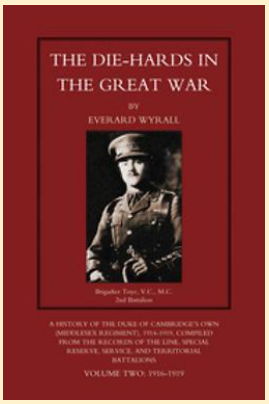
11th Battalion Middlesex Regiment

This is an abridged version of:
The Die-Hards In The Great War - Vol 2 1917-1918
by ***Everard Wyrall***



All references to other battalions have been removed.
Only direct references of the actions of the 11th Battalion, plus some additional contextual information has been left to aide the reader.

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[The Allied Armies were to be ready to begin operations by the middle of February, 1917. But two events interfered with these plans. The Joffre-Haig plan of campaign was altered to such an extent that serious delay occurred. Marshal Joffre was superseded by General Nivelle, who put forward a plan of his own, and the Russian revolution made an offensive on that front impossible. Nivelle's plan was a sharp and decisive offensive from along the French front, the British Armies taking only a subsidiary part in the operations, whilst in the Joffre-Haig plan they were jointly to undertake the main attack.

The change necessitated a readjustment of Sir Douglas Haig's plans. His offensive, originally designed for February, was postponed until April, when the Arras Battle was due to open. The French were to follow soon after with their great offensive, and if this did not succeed within a reasonable period the British offensive was to be transferred to Flanders. Thus the Battles of Arras, 1917, and the Battles of Ypres, 1917.

Before, however, the Arras offensive opened the enemy, weakened by his losses during 1916 and forced to shorten his front, beat a retreat to the Hindenburg Line, and the Fifth British Army, instead of attacking from the line of the Ancre simultaneously with the advance of the Third British Army on its left, had now to follow up the retiring enemy and establish itself in front of his new line of defence —a very powerful system of trenches.

The British front line south of Arras had been extended in order to meet the wishes of the French Commander-in-Chief, who desired to concentrate all his available troops for his offensive, which formed a part of the Spring operations. By the end of February Sir Douglas Haig had taken over the

French line from just south of Les Bœufs to west of the town of Roye. This addition entailed the maintenance of an exceptionally active front (including the whole of the Somme Battle front) of 110 miles, and threw a further heavy burden upon the British forces. Nevertheless the operations on the Ancre as well as certain minor enterprises and raids were carried out as intended.

It will be remembered that the last operations of 1916 in which Battalions of the Middlesex Regiment were engaged took place on 18th November, when an attack was delivered against the German defences overlooking the villages of Pys and Grandcourt, during which valuable positions were gained on a front of about five thousand yards. A simultaneous attack north of the Ancre by the 4th Canadian, 18th, 19th, 37th and 32nd Divisions considerably improved the British positions in the Beaucourt Valley. But now winter had set in and had put an end to offensive operations, and throughout the remainder of November and December the maintenance and improvement of trenches and communications behind them claimed the energies of the troops.] The 1st January, 1917, saw no less than 15 Battalions of the Middlesex Regiment in France and Flanders. The 1st Battalion and 18th (Pioneers) Battalion of the 33rd Division were out of the line occupying an area 5 or 6 miles east of Abbeville: the 2nd Battalion (8th Division) held front-line trenches about 2 miles east of Combles: the 4th Battalion (37th Division) was in the Festubert sector: the 1/ 7th and 1/ 8th Middlesex of the 56th Division were in the Neuve Chapelle trenches: about 12 miles due west of Arras the 11th Battalion of the 12th Division was resting and training: the 12th Battalion (18th Division) was also out of the line training in an area about Abbeville: the 13th Battalion (24th Division) was still in the Loos sector: the 16th Middlesex of the 29th Division were 7 miles west of Amiens: the 17th Battalion (2nd Division) occupied an area 10 miles north-east of Abbeville: the two Battalions with the 41st Division, i.e., 19th and 23rd Middlesex, were in the line in the Kemmel sector, and, finally, the extreme right of the British line, 5 miles north of Péronne, was held by the 40th Division, in which were the 20th and 21st Middlesex. Thus, when the New Year dawned, only the 2nd, 16th, 20th and 21st Battalions were on the Somme. The 3rd (28th Division) and 26th (27th Division) Battalions were at Salonika. The 2/ 10th Battalion (53rd Division) was in Egypt. The 1/ 9th and 1/ 10th were in India. Two Battalions —2/ 7th and 2/ 8th —having seen service, had been disbanded. Other Battalions (amongst which was the 3/ 10th, soon to come to France) were in training in England.

[Both in France and Flanders at all hours of the day and night troops were on the move, so that it is not surprising to find early in the year the 12th (18th Division) and 17th (2nd Division) back again on the Somme, floundering amidst the mud and filth about Miraumont and Pys, fighting hard and giving a good account of themselves in the old Die-Hard spirit. Truly, the Somme battlefields were freely sprinked with the blood of Middlesex men.]

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The Battles of Arras 1917: 9th April - 4th May

At least 11 battalions took part in the Battles of Arras, 1917, but of these only five were engaged on the first day of the operations. They were the 4th (37th Division), 1/ 7th and 1/ 8th (56th Division), 11th (12th Division), and 13th (24th Division), and of these the first-named (4th Battalion) did not "go in" until night.

