Dump, Bailleul East and Naval Trench cemeteries. There are many unknowns here which bears out a theory that Trevor Tasker has that most men are unidentified rather than 'missing'(16). When all is said and done the Royal Marines suffered 846 casualties of which 335 were dead, this was the worst losses the Royal Marines had ever suffered and still is the highest number of casualties suffered in one day by the Royal Marines. At Jutland there were more dead and less wounded (17) but these figures were light in comparison to the losses of Gavrelle.

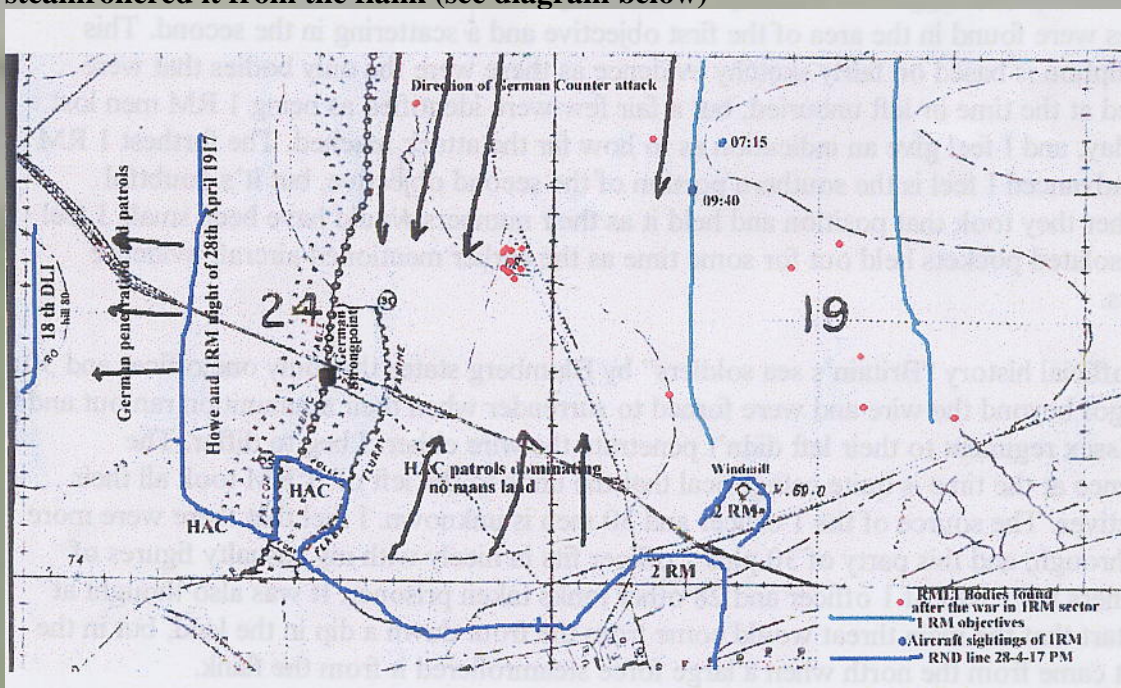
AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSIONS

The following day the attack was renewed with the HAC bombing back up to the strongpoint , taking it and the trench line above it. In doing so Capt. Pollard and Lt Haines were awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery. The RND were relieved by the Pals of the 31st Division on the 30th, and 40 tired and determined marines left the Windmill, still in their hands. The RND continued to serve in this sector for a few more months. It was where possible arranged that the honour of defending the Windmill fell to the 188th Brigade as they had fought so hard for it. Gavrelle itself was never a quiet sector, it was known that any movement up to the windmill in daylight was courting death. The town and surrounds were covered with bodies and stank, one member of the York and Lancaster Regt described it as the worst place he ever served in.

What actually happened and what went wrong on the 28th?. I have sat down and worked out how far I think the attacks got, and where I felt things went wrong. Brigadier Prentice did the same, after every action the results were often analysed and the subject of a report, the report on this attack points to a few areas, it also ignores some, so the following is a mixture of my humble opinions and those of Brigadier Prentice. In terms of how far did they get , I will look at each attack separately.

