

The Germans who faced the Irish at Wijtschate on 7 June 1917:
Who were they, where did they come from and what happened to them
before, during and in the days after the battle to take Wijtschate ?

Introduction

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The story of the Battle of Wijtschate which took place on 7 June 1917 would not be complete without making some attempt to record what happened to the German infantry units that faced the Irish battalions of the 16th (Irish) and 36th (Ulster) Divisions in their attack on Wijtschate. This essay will identify these units, who they were, where they came from and what happened to them before, during and in the immediate days after the battle to take Wijtschate on 7 June 1917.

A major obstacle to the study of any aspect of the imperial German army is the fact that a bombing raid on Potsdam by the Royal Air Force on 14 April 1945 completely destroyed the Prussian archives. Because Prussian formations and regiments accounted for almost 90 per cent of the German army during the First World War, the seriousness of the losses of these documents cannot be overstated.¹ The sources used to present the German account of the events on 7 June 1917 in this essay are taken from secondary sources in the form of regimental histories written many years after the war. The histories were written based on sources such as unit war diaries, archival material as well as some witness accounts. Written in the mid-1930s, the books reflected the political mood in Germany at the time of writing. Patriotic language and themes of ‘no regret’ and ‘unbeaten in the field’ are common threads found in the texts of all of these books. Germany had lost the war and the consequences of the Versailles treaties led to bitterness and resentment against a peace deal that was seen as unfair and mean-spirited. Not only right-wingers saw the dismantling with some regret of the old Prussian, Bavarian, Wurttemberg and Saxon armies which had formed Imperial Germany’s military might. Old comrade associations published unit histories where they cherished the old regimental spirit and tradition that in many people’s eyes had come to an untimely end. It is important to bare this in mind when reading the accounts. Therefore if one distils away the no regret, honour, glory and fatherland themes that run through these books, one is left with a series of accounts which offer an insight into who these German units were, where they came from and what happened to them on 7 June 1917 at Wijtschate.

¹ Sheldon, John, *The German Army on the Somme, 1914-1916* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2005).p.407.

Who were they ?

In early June 1917, the German Fourth Army under the command of General Sixt von Arnim held the German side of the Flanders front line around the Ypres salient. The southern end of the salient where the Wijtschate-Messines Ridge ran, known to the Germans as the *Wytschaete-Bogen*, was held by the German XIX Corps, the *Gruppe Wytschate*, under the command of General der Kavallerie Von Laffert.²

From an Irish perspective, the responsibility of defending Wijtschate fell to the 2nd (East Prussian) Division under the command of Major-General Reiser; the 40th (Saxon) Division under the command of Major-General Meister and some of the 3rd (Bavarian) Division under the command of Lieut.-General von Wenninger . The 2nd (East Prussian) Division was made up from the 44th Regiment, the 33rd Regiment and the 4th Grenadier Regiment. These troops were deployed at Hollandscheschuur, Grand Bois, Petit Bois, Maedelstede Farm and Peckham House and were essentially the German troops who faced the 16th (Irish) Division on 7 June 1917. The next German division going south along the front line whose responsibility was to defend Messines was the 40th (Saxon) Division. This division was made up from 104th Regiment, the 134th Regiment and the 181st Regiment. These regiments were deployed at Spanbroekmolen, Kruisstraat and Ontario Farm and it these regiments that the 36th (Ulster) Division faced on 7 June 1917. The 3rd (Bavarian) Eingreif Division was also assigned the responsibility of defending Messines further south from the 40th (Saxon) Division.³ See Table 1 for the German order of battle on the night of 6/7 June 1917 before the attack began.⁴

² Passingham, Ian, *Pillars of Fire. The Battle of Messines Ridge June 1917* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1998).Pp.75-76.

³ Ibid.p,199. See also Map on p.76.

⁴ Ibid.Appendis 1 and 2. p.192 and p.202.

Table 1 The German infantry units in Wijtschate that faced the Irish battalions on 7 June 1917.