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The 11th Middlesex, who as part of the 36th Brigade (12th Division) were to attack the enemy between the Arras-Cambrai road and the Arras-Douai Railway on 9th April, had left the Somme area

on 21st October, 1916, and moved in stages north of Arras, the 36th Brigade taking over the Agny sector on 26th. But the Middlesex did not go into the line until 1st November. Although the line was noisy, heavy and light trench mortars being always more or less active, casualties were not heavy, and for several weeks trench warfare was normal. On the 10th December the 36th Brigade was relieved by a brigade of the 14th Division, and the 11th Middlesex moved by stages to Buneville, where a period of training began and continued until the 19th January, 1917, when the Battalion moved again, this time to Wanquetin. On 23rd the 11th marched to Arras, where billets were found in cellars. A fortnight was then spent in furnishing working parties to dig trenches and communications and generally help in preparing for the Spring operations. On the 7th February the Battalion took over front-line trenches east of Arras, but the tour was uneventful and came to an end on 11th. On 14th, Lieut.-Colonel Pargiter was invalided to England, and Major T.S. Wollocombe assumed command of the Battalion.

On the 20th February "D" Company and two platoons of "A" Company, under Captain Maynard, began training for a raid on the enemy's trenches. This raid was carried out on 26th at 8.30 a.m. It was a splendid success, the raiders bringing back no less than 25 German prisoners, some 10 of whom were slightly wounded. One officer (2/ Lieut. D. R. Gillman) and 4 other ranks were killed and 1 officer (2/ Lieut. V. H. Castle) and 14 other ranks were wounded during the raid. But numerous other Germans were killed and their dug-outs bombed. On the 4th March the Battalion (in Brigade) marched out of Arras for Izel lez-Hameau, where training and practising the attack occupied the Middlesex men until 21st. On the latter date the move back towards the front line began, the Battalion marching first to Montenescourt, where all ranks were busily employed in getting ready for the forthcoming operations. The final move before taking up their assembly positions for the attack took place on the 2nd and 3rd, when the 11th Battalion moved again to Arras. On the night of 4th April "B" and "C" Companies moved up into dug-outs in "I" and the support line; "A" and "D" Companies had moved into cellars in Rue Gustave Colin near the Station. All companies were, however, still engaged in making final preparations for the attack. Bomb and grenade dumps were formed, ladders and bridges carried up to the line, and picks and shovels were drawn. They were busy days and nights, for the enemy's line had also to be patrolled and the conditions of his wire carefully noted and reported, for the guns were wire cutting. Both on the 6th and 7th April patrols went across No Man's Land to examine the enemy's wire and trenches. About midnight on 8th "A" and "D" Companies joined "B" and "C" in the dug-outs and in "I" support lines, all final preparations having been made.

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The First Battle of the Scarpe, 1917, and Vimy Ridge: 9th-14th April

The heavy bombardment to which the enemy's trenches had for three weeks prior to the 9th April been subjected, culminated in a terrific tornado of shell fire at 5.30 a.m. on Zero day, when, closely following on the heels of a most effective barrage, the infantry of the Third and First Armies swept across No Man's Land like an irresistible tidal wave.

The front attacked extended from just north of Croisilles (south-east of Arras) to immediately south of Givenchy-en-Gohelle on the northern point of the Vimy Ridge —a distance of nearly 15 miles. This front included some 4 or 5 miles of the northern end of the newly constructed Hindenburg Line. The official despatches state that the "general attack" was launched at 5.30 a.m., but it was not until two hours later (7.30 a.m.) that the right of the Third Army (VIIth Corps, formed of 21st, 30th, 56th and 14th Divisions, in that order from right to left) joined in the operations in what was apparently the second phase of the battle. The first battalion of the Middlesex Regiment to come to grips with the enemy was, therefore, the 11th, of the 12th Division, upon whom had fallen the difficult task of

wresting Observation Ridge, with its very powerful defences, from the Germans. Apart from three distinct lines of trenches to be taken, there was the Feuchy Switch, which ran back from the German forward lines to the western edge of Feuchy. In all these trenches there were a number of "Works" —strongly defended positions, heavily wired and fully garrisoned. No easy task lay before the 12th Division.

The 37th Brigade was attacking on the right and the 36th (to which the 11th Middlesex belonged) on the left. Of the latter Brigade the Middlesex was the right attacking Battalion and the 7th Royal Sussex the left. The 11th Division had on its right the 3rd Division, and on its left the 15th Division. The frontage attacked by the 11th Middlesex (Lieut.-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe) ran from Sap 20 (a German sap about half-way between the railway and the Arras-Cambrai road), thence some 200 yards southwards. Portions of Guildford and Hertford Trenches and of Henley Lane were also in the Battalion's objective.

At midnight, 8th/ 9th April, the Battalion was in its assembly positions in "I" Lines and the support trenches, and formed up in three waves for the attack. No details of the strength of the Battalion in "other ranks" are given, but there were only 20 officers —4 to each Company, the C.O., Adjutant, Lewis-gun Officer and Signalling Officer. Throughout the Army drastic orders were in vogue at this period detailing a number of officers, N.C.Os. and men from each battalion to the Transport Lines during a battle. The second-in-command always took charge of the nucleus, so that a battalion was never in danger of losing both its senior officers, and, if practically wiped out in the front line, still had a skeleton of trained officers and men to fall back upon.

As Zero hour approached Lewis-gun teams crept out into No Man's Land, taking up selected positions from which to deal with hostile machine guns and snipers should they become troublesome. Five minutes before Zero the order was given to "fix bayonets." As the thunder of the barrage broke over the German trenches at 5.30 a.m., the waiting troops followed quickly in its train, keeping as close to the screen of fire as possible. The Diary of the 11th Battalion, though not very full, is nevertheless to the point. It states that at 5.30 a.m. "the Battalion went over the top as practised on the training ground. The artillery work was splendid and never really gave the Bosche a chance." [A sporting phrase that —a chivalrous sentiment.] "Our fellows took full advantage of the different barrages and quickly captured their objective, i.e., the Black Line (Hertford Trench). So far casualties had been wonderfully slight and all ranks behaved splendidly."