The attack of 1RM is hard to assess, but the result was it was a complete failure with heavy losses, at the time what happened was hard to assess because there were no survivors from those who penetrated the wire. There are no sightings of 1RM after the attack began, 6 Brigade never made contact with them, in fact they had to cover their flank as the non appearance of

1RM left them vulnerable to attack. On the right 2 RM never saw 1RM. The HAC were aware of 1RM in trouble but made no contact with them, a few stray marines joined the HAC to continue the fight, but not many. The wounded were a source of information and they said that the first objective had been taken. Apart from this evidence the only other evidence comes from planes of the RFC flying over the area looking for prearranged signs, more evidence comes from where bodies were found after the war. With all the evidence it is clear that much of the battalion got stuck in front of the wire as it hadn't been cut and conducted a fire fight from there. There was some opening up to the left and some of the waves got through there and the attack veered northwards slightly. I feel that a portion of the first objective was taken, but not in strength. Under orders to continue regardless of what was happening to the sides some pockets of men got further but not in any strength. The evidence of bodies found after the war(18) suggests that many were killed just behind the German front line, some bodies were found in the area of the first objective and a scattering in the second. This evidence is fairly sketchy as these were only bodies that were missed at the time or left unburied , but a fair few were identified as being 1RM men lost that day, and I feel give an indication to how far the attack got to. The furthest 1RM men got to I feel is the southern portion of the second objective, but it's doubtful whether they took that position and held it as their numbers would have been small. I feel that isolated pockets held out for some time as the earlier mentioned aircraft evidence shows . The official history "Britain's sea soldiers" by Blumberg states that only one officer and 30 men got beyond the wire and were forced to surrender when their ammunition ran out and the Essex regiment to their left didn't penetrate the wire either. I beg to differ , the evidence at the time is quite categorical that the units to the left of 1RM took all their objectives. The source of the 1 officer and 30 men is unknown, I feel that there were more that got through, and this party of 30 plus 1 officer though fits in nicely with my casualty figures of prisoners for 1RM of 1 officer and 28 OR's taken prisoner. It was also thought at the start that the main threat would come from the front down a dip in the land, but in the end it came from the north when a very large force steamrolled it from the flank (see diagram below)



The attack of 2RM with Anson assisting is much easier to assess as there is much observation of it's course and communication appears to have been relatively sound during it's course, although there were worrying times. There appears to be some debate as to whether the windmill was actually taken. The evidence is irrefutable, the Windmill was captured and held,

and was still in the hands of the RMLI on relief on the 30th April. It was quite isolated though and was linked to Gavrelle by a series of 'strong' points. The Windmill was in communication with HQ at all times, Lt.Col Hutchison even visited it during the battle, the land around the windmill was under the control of the RND, the HAC were patrolling out well past the windmill all night of the 28th. That objective was taken and held by 2RM. The other objective as laid down was also reached in strength but not held, many men were blasted out of the trenches by the enemy counter battery . Those that lived were cut off at the objective and fought on until they were made prisoner. Anson who were supplying the flank guard didn't fully reach their objective as due to weight of machine gun fire directed against them, they were unable to deploy and form the flank guard. I feel they got a fair way up to the front of 2RM but were basically wiped out trying to hold their position.

In my title I posed the question, "Triumph or Tragedy?", I will have to give a woolly answer I'm afraid. I feel the capture and holding of the windmill was a real triumph, this was the main objective and was the key to being able to hang onto Gavrelle in the long term. The rest I'm afraid is tragedy which I feel is the right term, not disaster, as tragedy sum's up my feeling that much was avoidable. As I stated earlier I looked at what went wrong, as did the Brigadier General, but I do not have to be polite for fear of upsetting the superiors, but even he said some things that would have ruffled feathers!! . So what went wrong?, these are my thoughts:

On the 23rd the RND attacked a smaller frontage (the frontage for the attack on the 28th was increased northwards) with 2 brigades, and succeeded in getting into Gavrelle but failed to the north. On the 28th a larger frontage was allotted to 2 Battalions with 1 company providing a flank guard and a much weakened battalion close support. To me it seems incredible that only 2 Battalions were given this objective, and on completion 2 RM were to relieve the Anson Battalion for their evening assault. The only reason I can think that the assaulting troops were so light in number is that generally you allot the size of your force to the size of the opposition and there was a feeling that the opposition would be light. I find things rather conflicting here. Had the Germans suddenly given up defending?, had they slipped off like a thief in the night?. The corps HQ genuinely thought that the opposition was light and hence the orders were issued accordingly. I find it amazing that they thought that the Germans wouldn't defend their territory, surely the years of fighting showed that the Germans fought for every inch. It's on the strength point that I find some confusion. In his summary of the attack Brigadier General Prentice is scathing about the information given to him, as regards to the northern attack he states " The enemy undoubtedly had reserves ready for the counter attack and were evidently *much stronger than I was given to suppose* by the BGGs of the 13th Corps, when discussing the operations at my headquarters , *previous to the issue of orders by Division*"(19) . This firmly suggests that the opposition was thought to be weak at the time of planning and hence the size of the attacking force. The same criticism was saved for 2RM's attack but, I feel that there was some discourse at HQ over the plan. I feel that Anson's night attack was originally planned by Brigadier General Prentice to go along side 2RM, protecting their flank better from German forces to the south which he feared may cause flanking casualties, and hopefully linking with the forces of 37th Div. Corps HQ obviously vetoed this, suggesting that there wasn't any need as there was no opposition. The evidence for this comes from Prentice himself as in his report he states " I was informed at the conversation referred to above, *that little or no opposition was to be expected* . This I think could have been avoided-*as I suggested at the time* -had an attack been made from the line south of the cemetery in conjunction with the main attack"(20). This is the worst criticism I have seen in writing, I can imagine that man seething whilst writing his report, knowing that he could have prevented the loss of 2RM and had planned for it, only for a higher authority to veto it. Having said the above, conflicting evidence appears in the attack orders are

given to the Machine gun section ,and then there are several points as regards to the direction of counter attack, but the first point is made. " All indications and information lead to the assumption that the enemies troops have orders to oppose strenuously our advance on the north bank of the Scarpe, which, if successful not only brings us up to the Siegfried line before it's completed but also threatens his hold on Lens. *Violent counter attacks must therefore be expected and will probably develop very shortly after we reach our final objective*"- very prophetic(21). Here we have in the orders, an admission that the Germans will react very violently ,for good reason, yet the lack of numbers and back up to deal with it. With the shortage of numbers , having taken the objectives , there was no strength left to hold it against the predicted violent counter attack. I feel quite strongly that this should have been a 2 brigade attack, if the attack was to be made it was to be in strength or not at all.

Another vital mistake in my opinion is the fact that the assaulting troops were the garrison of the front line. When they left to attack no one came up to hold the front line. So when these assaulting battalions were wiped out there was a rush to get the front line covered. The Germans were patrolling out well behind the old Northern front line. If the Germans wished to they could have taken the old 1RM front line with ease, they were patrolling through it. Gavrelle could have been retaken, the defenders, 2RM were either surrounded or dead. I feel that the Germans really didn't want to take back land to the north, there was no series of counter attacks, more a series of fighting patrols. To the south however, I feel that they wanted Gavrelle back and did mass to attack. It was fortunate that the massing point was under observation and the artillery bombarded these concentrations very effectively indeed. So good was the artillery , that no counter attack hit the town, it was the gunners that saved Gavrelle.

On the northern attack, it was found that there was no way through the wire except to the north of the sector, so only a few marines got through, the rest got into a firefight in front of the wire. Ironically, getting caught in front of the wire I feel may have saved 1RM. If all the marines had got through and been subjected to the violent counter attack by huge numbers perhaps many more of 1RM would have been caught or killed. It would appear that this operation was one of the Germans elastic defence systems. They waited for the expected attack and then waited for us to show our hand before getting their ace out, they did have counter attacking reserves ready, and a series of strongpoints and a light front line. Was this the reason for the notion that the Germans were light in numbers??. Those that did get through the wire were off course and therefore disorientated.