German Division	Infantry Unit	Sector Deployed	British Div facing	British Units
2 nd (East Prussian)	The 44 th Regiment.	Hollandscheschuur	19 th (Western) Division	58 th Brigade
2 nd (East Prussian)	The 33 rd Regiment	Petit Bois and Maedelstede Farm	16 th (Irish) Division	49 th and 47 th Brigade
2 nd (East Prussian)	The 4 th Grenadier Regiment	Peckham Farm	36 th (Ulster) Division	109 th and 107 th Brigade
40 th (Saxon) Division in process of change over on night 6/7 June with 3 rd (Bavarian) Division.	The 104 th Regiment (Before the attack) 23 rd (Bavarian) Regiment. (After Zero Hour, order to complete relive was cancelled)	Spanbroekmolen and Kruisstraat	36 th (Ulster) Division	109 th and 107 th Brigade
40 th (Saxon) Division in process of change over on night 6/7 June with 3 rd (Bavarian) Division.	181 st Regiment (Before Zero Hour) 17 th (Bavarian) Regiment. (After Zero Hour.)	Ontario Farm	25 th Division II ANZAC Corps.	
40 th (Saxon) Division in process of change over on night 6/7 June with 3 rd (Bavarian) Division.	134 th Regiment (Before the attack) 18 th (Bavarian) Regiment. (After Zero Hour.)	Messines	New Zealand Division II ANZAC Corps.	

The 2nd (East Prussian) Division

The 44th Regiment.

The *Infanterieregiment Graf Dönhoff* (7. *Ostpreußisches*) Nr. 44 was formed in 1860, hence the relatively high number. The seventh regiment in East Prussia, it was the 44th in the line and named after a member of the Dönhoff family.⁵ They wore a Blue shoulder marking on their tunic.⁶

The 33rd Regiment

Originally, the 33rd Fusiliers were a light infantry unit, their full title being *Füsilier-Regiment Graf Roon* (*Ostpreußisches*) Nr. 33. They were named after Albrecht Count Roon, Prussian Minister of War and Field Marshal, a prominent figure in military and political life between 1848 and 1870. The 33rd Fusiliers were East Prussia's only regular fusilier regiment and the 33rd of Foot.⁷ They wore a Red shoulder marking on their tunic..⁸

The 4th Grenadier Regiment.

Some units were linked to Prussia's political and military history, which is underlined by the full names of the regiments and their precedence. Forerunners of the *Grenadierregiment König Friedrich der Große* (3. *Ostpreußisches*) Nr. 4 was raised in the late 1600s. The name of King Frederick the Great (1740-1786) is equivalent to British regimental nomenclature such as The Duke of Wellington's Regiment or, the King's Own Scottish Borderers etc. It originally denoted colonelship. The title in brackets illustrates the unit's region. This particular German grenadier regiment is the third regiment of infantry from East Prussia. Within the army as a whole, it was the Fourth line regiment.⁹ They wore a Yellow shoulder marking on their tunic..¹⁰

Before they came to Wijtschate to face the Irish troops, all of these units of the 2nd (East Prussian) Division had spent much of the war fighting the Russians on the Eastern Front; first in the defence of East Prussia 1914 / 15 and then on offensive actions into the Russian Empire, for example in Lithuania. They had encountered the outdated infantry tactics of the Russians. For some German soldiers, the Russian front was, 'too funny for words; the bands played in No Man's Land each other's national anthem and both sides sit on the parapets of the trenches applauding.'¹¹ The western front was not their main theatre of operations and they had relatively little experience with trench warfare and the tactics used there.

⁵ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst, *History of the Infantry Regiment Count Dönhoff (7th East Prussian) No. 44 1860 -1918. In Flanders Field with the 4th Army* (Berlin Berlag Tradition Wilhelm Rolt, 1930). Pp.242-247.

⁶ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. WO95/1969. (London: Public Records Office). Intelligence Report 6 June 1917.