General Ludendorff blames some of his divisions for giving way before the fury of that first attack, but from letters taken from dead Germans and German prisoners it is evident that the terrific bombardment to which they had been subjected had deprived numbers of the enemy's troops of all power of resistance: stupefied and terror-stricken, they could no longer resist. Thus the first objective (Black Line) fell without much resistance. But the Germans were no mean opponents, and by the time the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers passed through the 11th Middlesex and Sussex in order to capture the second objective (the Blue Line), the enemy's defence was beginning to harden. But so far as the first day of the Battle was concerned, the 11th Middlesex had done their job —done it thoroughly, too. They consolidated the ground won and formed a strong point in Hertford Trench, which was manned by "D" Company. During the afternoon "B," "C" and "A" Companies went forward to support the 5th Royal Berks, and by nightfall on 9th the 12th Division had reached the Feuchy Chapel-Feuchy Road. During the afternoon a dug-out near Battalion Headquarters blew up (probably a delay-action mine) and about 20 H.Q. details, including Sergeant Hunter and all the signallers, were killed. Three or four more dug-outs "went up" shortly afterwards. Headquarters and "D" Company then moved back to the old British line, where they were joined in the evening by "B," "C" and "D" Companies. The losses of the Battalion during the day were: 2/ Lieuts. H. G. Wright and

G. Sinclair killed, 2/ Lieuts. Holman, Newman, Smallwood and Tatham wounded, and about 100 other ranks killed, wounded and missing.

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The 11th Middlesex (12th Division) remained in the old British front line throughout the whole of the 10th and did not move forward again until the morning of 11th April.

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The records of the 11th Middlesex for the 11th and 11th April are of a similar character to those of the 4th Battalion.

The 11th Middlesex passed the night, 10th/ 11th April, in the old British line, but at 9.30 a.m. on 11th, led by the Adjutant, the Battalion moved forward to Halifax Trench, astride the Cambrai road, two companies on each side of the road. At 8 p.m. the Battalion again moved forward, taking over a somewhat hazy outpost line between Monchy and Guemappe from 112th Brigade (37th Division); the 36th Brigade had been ordered to relieve the former. In moving forward a "Crump" fell in the middle of a platoon of "D" Company, causing about a dozen casualties.

The night was comparatively quiet, and throughout the 12th little of importance occurred. At 8 p.m. orders were received that the Battalion would be relieved, but it was 7 a.m. before the relief was complete, after which the tired Middlesex men marched back to the Caves at Ronville, where they slept throughout the 13th. On the 14th at 7.30 a.m. the Battalion (in Brigade) marched off westwards, billeting for the night in Habarcq. Their casualties throughout the operations were about 196, of which number 50 were killed, 120 wounded and 20 missing.

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THE BATTLE OF ARLEUX: 28th-29th April

From the strength of the enemy's resistance (which was on the increase and not diminishing) it was clear that the continued British attacks at Arras were having the desired effect —the German reserves were being drawn to that part of the line and away from the French front.
On the 28th April, on a front of about 8 miles north of Monchy-le-Preux, the enemy was again attacked by troops of the Third and First Armies. The 12th Division made progress between Monchy and the Scarpe, the 37th Division gained a little more ground on Greenland Hill, and the 2nd Division captured portions of the enemy's line in the neighbourhood of Oppy.

Zero hour was at 4.25 a.m., when both British and Canadian troops made a heavy assault on the enemy. The two days' fighting which followed the initial attack was fierce in the extreme, counter-attack after counter-attack being launched by the enemy with a lavish expenditure of men, as terrible as it was useless! The German losses in prisoners and guns were small compared with the number they lost in killed and wounded.

From a Regimental point of view, the chief interest in the battle centres chiefly round the 17th Battalion of the 2nd Division, for the 4th Middlesex of the 37th Division were in close support, while the 11th Battalion of the 12th Division was in reserve in the Railway Triangle east of Arras. One other Battalion —1/ 8th, of the 56th Division —held front-line trenches south of the Arras-Cambrai road

and east of Wancourt, but they were outside the area of the operations. It is, therefore, to that fierce struggle in and around Oppy Wood and its defences that this story turns —a story full of heroic, hard fighting, but of heavy losses; an intense struggle in which the 17th Middlesex, with other units of the 2nd Division, were matched against some of the finest fighting troops then in the German Army.
As the 36th Brigade was in reserve, the 11th Middlesex (Lieut.-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe) were not engaged with the enemy, though both on 28th and 29th April parties of officers and men were at work digging a new line on Orange Hill.

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THE THIRD BATTLE OF THE SCARPE: 3rd-4th May, 1917

On the 3rd May another attack was made by the Fifth, Third and First Armies (in that order from right to left) between Bullecourt and Fresnoy, i.e., roughly on a front of about 16 miles. The French were to launch their offensive against the Chemin de Dames on 5th May, and in order to assist them Sir Douglas Haig had extended his battle front to include the Hindenburg Line in the neighbourhood of Bullecourt. But the sectors of the front of special interest to the Middlesex Regiment were Cherisy, Monchy-le-Preux, and just south of the Scarpe west of Pelves. In these three sectors the 12th, 1/ 7th, 1/ 8th, and 11th Battalions of the Regiment were engaged.