The strongpoint on the railway which caused many casualties to the Royal Fusiliers and Bedfords on the 23rd was not dealt with prior to the attack. As the marines headed to the gap in the wire it exposed them to flanking fire and they were mown down. I feel that as this was a known trouble spot, it could have got a special suppressing bombardment, or even an attack 2 hours before. There appears to be a few Stokes set aside for it to start with but these were ineffectual. The HAC assaulted this tough nut when it appeared that they realised the problem it was causing up north. I'm still left with the impression that many lives could have been saved if this known trouble spot had been dealt with.

With the Southern attack 2RM grabbed their objectives easily but were attacked from both flanks and were like the contents of a bag. There are several points to bring up. Was it a wise thing to do, to advance out of a salient with 500 yards of flank open in mid air?. The German 25th Regiment quotes this attack in their history "a British battalion with machine guns was seen advancing along the Gavrelle-Fresnes road, north of the regimental sector. The machine gun company of the right hand battalion took this column and its line of retreat under such

effective fire that it surrendered as a body to the division to our right"(22). This was an exaggeration but showed what a single attack down into a pocket meant, all the Germans had to do was close the neck which they did. I feel that this advance was not sensible without a southern attack to secure it's flank as originally suggested by the Brigadier.

Also with no supporting troops in the front line, there was no rescue party available to put an attack in to break the stranglehold on 2RM. With a really poisonous mind you could suggest that seeing 2RM coming forward on a narrow front the Germans retreated causing them to come on further into the pocket. There is no evidence for that interesting theory but they were practising elastic defence letting the opposition come and then hit them hard with a counter attack.

Interestingly the headquarters of 13th Corps came up with another gem of criticism at 9.30pm on the 28th. With a good portion of the battle being conducted out of the sight of the commanders and still no real feed back, the corps commander issued a directive. It is noted in the RND HQ telephone log as "Corps Cdr. Directs special attention to ample provision for mopping up. He considers today's difficulties chiefly, if not entirely, due to the inadequacy in this respect" (23). I'm not an officer basher in any way and I don't subscribe to the general butchers and bunglers theories but with a statement like that it does rather ask the question as to what battle they were referring to and whether they had completely lost the plot. With regards to officers this was another example of officers leading from the front with the obvious consequences that there were few officers left in the Royal Marine battalions afterwards, these officers paid the price for upholding the Royal Marines tradition of leading from the front.

I feel that this plan was flawed from the start and totally ill conceived. 2RM should have only had to take the windmill only and advance another hundred yards out of Gavrelle, and I think that the plan cost 2RM unnecessarily , it is perhaps provident that more troops were not used as the result would have been the same. Lastly the role of 1 company of Anson needs to be looked at. They were meant to protect the flank, but started to take serious casualties from the ' non existent' opposition to the south. At 10:30 the CO of Anson decided to pull his men back, and ordered them back. This left the right flank of 2RM totally exposed, in effect signing their death warrants. The CO of Anson had an agonising choice, to leave his company in place, watching them getting cut off and wiped out, or to reinforce that company and risk losing his battalion. Choosing to save his men he must have known that it would cause the capture or death of most of 2RM, I can find no evidence of a discussion or notification of his moves with the CO of 2RM either. I will not judge on that agonising choice , but it is an important factor. His company though had difficulty getting away, one party got stuck and had to wait for night fall, another used German prisoners as a human shield to help them get back. These incidents show the extremely grim position Anson were in at the time. It was not a long time after that 2RM were heavily counter attacked and then cut off. Judging by the difficulty Anson had getting away it is open to debate as to whether 2RM could have got away had C company of Anson stayed put. It is also worth considering whether there would have been a C company of Anson left to assist the get away.

Common with both attacks was the obvious communication problems that existed.

Communication was by telephone but this didn't usually last long. By runner but with a machine gun swept battlefield these didn't last long, the wounded brought progress reports but was often out of date. The RFC provided some reports and even flags were in use from the Windmill. It is easy to assess a battle with the idea that commanders knew the whole situation as we are used to the use of radios sets. But the battle boiled down to junior officers and NCO's fighting a small

series of battles. During the whole battle there was no word from 1RM whatsoever. It was fortunate that there was good communication between the artillery observers and their guns. If there was no communication, these counter attacks would not have been broken up by the artillery.