⁷ Liedtke, Major (Retd), *History of the Fusilier Regiment Count Roon (East Prussian) No. 33 in the World War 1914 -1918* (Berlin: Berlag Bernard & Oraefe, 1935).Pp.294-303. The 33rd Fusiliers history was published in 1935 by the Berlin Company of Bernard & Graefe as Volume No. 26 of a series titled; *Deutsche Tat im Weltkrieg* (German Deeds in the World War). It is dedicated to, 'den Mitkämpfern für Deutschlands Ehre und Freiheit' (to the fellow fighters for Germany's Honour and Freedom). Pictures on the first pages show Kaiser Wilhelm II in field uniform, the regimental colours, Count Roon, his coat of arms and the wartime supreme commanders from 1916, Hindenburg and Ludendorff. The author, Professor Liedtke, a wartime reserve officer in the regiment and one of the frontline commanders in Messines 1917, dated his introduction *Heldengedenktag 1934* (Heroes' Commemoration Day 1934). This is how the Nazis rephrased what had been the more subdued *Volkstrauertag* (People's Day of Mourning) between 1920 and 1933. Unlike the two other books, this account of Messines clearly refers to the erstwhile enemy in denigrating terms. Liedtke appeals to a spirit of unity among the survivors: only then would they remain a reliable shock troop for their 'Vaterland, das Reich der Ehre und Freiheit. (Fatherland, the Empire of Honour and Freedom). The use of such language can be traced to the propaganda prevalent in the 1914-1918 war. It is also very much at home in the Germany of 1935 at a time when the Nazis constantly beat the drum of honour and freedom, having neither on their agenda.

⁸ *War Diary 47th Brigade*.

⁹ Dieterich, Lieut.- Gen. (ret'd) Alfred *History of the Grenadier Regiment King Frederick the Great (3rd East Prussian) No. 4* (Berli: Berlag Tradition Wilhelm Wolf, 1928).Pp.742-757. The history of the 4th Grenadier Regiment was first published in 1928 and the 44th Regiment in 1930. Both histories were published by a Berlin firm called Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk (Tradition Publishers Wilhelm Kolk). This specialist publisher's logo was an 18th century grenadier, like the company name the figure alludes to military tradition.

¹⁰ *War Diary 47th Brigade*.

¹¹ Kingdon, Ernest William. *Royal Field Artillery. Manuscript Memoirs of Service with 153rd and 56th Brigades Royal Field Artillery Titled. Through Mud,through Blood to the Green Fields Beyond, 1914-1918 MD 1327*. (Woolwich: Royal Artillery Museum). Interview between Kingdon and a German officer prisoner who Kingdon found 'a nice lad.' The interview was carried out on 8 June 1917.

The 40th (Saxon) Division

The 104th Regiment.

The Royal Saxon 5th Infantry Regiment Crown Prince No. 104 was one of the senior units of the Saxon army, being the fifth of the line in Saxony which at that stage held a nominally independent army as did Bavaria and Wurttemberg. All other German territories had their forces integrated (to varying degrees) into the Prussian Army. All German regiments (except Bavarian units) were numbered organisationally into the German line and according to regional seniority; hence a unit could be the 104th in Germany and the 5th in Saxony. The 104th had as their Colonel in Chief the Saxon Crown Prince who commanded the regiment after Messines. Its home garrison was Chemnitz, an industrial town not far from Leipzig.¹²

The 3rd (Bavarian) Division

The 17th (Bavarian) Regiment.

The 17th Bavarian Regiment of Infantry, Orff, was named after a member of the Bavarian Orff family – a descendant of that family was the composer Carl Orff who composed *Carmina Burana*. The 17th Bavarians were stationed in the Palatinate, a region in the southwest of Germany, which was then part of the Kingdom of Bavaria. Their home garrison was the former fortress of Germersheim south of Ludwigshafen on the western bank of the Rhine.¹³

According to the British IX Corps Intelligence Report dated 7 June 1917 whose contents were based on information obtained from German prisoners, the German order of battle was as per Table 1, except, the next German regiment in line after the 4th Grenadiers was the 23rd (Bavarian) Infantry Regiment followed by the 17th (Bavarian) Infantry Regiment. The British Official History of the Battle of Messines put the order of battle as being 23rd, 17th and 18th Bavarians.¹⁴ All these Bavarian regiments were part of the 3rd (Bavarian) Eingreif Division who was assigned the responsibility of counter-attacking the British infantry if they got through. During the night of 5/6 June the 40th (Saxon) Division was partially relieved in the line by the 3rd (Bavarian) Eingreif Division. The relief was to have been completed on the morning of 6 June. However, due to the British bombardment ‘on the back areas made it impossible to complete the relief which was only carried out with heavy losses’ on the night of the 6/7 June, i.e. just before the British attack.¹⁵ Essentially, the attack came when the 40th (Saxon) Division was in the process of moving out and the 3rd (Bavarian) Division were moving in.