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During the attack by the 36th Brigade, 12th Division, the 11th Middlesex were in reserve to the Fusiliers in their attack on the first divisional objective —the Brown Line (Gun Trench). The Middlesex were in Bayonet Trench, their final duty being the clearing of Pelves. The attack, however, failed, and after darkness had fallen on the night 4th/ 5th the 11th Battalion took over the front line from the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers, who had lost very heavily. The Middlesex occupied Scabbard, New, Rifle and Bayonet Trenches, portions of which were unrecognisable, having been blown to bits by hostile shell fire. Hard work during the night resulted in a decent amount of cover when dawn broke on 5th. Throughout the remainder of 5th and on the 6th and 7th the defences were strengthened. The Battalion was relieved on night 7th/ 8th and moved back to the Orange Line. Before the relief, however, a hostile party of about 50 Germans had, very early in the morning of 7th, advanced against “A” Company, the records narrating this adventure in the following sarcastic terms: “About 3 a.m. a part of about 50 of the enemy were observed to be crossing No Man’s Land, apparently with the idea of relieving “A” Company in Scabbard Trench. Two Lewis guns and rifles effectively dealt with this party, at least two-thirds of which were observed to fall, the remainder doubling back.”
The close of the Third Battle of the Scarpe concluded the Battles of Arras, 1917, but there were two subsequent operations —the capture of Roeux (13th-14th May) and the capture of Oppy Wood (28th June), and in the first of these the 11th Middlesex were again engaged.

The Capture of Roeux: 13th-14th May

The 11th Middlesex, with other units of the 36th Brigade, were out of the front line until the night of 10th May, when the Brigade relieved the 35th Brigade in the right sub-sector of the 12th Divisional front.

At this period the divisional front line (which was immediately south of the Scarpe and south-west of Roeux) ran from Rifle Farm along Rifle Trench and Scabbard Trench to the southern banks of the river. On the right the 3rd Division held Monchy, while across the Scarpe, on the left, the 4th Division was just west of the famous Chemical Works and Roeux Cemetery.
The dividing line between the 36th and 37th Brigades (the latter being on the left of the former) was a point where the extension of Curb Lane joined Halberd Trench.
The front line was very irregular and in places the opposing trenches were close to one another. Along the 36th Brigade front the enemy was very strongly posted in Devil's Trench, in rear of which lay another equally powerful line —Gun Trench.

On the evening of 11th May, at 7.30 p.m., the 4th Division, across the water, attacked the Chemical Works and Roeux Cemetery, the guns of the 12th Division co-operating. This attack was continued throughout the 12th and was completely successful.

Meanwhile, during the night 11th/ 12th, the 11th Middlesex had relieved the 9th and part of the 8th Royal Fusiliers in the front line, and by 2.30 a.m. on 12th the Battalion held the frontline trenches, "A" Company on the right in Chain Trench from Bit Lane to Harness Lane, "B" Company in Rifle Trench from the junction to Harness Lane, "C" Company in Halberd Trench and in the forward piece of Rifle Trench, and "D" Company (in support) between Musket Trench and Orange Lane, and on each side of the junction Curb Lane and Rifle Trench.

At 7.30 a.m. a shell fell just to the right of the junction of Curb Lane and Rifle Trench, killing 2/ Lieut. A. A. Keogh; two other ranks were also killed and two wounded.

During the day companies lay low and rested, the enemy also being very quiet. But an attack on Devil's Trench had been ordered for 6 p.m.

At Zero hour a three-minute heavy bombardment of Devil's Trench took place, under cover of which both the 3rd and 12th Divisions attacked the enemy. Heavy machine-gun and rifle fire met the troops as they rushed towards the German trenches, and for a while the situation became obscure. At 7.30 p.m., when the position became clearer, it was found that, with the exception that we occupied a small portion of Arrow Trench on the right of the Brigade boundary and to the north of Bit Lane, the attack generally had been a failure. Reports, however, reached the 11th Middlesex that the King's Regiment (the left attacking Battalion of the 3rd Division) had gained their objective, and, in the words of the Battalion Diary, "it was determined to carry Devil's Trench at all costs."

Gallant resolution, but how difficult to carry out! Up to this period three more officers —2/ Lieuts. H. A. Godfrey, R. V. Morrison, and A. C. C. Towgood —had been killed, and 2/ Lieut. Gardener wounded; the casualties in other ranks were also heavy.

Meanwhile, immediately the situation became known at 7.30p.m., 2/ Lieut. Wilkins was sent out with his platoon to form a defensive flank on the Battalion right, parallel with and 50 yards from Bit Lane.

The second attack, which took place at 9.45 p.m., after a short preliminary bombardment, again failed, though the gallant fellows who rushed towards Devil's Trench got within 40 yards of it. But the position was too strongly held.

When dawn of 13th broke that portion of Arrow Trench won on the previous day was still held by Captain Anderson (" A" Company) and his men. All companies had lost heavily, "C" and "B" being especially weak. The enemy's barrage was particularly heavy: Monchy Trench and Curb Lane were

swept by a perfect tornado, and about Battalion Headquarters the shells were falling and bursting with terrifying frequency. The Battalion Diary records that "the work of the orderlies, which had always been good during the recent fighting, was worthy of the highest praise."

In the second attack on Devil's Trench 2 more officers (2/ Lieuts. W. H. L. Bartlett and A. W. Carter, both of "B" Company) were killed, the total casualties suffered by the Battalion being now 6 officers killed and 1 wounded; 26 other ranks killed, 66 wounded, and 20 missing, believed killed.