One point was raised by one of the 3 wise men when discussing the action, and that was the question of Tanks. They had been used in parts of the Arras battle, would they have been of value here?. I have always thought that tanks have been overestimated especially in those early days. They had to have ideal ground, they were unreliable, used in too few numbers and the conditions inside were so trying that the endurance of the men inside was not long. I did however see a point at which ground and enemy observation permitting in which they may be of some use and that was the suppression of the strongpoint which wiped out 1RM. I see a parallel between this situation and that on the Ancre on the 13th November 1916. One strongpoint then wiped out Hawke battalion and upset Nelson and Drake badly, and at the end of the day held out. Yet the following day a tank came out and fired at it and 700 men walked out, having been cut off faced by that they decided to surrender. I was intrigued as to the effect a couple of tanks on that strongpoint would be along with their effect on the counter attack. Intriguing eh!!

When all is said and done my feelings are that the attack of 2RM should have been a local penetration of two hundred yards plus the windmill, with the objective of securing Gavrelle. As regards to the attack of 1RM, it seemed that events were forced on them to secure the attack of 2Division, who in turn were helping the Canadians to the north of them. Perhaps it might have been better if that strongpoint was taken out, but with the counter attack from the north I feel that the attack was doomed. My only opinion on improvement were if a force just held the line where 1RM was, and a powerful force came up from HAC's position and advanced at 90 degrees to the German trenches. Attacked on a 2-300 yd frontage until they hit 2 Div. This though would have meant exposing flank, but I feel may have worked as it did on the 29th

There were my feelings and thoughts, either way it's 80 years on now. Gavrelle is the site of the second RND memorial, the other being at Beaucourt. There are no other finer places than these two towns. The Beaucourt one was built by survivors, the Gavrelle one by Trevor Tasker and it's a fitting tribute to the men. The Royal Marines were badly hit, many officers and men gone. Looking through the service numbers, there was the usual mix of the regulars with the duration only men, but there were many who were survivors of Gallipoli, Ancre and Miraumont. This core of experience was wiped out and had to be re built. The units were rebuilt and went on to fight well at Poelcappel, Aveluy Wood, Logeast Wood, Queant-Drocourt and across the Canal de Nord. This showed that the spirit of a sound organisation could be instilled and preserved. Was the action on the 28th April a triumph or a tragedy-I leave you to decide.

HONOURS AND AWARDS TO THE RMLI

Military Cross

Godfrey.E.A. T/2ndLt. RMLI

For conspicuous gallantry and resource during operations, when he worked his gun with great skill and endurance for 60 hours without rest, and under a heavy barrage, against a strong point which eventually surrendered.

Huskisson.E.J. Captain RMLI

For conspicuous gallantry when reconnoitring under a heavy shell fire, a position and organising guides prior to an assault. It was mainly owing to his coolness and courage that the battalion was successfully placed in alignment in the face of the greatest difficulties.

Newling.G.A. T 2/Lt. RMLI

For conspicuous gallantry in an attack , when he led his platoon with great courage and skill, and held the objective, when captured against numerous counter attacks.

Distinguished Conduct Medal

Davis.G. Pte PLY 66-s- RMLI

For conspicuous gallantry. He advanced alone to an enemy strong point, demanded it's surrender, and single-handed he bought in fifty prisoners.

Salt.T. Pte (L/Cpl) CH 18511 RMLI

For conspicuous gallantry in operations, when he crawled backwards and forwards for three hours through heavy HE barrages in order to signal the effect of the stokes mortar fire. He was wounded.