¹² Wolff, Ludwig, *Das Kgl. Sachs. Inf. Regiment ‘Kronprinz’ Nr. 104* vol. 3 (Dresden Verlag Buchdruckerei der Wilhelm und Bertha Baensch, 1927). Pp.58-82.

¹³ Kohl, H, *Heading for Death with a Hooray! A Frontline Soldier’s War Experience, 17th Bavarian Infantry Regiment ‘Orff’*. Compiled by Hermann Kohl, Formerly 2nd Lieutenant (Reserves) (Stuttgart Belser Publishers and Book Dealers, 1932).Pp.162-173. The 17th (Bavarian) Regiment’s history was written by Hermann Kohl who was a former subaltern with the regiment. He published his book in 1931. The language is an interesting mixture of a somewhat stilted and formal style, imbued with patriotic terminology on the one hand and more modern journalistic phrases on the other which in a way seems to reflect the book’s intentions that are between a recollection of history and a statement in an on-going political campaign. Like many Germans of his generation, Hermann Kohl tried to convey the picture of the army ‘unbeaten in the field’, which had fought a purely defensive war against a world of enemies. Kohl’s own preface portrays the regiment’s deeds as an inspiration for coming generations to work for ‘a new and healthy’ Germany. His words were not only directed against the Versailles Treaties (parts of the regimental area of the old 17th were under French occupation between 1919 and 1929) but also set against the political and economic conditions in the Germany of 1931/32. The book is actually dedicated to Major Ritter v. Kohlmüller who was killed at Wijtschate. The accounts of military action appear relatively accurate and sometimes realistic – for example soldiers are mentioned who grab the opportunity to get drunk when bottles are unearthed by the shelling. The lack of supplies and meagre rations are referred to in a casual way. Allied efforts are partly described with a kind of grudging respect but also as a triumph of material over traditional valour. Hermann Kohl’s account is probably based on his own notes as well as the official war diaries and survivors’ tales.

¹⁴ Edmonds, J.E. Sir. (Brigadier-General), *History of the Great War Military Operations France and Belgium Volume 2, 1917* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1948).p.64.

¹⁵ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917. See also Passingham, Ian.p.199.Map p.76.

The 2nd (East Prussian) Division was also due to be relieved on the following night, i.e. 7/8 June. The British attack caused a cancellation of this change over. Its commander had requested relief on 4 June. Both the 2nd (East Prussian) and 40th (Saxon) Divisions had been in the line since mid-April and had suffered consistent casualties. By early June they were exhausted and much depleted units. The 40th (Saxon) Division had requested relief on 3 June. The relief began just as the battle opened. ¹⁶ According to the IX Corps Intelligence report, 'the approximate strength of the enemy's troops on the IX Corps front at Zero should have been about 5,500 including details and resting battalions.' ¹⁷

¹⁶ Edmonds, J.E. Sir. (Brigadier-General), p.64

¹⁷ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

Where did they come from ?

The German soldiers who faced the men in the Irish regiments at Wijtschate in June 1917 were more than likely from the same social background as their Irish opponents across the wire. The peacetime garrisons and main areas of recruitment of the 2nd (East Prussian) Division were mainly in the then provinces of East and West Prussia in the northeast of both the Kingdom of Prussia and the then German Empire. A large proportion of the soldiery came from farm labour backgrounds or employed in the businesses and small firms of half-rural towns. Saxony was densely populated and industrialised. The background for many of the 40th Saxon Division soldiers would have been skilled labour and urban.