The final positions held by all companies were: Captain Anderson with about 40 other ranks of "A" Company in Arrow Trench; "B" Company in Rifle Trench; "C" Company in Halberd Trench and the forward piece of Rifle Trench; "D" Company in Chain Trench. Throughout the 13th the Germans were quiet —they were just as worn out as the Middlesex men. Only the guns were occasionally active.

At 10 p.m. the company commander of a relieving battalion arrived to reconnoitre the line. Captain Anderson, who had most gallantly maintained his position in Arrow Trench, was ordered to withdraw his men to his original front line: "this was carried out very much against his will."
By 3 a.m. on 14th May the relief was complete and the 11th Middlesex had moved back into support. On 15th they marched back to billets in Arras.

The attacks by the 12th and 3rd Divisions south of the Scarpe were no doubt intended to assist the 4th Division in capturing Roeux, for although the official despatches state that the village was taken by the 51st Division, when the Scotsmen relieved the 4th Division on the night 12th/ 13th the latter already held half of the village, and the enemy then evacuated the other half, for during the 13th the German guns shelled the eastern outskirts of Roeux.

In all no less than 10 battalions of the Middlesex Regiment fought in the Battles of Arras, 1917: from the northern extremities of the Vimy Ridge to the Cojeul River, south of the Arras-Cambrai road, the Die-Hards had wrested many a trench from the enemy. The villages of Neuville Vitasse, Thilloy, Monchy, Cherisy and Oppy, the slopes of Observation and Telegraph Ridges, Infantry and Greenland Hills —all were stained with the blood of Middlesex men. And some there are who lie there still, now that the awful sounds of battle are over and the plains of Picardy once more silent.

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The Battle Of Cambrai, 1917: 20th November-3rd December

"We were expecting a continuation of the attack in Flanders and on the French front when, on the 20th November, we were surprised by a fresh blow at Cambrai." —GENERAL LUDENDORFF.

[While the Flanders operations were in progress other parts of the enemy's line had been under close observation and investigation in order to discover the strength with which he was holding them: for the Battles of Ypres had compelled the Germans to concentrate large forces in that area and weaken other portions of their line. The weak spot was found south-west of Cambrai which was held chiefly by tired divisions resting after withdrawal from the Ypres Salient.

The object of the attack was to gain a local success by a sudden assault at a point where the enemy did not expect it and the Cambrai front was the most suitable, for here not only was the enemy weak in numbers, but the ground was favourable for the employment of tanks, of which large numbers were to be employed.

The success of the German-Austrian offensive in Italy was also an important factor in determining the attack, for it was still necessary to compel the enemy to deflect reinforcements which were to be used against the hard-pressed Italians, to the Western Front.
The general plan of attack was to dispense with previous artillery preparation and to depend upon the tanks to break through the enemy's wire of which great quantities protected his trenches. As soon as the advance of the tanks and infantry, working in close co-operation, began, the guns were to assist with counter-battery and barrage fire, but no previous registration of guns for this purpose could be permitted for fear of rousing the enemy's suspicions. Everything depended upon the observance of the utmost secrecy, and extraordinary precautions were adopted to keep preparations from becoming known.

The German defences on the Cambrai front comprised three main systems of resistance. The first of these, containing part of the famous Hindenburg Line, ran in a general north-westerly direction for a distance of six miles from the Canal de l'Escaut (or Scheldt Canal) at Banteaux to Havrincourt. At the latter place it turned abruptly north along the line of the Canal du Nord for a distance of four miles to Mœuvres, forming a pronounced salient in the German front. In advance of the Hindenburg Line the enemy had built a series of forward positions of considerable strength, including La Vacquerie on the north-eastern corner of Havrincourt Wood. Behind the Hindenburg Line, and at varying distances lay the second and third main German defences known as the Hindenburg Support Line and the Beaurevoir, Masnieres and Marquion Lines.

The operations subsequently divided themselves into three phases (i) the Tank Attack (20th-21st November), (ii) Capture of Bourlon Wood (23rd-28th November), and (iii) the German Counter-Attacks (30th November-3rd December).

Several Battalions of the Middlesex took part in these operations and one —the 17th —gained another Victoria Cross for the Regiment, Captain A. M. C. McReady-Diarmid of that Battalion carrying out what was probably the finest bombing feat of the Great War.

The Battalions engaged in the battle, or within the battle area, were 1/ 7th and 1/ 8th. (56th Division), 11th (12th Division), 13th (24th Division), 16th (29th Division), 17th (2nd Division), and 20th and 21st (40th Division).

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We left the 11th Middlesex at midnight 15th May billeted in Arras. The next day —16th —was Albuhera Day, but the Diary records that "owing to the exigencies of the situation" it was impossible to celebrate it in the usual way. The remainder of May and the better half of June were spent out of the line, training and resting, but on the 19th the Battalion moved back into the forward areas taking over support trenches in the Monchy defences on that date, and front-line trenches on the night of 23rd. But British and German guns were seldom silent and the records contain daily casualties in killed and wounded. On 24th 2/ Lieut. Ogilvie was wounded and on 27th a shell from a trench mortar badly wounded 2/ Lieut. Strong. On 25th July 2/ Lieut. G. F. Kidds was killed in Tool Trench by a trench-mortar shell. Apart from the usual amount of hard work on the defences when in the front line, work which had to be carried out often under shell fire, and the training when in back areas, August, September, and the first three weeks of October were not signalized by any special incidents. On 23rd of the latter month the 24th Division relieved the 12th and the 11th Middlesex (in Brigade) moved to Magnicourt-sur-Canche. The next move was to Fillievres on 29th, where several days were spent in training. On 16th November the Battalion marched to Frevent and there entrained for Péronne, the 12th Division having been ordered south to take part in the Cambrai

operations. On reaching Péronne the 11th Middlesex marched to Moislains and on 17th to Equancourt.
On 18th the Battalion proceeded to the reserve trenches, Gonnelieu, with two companies of the 8th Royal Fusiliers attached to hold the support line. The 12th King's were then holding the outpost line as a screen behind which the final preparations for the attack on 20th were being made.

