

The Case of Lieutenant Kirkwood and Indiscipline in the 11th Battalion, Border Regiment.

At 07.30hrs on the 1st July 1916 the 11th Battalion, Border Regiment, was in position for their part in the attack on the Somme at Authuille Wood. The battalion war diary for that day gives a brief but succinct record of the day's events;

'Zero hour 7.30am. Battalion advanced from assembly trench at 8am and came under very heavy machine gun fire suffering over 500 casualties.'

The diary then goes on to list officer casualties killed and wounded, which included among the dead the battalion's commanding officer Lt-Col P. Marshall, DSO. Total officers in the battalion killed and wounded came to 25.

The 11th/Border Regiment was part of the 75th Brigade, 32nd Division, Reserve Army, under command of General Gough. On the 4th July the battalion was withdrawn from the line to dugouts at Crucifix Corner where they were formed into fatigue parties supplying the front line.

On the 5th of July the battalion was attached to the 2/KOYLI at Contay Wood and reorganised into two companies. Battalion strength by this time was 11 officers and 480 men, with Lieut. Welsh acting as battalion CO.

On the 8th of July the battalion marched to billets at Senlis where Captain Palmer of the 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry took over command of the battalion. Lieutenants Brown and King of the Highland Light Infantry also joined the battalion.

On the 9th of July the shattered battalion returned to front-line duty. At 19.40hrs Capt. Palmer received orders for his battalion to carry out a trench raid and detailed Lieut. Ross with Lieut. Twynam to find 100 men from the reserve company to carry out the attack. Lieut. Ross was placed in charge and briefed Lieut. Twynam and the NCOs of the planned operation. At around 21.00hrs a number of men reported to Lieut. Ross's dugout and stated they wished to report sick with nerves. Lieut. Ross refused their request and sent them back to their company. Shortly afterwards more men reported with the same complaint. Lieut. Ross reported the matter to Capt. Palmer, who sent for the Medical Officer, Lieut. George Kirkwood and asked Lieut. Ross to brief the MO on the planned raid. Shortly afterwards Lieut. Ross received a 'certificate' from Lieut. Kirkwood stating,

'In view of the bombing attack proposed to be carried out by the 11th Border Regt. I must hereby testify to their unfitness for such an operation as few, if any, are not suffering from some from some degree of shell shock.'

13th Brigade
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Lieut. Kirkwood
Lieut. Ross

9/7/1916

Lieut. Kirkwood's 'certificate'.

Lieutenant Ross was sent to Brigade HQ with the MO's certificate at 23.20hrs to report the matter and asked for the attack to be postponed for a later time, but was refused. He reported back to his company and informed Lieut. Twynam that the operation was to go ahead at midnight as planned. Lieut. Ross was to lead the men at the head of the company with Lieut. Twynam bringing up the rear. The NCOs were detailed to form the men up with instructions for Lieut. Twynam to give the word when the men were ready to move off.

Midnight came and went with no word from Lieut. Twynam, despite Lieut. Ross sending four messages down the trench enquiring about the reason for the delay. At around 00.30hrs he proceeded back down the trench himself to investigate the delay and noted in his statement that there was 'a lack of the offensive spirit in the party'. As he made his way down the trench he found that some sections had been blown in by previous shellfire which made progress along the trench very slow and some of the company had taken the wrong turnings. By 01.10 he was still only halfway along the company of assembled men and came to the decision that it would be impossible to launch the attack before the sun rose and abandoned it. Lieut. Ross reported back to Capt. Palmer who informed Brigade by phone. Lieut. Ross was instructed to report to Brigade in person to give an account for the failure to carry out the attack. He was ordered by the Brigadier to place the four company sergeants under arrest. General Gough wanted immediate steps taken to arrange courts-martial for the NCOs and men who,

'Failed in their duty...necessitating immediate and severe disciplinary action.'

To investigate the events of the 9th July a court of enquiry was convened and on the 12th July Captain Roberts of the D.A.A.G [Deputy Assistant Adjutant General] was dispatched to assist in the legal

proceedings. He subsequently determined that there were no grounds for charging the four company sergeants and they were released from detention.

Lieutenant Kirkwood was convinced the men were in no fit state to take part in the attack and in his statement to the enquiry indicated his opinion of the mental condition the men were in,

‘The attack of the 1st July, when the Battalion lost all its officers and more than half of the men, had had a most demoralizing effect and the men had not recovered their mental equilibrium. The few days’ rest at Contay sorting out deceased comrades’ kits did not improve their mental state.’

He added that the conditions they had endured since coming out of the line, such as carrying rations up to the front under heavy shellfire, digging out dead bodies from shelled trenches and living with decomposing bodies all contributed to their mental condition.

In a memo from the HQ of X Corps on the 14th July the material facts of the incident were stated which included,

‘A deplorable state of discipline in the 11th Battalion, Border Regiment; and an entire absence of courage and any soldierly qualities among the NCOs and men of the Battalion.’ And, ‘Conduct on the part of Lieut. G N Kirkwood, which shews (sic) him to be totally unfitted to hold a commission in the Army or to exercise any military responsibility.’

General Gough ordered the Divisional Commander to assemble the 11th Battalion, without arms, in the presence of the 75th Brigade, under arms and to inform the men involved of the disgrace they had brought upon themselves and the whole Battalion. He went on to state,

‘It is inconceivable that men who have pledged themselves to fight and uphold the honour of their country should degrade themselves in such a manner and to show an utter want of manly spirit and courage at least expected from every soldier and every Britisher.’

Gough went on to say of the men involved,

‘Conduct such as theirs’ merits the extreme penalty and it is in every way regrettable that examples are not able to be made.’

Clearly the sacrifices made by the 11th battalion on the 1st of July were quickly forgotten by Gough.

Capt. Palmer was censured for his part in the incident by not showing any leadership. He was subsequently declared medically unfit by a medical board and relieved of his command, taking up the post of Town Major at Beuvry.

No action was taken against lieutenants Ross and Twynam. None of the men involved were court-martialled.

The Brigade Commander, Brigadier General Jardine and his staff were informed of the 'unsatisfactory state of affairs' and told a staff officer should have been dispatched to take charge, but no disciplinary action was taken.

Lieutenant Kirkwood was the scapegoat in the affair. General Gough stated that,

'Immediate steps must be taken to remove Lieutenant Kirkwood from the service. The 'certificate' which he signed and the reasons given by him in support of it conclusively prove that he has no conception of the duties and responsibilities of a Regimental MO and that so long as he is allowed to remain in the Service he will be a source of danger to it.'

The Assistant Director of Medical Services for the 32nd Division, however, spoke out in support of Lieut. Kirkwood,

'He has performed his medical duties conscientiously and well. The Commanding Officer, the late Lieut.-Col Marshall, formed a high opinion of him which I fully endorse. The sick rate of the battalion was never excessive and he did very good work during the recent fighting in attending to the wounded...and has given complete satisfaction.'

Lieutenant Kirkwood was forced to resign his commission on 15th October 1916. However, The London Gazette recorded his appointment as a temporary lieutenant on 4th June 1917. On 4th December 1917 he was promoted to Captain and finished his war service with the South African 8th Field Ambulance.

Captain George Kirkwood was born on 9th July 1879 in Renfrewshire and studied medicine at the University of Glasgow. He went to work in South Africa in 1910, but returned to the UK in 1915 to enlist. He served his men compassionately and returned to live and practice in South Africa after the war. He was married to Nellie. He died on 7th January 1931. His name can be viewed on the Roll of Service plaque in the grounds of Pollock House, Glasgow.



Captain George Kirkwood

Jeff Clare