Before the outbreak of the war, officers mainly came from a bourgeois background and from traditional military gentry families of rural Prussia. In his paper titled, *Junior officership in the German Army during the Great War 1914-1918*, the historian Alexander Watson¹⁸ noted about the class background of the German officer corps.

Despite the recruitment of large numbers of middle-class men in the years before 1914, aristocratic value defined the ethos of the German officer corps. Thirty percent of the 33,804 professional or active officers in 1913 came from the nobility, but tradition and their disproportionate share of the upper ranks (fifty-two percent of officers between the ranks of Oberst and General were aristocrats) ensured that they maintained overwhelming influence. The more fashionable regiments, The Guards, Cavalry units and those stationed in the major cities, often had a very high proportion of aristocratic officers; the new men recruited from the middle-class tended to join arms such as the heavy artillery which were less prestigious and demanded technical knowledge. The Offiziere der Reserve, who numbered 85,950 men at the outbreak of war, was also drawn from the upper-middle classes. In 1905, businessmen and landowners each comprised approximately thirteen percent and higher officials forty-five percent of the Prussian corps.

With the losses of professional officers in the early stages of the war, by June 1917 many gaps were filled by reservists whose ranks were marked by the letters *d.R.* – *der Reserve* (of the reserves).

¹⁸ Watson, Alexander, *Junior Officership in the German Army During the Great War 1914-1918*. The Third Conference of the International Society for First World War Studies. (Trinity College Dublin 23-25 September 2005).

What happened to them before, during and in the days after the battle to take Wijtschate ?

On average, one German regiment (three battalions) faced the assault frontage of each British division on 7 June 1917. Of this regiment, one battalion garrisoned the forward zone, another was in and about the Second Line, including the belt of strong points in front, and the third was in reserve several of kilometres behind. The companies of the front and support battalions were divided into counter-attack troops (about 75 per cent) and garrison units for the strong points. These garrison units were distinguished from other units by wearing a white armband.¹⁹

Beginning with the Germans who faced the 58th Brigade of the 19th (Western) Division on the left flank of the 16th (Irish) Division, namely the 44th Regiment of the 2nd (East Prussian) Division, going south along the front line ending with the 17th (Bavarian) Regiment of the 3rd (Bavarian) Division who faced the 25th Division of the II ANZAC Corps on the right flank of the 36th (Ulster) Division, the following is an account of what happened to each German infantry battalion that faced the Irish divisions in the week leading up to the battle and the battle itself on the morning of 7 June 1917.

The 44th Regiment, 2nd (East Prussian) Division.

On the night of 6 June, the targets of the British gunners were focused on positions beyond the Oosttaverne Line, more than likely where the Germans had located some of their artillery. Moreover, their objective in hitting these particular positions behind the Oosttaverne Line, according to the German interpretation anyway, was to break any links in terms of roads and tracks etc. between their reserve and front line, thus preventing the quick deployment of the reserve infantry divisions for counter-attack purposes or reinforcement purposes. It seems the objectives outlined by the Irish artillery worked.²⁰ It seems the 44th Regiment's medical evacuation systems worked fine and there was some respect shown to the German wounded by the British gunners. The historian of the 44th Regiment noted about the handling of the wounded during this British shelling.²¹

The transport of the wounded had been running smoothly. Medical company cars went to the dressing station of the BTK (**B**ereitsschaft **T**ruppen **K**ommandeur the reserve or stand-by troop positions) every morning, stretcher bearers of the two forward battalions had to get the casualties there. The Englishman respected the Geneva Convention. Neither cars nor bearers were ever fired on wilfully. There was a remarkable quiet in the first and second line of defences during the night of 6 June. Further behind, a constant and heavy barrage went down beyond the Sehnenstellung (Oosttaverne Line) and even the third line of defences. The enemy used an enormous amount of both gas and explosive grenades in order to seal off the rear of the first and second positions completely.