The 16th Middlesex, after the Battle of Poelcapelle on 9th October, had moved back on the night 10th/ 11th to Elverdinghe Château, where a few hours were spent. On the morning of 11th the Battalion entrained for the Proven area, but their stay in the latter was short, for, on 16th, the 29th Division was transferred to the Third Army and proceeded by train to the Somme country.

The Middlesex arrived at Beaumetz early on 17th October and marched to camp at Heudecourt, where they were billeted in huts and carried out training until the 16th November. On the night 17th/ 18th they left Heudecourt and marched to Boislieux-au-Mont where they entrained for Péronne. At the latter place (like the 11th Battalion) they detrained and marched to Equancourt at 1 a.m. on 19th.

The Tank Attack: 20th —21st November, 1917

[Of the four Battalions of the Middlesex Regiment (1/ 7th, 1/ 8th, 11th and 16th) engaged on the first day of the Cambrai operations, the 11th of the 12th Division at Zero hour, was on the right at Gonnelieu, the 16th at Equancourt waiting to "go through" when the first and second German lines had been captured, and the 1/ 7th and 1/ 8th on the extreme left, the 56th Division having been ordered to make a demonstration with gas, smoke and artillery, in order to assist the main attack from Gonnelieu to the Canal du Nord opposite Hermies —a front of about six miles.

The 12th Division had been ordered to attack the enemy on the Gonnelieu-Bonavis ridge, and for this purpose the 35th Brigade, on the right, and the 36th Brigade, on the left, were to assemble on both sides of Gonnelieu, Sonnet Road being the dividing line between Brigades. There were three objectives: (i) the Black Line, which (on the Divisional front) ran from Bleak Support to Village Line; (ii) the Blue Line, which varied at from 900 to 1,500 yards north-east of the Black Line and (iii) the Brown Line, which included Lateau Wood and the Hindenburg Support Line as far as Vacquerie Valley. The Black and Blue Lines were allotted to the 35th and 36th Brigades: the Brown Line was to be captured by the 37th Brigade (right) and the 36th Brigade (left). The 55th Division was on the right of the 12th and the 20th Division on the left.] Seventy-two tanks were allotted to the 12th Division, 48 for the Blue Line and 24 for the Brown Line. They were to form up 1,000 yards from the German front line and the infantry behind them. Of the dispositions of the battalions of the 36th Brigade and the task allotted to each it is not possible to write, but the story of the attack as related in the Diary of the 11th Middlesex (Lieut.-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe) is given in full.

Every precaution to prevent the enemy obtaining information concerning the impending attack had been taken and extraordinary measures resorted to to keep the operations secret.

"Zero" was at 6.20 a.m. on 20th November and at that hour the tanks, moving forward in advance of the infantry, literally fell upon the enemy's wire, tearing great lines in it through which the troops passed. Protected by smoke barrages which "blinded" the enemy's artillery, the tanks rolled on across the German trenches, smashing up the enemy's machine guns and driving his troops to ground. The British infantry, following close behind the tanks, cleared the Germans from their dug-outs and shelters, whilst the tanks patrolled the line of hostile trenches. The surprise of the enemy

was complete. Both the main Hindenburg Line and its outer defences were quickly overrun, and the attack then swept on to the Hindenburg Support Line.

The 11th Middlesex thus relate their part in the attack: “Formed up behind our tanks —12 per battalion —‘C’ and ‘B’ Companies in the first wave, ‘A’ and ‘D’ in the second, all ready by 3.45 a.m. The Battalion attacked the furthest objective (Brown Line apparently) and formed up 800 yards in rear of leading battalions.” (Dispositions of latter unobtainable). “Zero, minus ten minutes, tanks and infantry moved off. No excitement on the part of the Huns except one M.G. Our guns started off at Zero (6.20 a.m.). Battalion Headquarters in Gun Support. 2/ Lieut. Chippenfield went off to find a new Battalion Headquarters 8.25 a.m. 9.25 a.m. —No news from Chippenfield. Moved off in three parties to find a new Battalion Headquarters. Eventually found a suitable dug-out in the Hindenburg Line, R. 16. d. 6.1. Battalion started one tank short, one tank also stuck in our old front line. Battalion gained all its objectives well up to time, and reorganization and consolidation taken in hand at once. Total captures about 150 prisoners, including a regimental commander and several officers, 6 machine guns all in working order, two handed over to a tank and taken on to Masnieres, various Granatternwerfer and ammunition and materials, a dug-out containing quartermaster’s stores, etc. Bosche headquarters, probably near Cambrai, were still ringing up to this dug-out several hours after we had gained our objective. Casualties: Capt. E. A. Moore, Capt. G. T. Whinney, Lieut. Hedgecock, 2/ Lieut. Sewell, 2/ Lieut. Angrave wounded, and about 90 other ranks. Reorganization of the line to be in support to 9th Royal Fusiliers, facing south-east, completed 11.30 p.m. No lights permitted at all during the night.”