Military Medal

Andrew H Pte Deal 4077-s- RM Med unit

King R Pte Deal 3942 RM Med unit

Archibald J.D. Pte Deal 3322-s- RM Med unit

Ludbrook E.R Cpl (A/Sjt) PO 15284 RMLI

Bennett M Pte Deal 3743-s- RM Med unit

McKinnon D Pte PLY 17577 RMLI

Booth E Pte CH 73-s- RMLI

Martin B Pte Deal 3093-s- RM Med unit att MG Company

Bradley G.T Cpl Deal 3165-s- RM Med unit

Mandrill C Pte Deal 3194-s- RM Med unit

Bushell J Sjt (A.CSM) CH 7771 RMLI

Mickle H.C. Pte Deal 4096-s- RM Med unit

Castley E Pte PO 13278 RMLI

Parkinson E Pte Deal 3960-s- RM Med unit

Coyne P Pte PLY 17958 RMLI

Rodger W Pte PLY 17128 RMLI Trench mortars

Crooke A.E Pte PLY 1002-s- RMLI

Rogers R.C. Sjt (A/Col Sjt) CH 15594 RMLI

Cumisky C.C Cpl PO 633-s-

Singleton J.S Pte Deal 3016-s- RM Med unit

Donkin J Pte PO399-s- RMLI

Titley C.W L/Cpl Deal 3238-s- RM Med unit

Eaves A.T Sjt. PLY 219-s- RMLI

Watts W.H Pte (A/Cpl) CH 16180 RMLI

Hall J.W Pte Deal 4012-s- RM Med unit

Wormald A. Pte PLY 470-s- RMLI

Hampson J Pte Deal 4153-s- RM Med unit

Jackson S Pte PO 17447 RMLI

Kerslake A.J Pte (A/Sjt) PLY 17813 RMLI

References and acknowledgements

- (1) **Cheerful Sacrifice by Jonathan Nicholls p 3 . Pen and Sword Books- excellent write up on Arras, very readable, in fact the only book I know of that describes the battle of Arras, truly excellent.**
- (2) **Military Operations France and Belgium 1917 p400 HMSO.**
- (3) **Military Operations France and Belgium 1917 p399 HMSO.- My italics**
- (4) **PRO ref. WO95/3108**
- (5) **"I was There" -Hammerton p1127- This story is that of AB Downe of Anson Battalion. Hammerton states in the title that it is the story of 23rd April, but reading the story, events and participants, it's obviously 28th April. It also sheds more light on the predicament Anson were in.**
- (6) **Sources used for casualty calculation include, Globe and Laurel 1917, With Full and Grateful Hearts, Cross of Sacrifice Vol. 4, Read Cross and St.John enquiry list July 1st 1917,WO95/3108, WO95/3110. All of these sources were used to cross reference everything and I'm 99% sure of the accuracy of the RMLI casualties. Names could be put to each one.**
- (7) **These were CSM John Campbell and Pte Tom Hampshire. Hampshire was one of the 11 O.R's found in Sept 1917. Their deaths were confirmed on their service ledgers (ADM159) and deaths confirmed in the Royal Navy Casualty ledgers (ADM242). These names were submitted to the CWGC. Coincidentally Pte Hampshire had been brought up by a Mrs Margaret Stansfield of Elland, Yorkshire who found him by newspaper evidence whilst researching local casualties. The Name's of Tom Hampshire and John Campbell were added to the Arras memorial in January 1998.**
- (8) **Taped interview of Pte Hubert Trotman 1st Battalion RMLI Interview by Max Arthur.**
- (9) **PRO ref.WO95/3110**
- (10) **Pte G.W.Davies PO1552-s-**

(11) PRO ref.WO95/ 3111

(12) The Honourable Artillery Company in the Great War 1914-18 by G.Goold-Walker. 1930

(13) Globe and Laurel 1917

(14) PRO ref.WO95/3093

(15) APM report by Phone within WO95/3093

(16) Remembrance Geography: Cemeteries and memorials on the Arras/Lens Battlefields in France by Trevor Tasker 1997. Dissertation for BA

(17) At Jutland the Royal Marines suffered 500 killed and 50 wounded, the high number of deaths can be attributed to the explosions of the 3 battle cruisers of which there were very few survivors.

(18) Trevor Tasker. Working notes from the above dissertation. Burial returns for men buried at Orchard Dump Cemetery.

(19) PRO ref.WO95/3108- my italics

(20) PRO ref.WO95/3108- my italics

(21) PRO ref. WO95/3108 -orders for attack

(22) Military Operations France and Belgium 1917 vol2 p425-HMSO

Photo for figure 1 is from the Capron Family of Gavrelle, it was taken 1914-15.

Thanks to the three wise men, they know who they are. Thanks also to Trevor Tasker for unloading a shed load of information on Gavrelle and the surrounding area for me to get a grip of the area.

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