Information obtained from German soldiers captured on 5 June indicated that the 2nd Battalion of the 44th Regiment were in the front line, the 3rd Battalion were in support and the 1st Battalion of were in rest at Wervicq. Another rest area for the 44th and 33rd Regiments was at Comines where they had billet huts on the eastern side of the village.²² The casualties suffered by the 44th Regiment during the five-day preliminary British bombardment of the German lines were; two officers, fifty-five men killed. The two officers were Leutenants Wulpert and Eggert. Their wounded was three officers and 195 men, a total of 255 men.²³

¹⁹ Edmonds, J.E. Sir. (Brigadier-General). p.44 and p.63.

²⁰ *War Diary 36th (Ulster) Division* WO95/2491. (London: Public Records Office). Extracts from IX Corps Royal Artillery Orders for the preliminary bombardment. Item 24. Subsections I to VII. See also Edmonds, J.E. Sir. (Brigadier-General). p. 48.

²¹ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst.Pp.242-247.

²² *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

²³ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst.Pp.242-247.

Just after midnight on 7 June Hauptmann d.R (Reserve Captain) Steinlein was ordered to move forward with his battalion of the 1st/44th Regiment (1st Battalion of the 44th Regiment) from the Wervicq area to the southern edge of the Rondellwalld (Oosttaverne Wood). The Regimental Headquarters was in the Rondellwalld and was named the Sachenfeste (Saxon Fortress). It was approximately 290 metres east of Somer Farm on the eastern outskirts of Wijtschate.²⁴ Steinlein may have been ordered forward to either relieve the men of the 44th Regiments 2nd and 3rd Battalions who were garrisoning the positions on the northern end of Wijtschate, or, to act as reinforcement. Before they moved forward, Hauptmann Steinlein and his men were behind the Oosttaverne Line. Sometime after midnight on 6/7 June, wearing gas masks, companies from the 1st/44th assembled and headed towards their positions. They walked straight into British artillery fire landing behind the Oosttaverne Line that prevented Hauptmann Steinlein and his men from getting forward. The British gunners had achieved one of their objectives. The men in the front line defences in and around Wijtschate were cut-off and left to the mercy of the oncoming infantry battalions of the 58th Brigade.²⁵

At the ordered time companies assemble, wearing gasmasks from the beginning. They are soon in the barrage zone created by the English artillery who fire on the Sehnenstellung (Oosttaverne Line) without any let-up. It is impossible to keep units together. With great difficulties, the sections crouch forward from crater to crater, losing direction in the brew of gas, fog and smoke. A small contingent of men, including Battalion HQ, probably had reached the Sehnenstellung by 4 am. (Note: The Germans used GMT or European Time not BST. So '4:00 am' was in fact 3:00 a.m. BST) The main body of the companies, by then dispersed into small groups, have got lost east of the Sehnenstellung while others have got behind the left wing of 35 Infantry Division where they remain for the duration of the battle. There is no connection between HQ staff and companies. The attempt by the 1st Battalion to reach Rondellwalld from the Sehnenstellung must be classified as a failure.

When the mines at Hollandscheschuur exploded facing Sachenfeste, the shock wave sent through the earth made the concrete bunker 'tremble'.²⁶

Observers noticed towering pillars of earth rising up and collapsing again. The whole of the Wytschaete-Bogen was blacked out by giant clouds of dust and smoke...Before attacking with bare steel, the Englishman had used the last means at his disposal, blowing up all his mines simultaneously. His week-long barrage had not guaranteed him the success of his thrust – the brave German defenders had to be buried under their positions before his infantry could advance.

At about 9:15, a.m. another bunker named Zollernfeste (Zollen Fortress named after the Prussian Royal family) was, 'taken and occupied by Blacks.'²⁷ This is an interesting observation. One must wonder where these 'Black' soldiers came from and who were they. Apart from the West Indian soldiers who guarded the German prisoners at the 16th (Irish) Division's Walking Wounded Station, there is no other reference to West Indian units used in the attack on Wijtschate on 7 June 1917. It was common practice for raiding parties to blacken their faces prior to raids. Perhaps the writer, who described the British soldiers that took the Zollernfeste dugout as Blacks, may have been confused with soldiers who had blackened their faces. Lieutenant Frank Simon of the 9th Royal Dunlin Fusiliers and later of the 2nd Otago Regiment, New Zealand Division, noted in his diary on 24 May 1917. 'We seem to get new batteries daily and the Bailleul – Locre –Kemmel road is blocked with traffic. I saw a Negro battalion pass along it today.'²⁸ It is not known for certain if this 'Negro' battalion took part in the actual attack.