Such was the 11th Battalion’s account of the 20th November. It is not very illuminating. The 29th Division had been detailed to pass through the Brown Line (when captured by the 12th, 20th and 6th Divisions, in that order from right to left), force the crossings over the Canal at Marcoing and Masnieres and capture both those places: the cavalry were then to pass through in the third phase of the attack.

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The 11th Middlesex of the 12th Division apparently made no move on 21st. The Battalion was slightly shelled during the morning, but the work of organising the trenches and making fire steps was carried on. Nothing unusual happened during the afternoon, and certain trenches to be used as communication trenches were cleared.

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The 11th Middlesex (12th Division) made no attack, and in the evening received orders to supply 1 ½ companies to support the 8th Royal Fusiliers in an attack on Quarry Post —Bleak Quarry on 24th.

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The 11th Battalion on 27th marched back to Egypt Camp, Heudicourt.

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THE GERMAN COUNTER-ATTACKS: 30th November-3rd December

[The general results of the Tank Attack on the 21st November, and the capture of Bourlon Wood 23rd-28th November, had been to push forward the British line to west of Vendhuille, Banteaux, Lateau Wood, Masnieres, Noyelles-sur-Escaut, Cantaing, thence to Bourlon Wood (the greater portion of which remained in our hands) whence the line bent back in a S.W. direction to where the Canal du Nord crossed the Bapaume-Cambrai Road, thence N.W. to just south of Mœuvres and south of Tadpole Copse.

But towards the end of November, from the increasing activity of the enemy's artillery in registering targets, and from the movements of transport and German troops behind the hostile lines, it was obvious that counter-attacks were imminent. Preparations were therefore made to meet whatever attacks were launched by the enemy. From opposite Vendhuille to Cantaing there were five British divisions in line: 55th (opposite the former village), 12th (between Gonnelieu and Banteaux), 20th (at Lateau Wood), 29th (holding Masnieres), 6th (Noyelles) and 59th (Cantaing). These Divisions were weak and held extended fronts, but though tired with heavy fighting G.H.Q. considered that they would be able to beat off any attacks. North of Cantaing the 47th Division had taken over Bourlon Wood, and the 2nd Division had come into line on the left of the former Division, from the left of the Wood to south of Mœuvres: the 56th Division still remained in the line south of Tadpole Copse.] Thus five Battalions of the Middlesex were involved in the operations of the 30th November and succeeding days, i.e., 11th (12th Division), 16th (29th Division), 17th (2nd Division) and 1/ 7th and 1/ 8th (56th Division).

The 2nd Division had relieved the 36th Division in the Mœuvres-Bourlon Wood front on the night 26th/ 27th November, the 17th Middlesex (Lieut.-Colonel R. S. H. Stafford)[213] taking over a portion of the line from Lock 5 to a point about two hundred yards south of Mœuvres: but the Battalion was relieved by the 1st King's on 29th and moved back into support, south of the Bapaume-Cambrai road, "A" Company being at the immediate disposal of the King's if necessary. On the morning of 30th November, between the hours of 7 and 8 o'clock, the enemy suddenly opened an intense bombardment. Had this continued the troops holding the front line would have been warned, but the bombardment was of short duration; owing also to smoke shells and bombs it was difficult for the troops to see what was going on in other parts of the front and the approach of the German Infantry. The latter, in strong assault companies, swarmed across No Man's Land, whilst great numbers of low-flying German aeroplanes rained machine-gun fire down upon our troops. The attack began first from Vendhuille to Masnieres (the opening attack) and two hours later from Fontaine Notre Dame to Tadpole Copse (the main attack).

In the opening attack the rapidity with which the enemy advanced after his short hurricane bombardment secured him the northern end of Bonavis Ridge and Gonnelieu, the latter village with Villers-Guislain being turned from the flanks.

Of the 12th Division, holding the line between Gonnelieu and Banteaux, many officers and men were captured, having been surrounded almost before they were aware of the attack. The 11th Middlesex (Lieut.-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe) were, however, out of the line at Heudicourt when the attack began, but at 7.50 a.m. received orders to be prepared to move at short notice. The story of that great day of fighting as contained in the Battalion Diary is as follows: "9.15 a.m. Orders to proceed to St. Quentin Mill, south-east of Gouzeaucourt and to deal with the situation as it arises. Head of column, the advanced guard at about two hundred yards clear of Revelon Farm, went into action on the high ground and checked the advance of the enemy. Every available man called out, details from all battalions and divisions. Cavalry came up, some dismounted, and filled gap on our left, other cavalry went into action mounted. Sixteen tanks came up to attack Gouzeaucourt.

“Companies in position in valley near railway, in touch with Guards on the left and Queen’s on the right. ‘A,’ ‘B’ and ‘C’ Companies W. 6. b. 4.8 to W. 6. d. 6.1. (about six hundred yards south of Gouzeaucourt) consolidating a line east of sunken road in touch with Guards on the left and 20th Hussars on right in touch with Queen’s. ‘D’ Company digging in six hundred yards north-east of Revelon Farm with a platoon about three hundred yards north-east of Farm in touch on right with Northants. 2/ Lieut. Booth and 2/ Lieut. Challon wounded. Three other ranks killed and about twenty wounded.”

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Fierce fighting continued along the whole front throughout the 1st December. The 11th Middlesex were, however, not engaged with the enemy and spent the day consolidating their line. The Battalion Diary records that the Guards and cavalry captured Gauche Wood, and in the afternoon cavalry captured Chapel Crossing. The Diary ends with the words “No further excitement to-day.”