²⁴ 2 *German Trench Map Wijtschate*. (Wijtschate, Depover, Jose: RDFA Archive).

²⁵ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst.Pp.242-247.

²⁶ Ibid.Pp.242-247.

²⁷ Ibid.Pp.242-247.

²⁸ *Diary of Lieut. Frank.Simon, 1st Otago Regiment and Late 9th R D F*. (Dublin: The RDFA Archive).p.5.

The attack on the Sachsenfeste regimental headquarters in the Oosttaverne Wood was reported to take place around noon. It was likely that the attack was led by men mainly from the 9th Royal Welsh Fusiliers and 9th Cheshire Regiment of the 58th Brigade.²⁹

At about noon strong English detachments approached Rondellwald from Wytschaete. When they were fifty metres from Sachsenfeste, some officers and infantrymen tried to retreat to Sehnenstellung. Only three runners and Lieut. Becker, the 2nd Battalion's adjutant, succeeded in this attempt. At first there was no trace from the others. It was established later on that some fell and others were taken prisoner. Among the men killed was Major von Heydewolff, the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Battalion. Nobody has ever seen him again. The English grenade that killed him seemed to have buried his remains. The 44th Regiment lost an exceptionally diligent and brave staff officer who, being a cavalryman, had quickly adapted to infantry life. He had been in charge of 3rd Battalion for a year.

Regimental HQ and all others still inside the Sachsenfeste were taken prisoner. Fighting definitely continued till early afternoon. Sachsenfeste only fell after it had been surrounded by the rear from north (St. Eloi) and south (east of Wytschaete). In the Sehnenstellung and further to the rear of it the 1st Battalion mixed with retreating Bavarian and Saxon troops during the morning. The artillery barrage continued to block any attempt to reach Rondellwald.

It is interesting to note from the German side, that the British artillery fire in the afternoon on positions behind the Oosttaverne Line prevented reinforcements getting through to the men defending Wijtschate. This was one of the objectives set out in the British artillery plan.

At 3:00 p.m. Hauptmann Steinlein, still at this time unable to get forward and help his comrades in the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 44th Regiment, reported that, 'Rondellwald and Sachsenfeste have been taken by the English.' For the rest of the afternoon, the 44th Regiment and the remnants of other units simply got as far away from Wijtschate and British shelling as they could. The Oosttaverne Line defences had been destroyed and their front line artillery had been smashed.³⁰

At 3:00 p.m., Hauptmann Steinlein received reports that Rondellwald and Sachsenfeste had been taken by the English. When the 179th Infantry Regiment arrived to man the Sehnenstellung, Battalion HQ and contingents of the 3rd Battalion were retreating to the third defensive position. Other elements that could not be contacted mixed with the remains of various units and tried to hold the totally destroyed Sehnenstellung against attacks by the English. In the evening they also retreated to the third position. It was there that Oberleutnant (Lieutenant) Eggert and Leutnants (2nd Lieutenants) Pluchatsch and Gallus assembled and ordered various units as best they could during the afternoon. Battalion HQ retreated to Glockengut (Bell Manor). New German batteries were brought in to replace the smashed frontline artillery and go into position behind the 1st Battalion and open up.

During 8 June, Companies from the 10th Grenadiers and 51st Infantry relieved the shattered 44th Regiment and took their place in a new line now beyond Mesines. According to IX Corps Intelligence reports, seventeen officers and 574 other ranks were taken prisoner up to 6:00 pm on 8 June.³¹ What was left of the 44th Regiment went back to Wervick via Houthem. Here they picked up any stragglers left behind from the fighting.

²⁹ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst.Pp.242-247.

³⁰ Ibid.Pp.242-247.