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The 11th Battalion, after the excitements of 1st December about Chapel Crossing, had a quiet day on 2nd, during which consolidation was carried on. On the 3rd 2/ Lieut. Smith and six other ranks were wounded by shell fire. On the 4th the Battalion withdrew to Brusle and on the following day to Dernancourt, the 6th being spent in cleaning up.

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From Dernancourt the 11th Middlesex (Lieut.-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe) of the 12th Division, marched to Edge Hill Station on 8th December, and there entrained for the Wittes area. At the latter place the Battalion Diary records that “We learnt with much regret that 2/ Lieut. P. E. Booth had succumbed to his wounds. We thereby lose a very promising young officer.”[218] A move was made to Tannay on 23rd December where Christmas was spent. The last entry for the year in the Battalion Diary states that: “The Drums played the New Year in at midnight.”

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Five Battalions of the Regiment, i.e., the 3/ 10th, 11th, 11th, 16th and 17th began the New Year with every hope of “carrying on” for the whole course of the War. But Fate had ordained otherwise. The strenuous efforts of the British Army during the previous year (1917) had left it weak in numbers and at a low ebb. Drafts from home had fallen off. Nervous because of the heavy casualties suffered in the great struggles of 1917, in which the British Army had practically shouldered the burdens of most of the heavy fighting of that year (at Arras and at Ypres), the authorities at home kept back thousands of troops in training in England who should properly have been in France and Flanders. Faced therefore with keeping up the strength of his divisions Sir Douglas Haig (under instructions from the Army Council) had no other resource than to reduce the number of battalions in a division from 13 to 10, by disbanding numerous battalions in order to bring other units up to fighting strength. It was a bad policy, bound to affect the fighting efficiency of units, but it had to be done. As a result, in February, 1918, many splendid fighting battalions were disbanded and their personnel distributed amongst other battalions. In these changes the 3/ 10th (Territorial) and the 11th, 12th,

16th and 17th (Service) Battalions were involved. It was a great pity for the record of these battalions was of the best.

The 3/ 10th began the year at Bois des Bœufs (Monchy area) in reserve, but on the 3rd went into the front line, relieving the 1st Hants in the left sub-sector held by the right Brigade (10th) of the 4th Division. The tour was uneventful save for patrol work each night. On the 13th the Germans attempted to raid the Battalion "Sap 7" but were vigorously repulsed. The Battalion was relieved, but went back again into the front line on the night 27th/ 28th January for what was to be its last tour in the trenches.

The 3/ 10th came out of the front line on the night 1st/ 2nd February and occupied the Brown Line. It was there that they received orders concerning their disbandment. The 10th Brigade Diary records that on 27th January orders for the reorganisation of Divisions had been received whereby the 3/ 10th were to be disbanded. On the 6th February the Royal Scots relieved the 3/ 10th in the Brown Line and the Middlesex moved back to Schramm Barracks to billets. On the 8ththey moved to Agnes les Duisans, but before leaving the barracks they were formed up into three sides of a square. They were then inspected and addressed by the Divisional Commander, Major-General T. G. Mattheson. The General said: "It is with very great regret that I address you this morning to bid you farewell. As you know, orders have been issued for the Battalion to be disbanded … You have been in the Division since August, 1917, and have well maintained your position in the 10th Infantry Brigade, a fact of which you may well be proud, when it is taken into consideration the little experience you had when you joined the Division compared with the three years' experience of the battalions then in the Division. To whatever unit it may be the lot of each one of you to be transferred, it will be with pride that you will remember that you held your own in the very difficult and strenuous fighting in the District of Flanders in October, 1917." The General then thanked all ranks for their loyalty, zeal and energy and, having told them they had done splendidly, he wished them good luck in the future. The 3/ 10th reached Agnes les Duisans about midday on 8th and were billeted in the 4th Divisional Depot Camp, where they remained until the 20th. On the latter date, however, information was received that the Battalion was not to be broken up but was to become the 11th Entrenching Battalion under the orders of the C.E., XVIIth Corps, Third Army. The C.O., Lieut.-Colonel C. H. Cautley, was appointed O.C., Third Army Group Entrenching Battalion, with Headquarters at Albert. On the 21st February the Battalion moved to Arras. The Diary of the Battalion ends on the 23rd February, and there are no records as to what happened from that date but, being Middlesex men, it is certain that they carried out their duties with the same degree of energy and loyalty as when they were fighting infantry. The 11th Middlesex (Lieut.-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe) on 6th January moved to Neuf Berquin on the 36th Brigade (12th Division) taking over the Estaires area, and on the 13th of the month relieved the 10th Welch Regiment in the Fleurbaix Sector, but the tour was unproductive of any item of outstanding interest. On the 29th the 11th Battalion went into the Bois Grenier Sector, and the following quotation is from the Battalion Diary: "After a lapse of 2 ½ years we had come back to the sector in which we underwent our instruction shortly after coming overseas." The 11th Middlesex received orders concerning their disbandment on the 5th February: 7 officers and 150 other ranks were to be sent to each of the 1/ 7th and 1/ 8th Battalions, 10 officers and 200 other ranks to the 1st Battalion, and 15 officers and 300 other ranks to the 4th Battalion. These drafts were dispatched on 7th and 8th February. Battalion Headquarters, totalling 6 officers, Medical Officer, and about 135 other ranks not disbanded moved to Doulieu on 10th. The 11th Middlesex now ceased to exist as a battalion, and on the 27th of the month the Diary (the last) states that "Surplus, less transport, to be posted to No. 2 Entrenching Battalion, selected few posted to Machine-Gun Battalion.

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