³¹ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

Of the front line battalions who took the brunt of the mines, shelling and later infantry attacks, there were only three men from the 2nd Battalion and a few from the 3rd Battalion accounted for. The regimental diary of the 44th Regiment stated the losses were thirty-two officers and 992 other ranks missing in action. Hauptmann Steinlein's 1st Battalion lost seventy men on that day. On 9 June, the entire 2nd (East Prussian) Division was pulled out of the line and the 44th Regiment went to Marcke to recover from their hammering at Wijtschate. They were later moved back to their more familiar ground along Eastern Front.

The 33rd Fusilier Regiment, 2nd (East Prussian) Division

Going south along the German front line, the next German regiment that faced the British troops, mainly from the Irish 49th and 47th Brigades of the 16th (Irish) Division were the 33rd Fusilier Regiment. Later in the day, the 48th Brigade would take their positions in Oosttaverne Wood. Their main sector was, as the British called it, between Petit Bois and Maedelstede Farm or as the Germans called it Mark Wald and Maedelstede.³² British intelligence obtained from members of the 44th Infantry Regiment stated that there was 'zigzag wire through the middle of the wood running parallel to the front line.'³³ This belt of wire was about one metre high and three meters wide. Prisoners also stated that there was a number of dugouts in the wood which were 'capable of holding about a company (110) in all.' One prisoner stated that there were a number of dugouts capable of holding up to 300 men.³⁴

The historian of the 33rd Fusilier Regiment, Professor Liedtke, a reserve Major in the Regiment, noted on the morning of 7 June, that by 1:00 a.m., British artillery firing had 'begun to fade away' and from 2:00 a.m. no shells were fired on their front line. However, those men from the battalion who were out in the front line and who had been on the end of the British barrage prior to the mine explosions were frantic to get at the British whom they knew would, sooner or later, come over the top and attack them. Their hearts, as Liedtke wrote, were 'burning with revenge.'³⁵ According to British intelligence reports, prisoners captured from both the 44th Regiment and 33rd Fusilier Regiment during the week long bombardment, the German morale was 'on the whole good. They stated that their artillery was, 'in good and plentiful supply' and that all ammunition was 'being saved up until the critical moment.'³⁶

Sadly, for the front line men of the 33rd Fusilier Regiment, they never did get a chance to quench their burning revenge. Professor Liedtke wrote the battalion's account of what happened to them on the morning of 7 June 1917.³⁷

Dawn had ascended. So had doom – as grim and perfidious as the enemy who had sent it. Doom was heralded by absolute silence, the quiet before the storm. At 3:00 a.m. sharp there was a jolt like an earthquake, immediately followed by the strongest artillery barrage. The Englishman had triggered the detonation. In *1a Line* and to the western edge of Zahnstocherwald giant masses of earth rose from the ground and buried the unfortunate crews of sections Aa, Ab and Ad and 2 Company (Lt. Zinn) in the Schweinestollen.

³² 3 *German Trench Map Wijtschate*. (Wijtschate, Depover, Jose: RDFA Archive).

³³ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917. The wood may well have been Grand Bois or as the Germans called it Wyttschaete Wald. See

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ Liedtke, Major (Retd).Pp.294-302.

³⁶ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

³⁷ Liedtke, Major (Retd). Note. 1a Line was the German front line, probably Nail Trench and Nags Nose on British trench map reference number 28SW2.1 April 1917. Zahnstocherwald, Toothpick Forest, or, as General Hickie called it, Inniskilling Wood. Schweinestollen or Pig Tunnel, may have been located between Wijtschate and the Hospice along a trench named the Schweinlie Steg. See map in *War Diary 48th Brigade, 1 January 1917 to 30 April 1919*. WO95/1973. (London: Public Records Office). A Company of either the 44th and 33rd Infantry Regiments at the time of the British attack on 7 June 1917 contained about 110 men. See *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917. Bayernweg - The British called the Bayernweg trench Obstruction Alley. It was located at the northern corner of the Grand Bois. Today it would be along the Voormezelestraat. *Ibid*.

The barrage jumped to the rear positions, English infantry streaming into 1a Line. Anyone found alive were finished off remorselessly by the knives of the Blacks. One man each returns from 2 and 3 Company, none from No. 1 Company. With Kortestollen (Korte Tunnel) succumbing after shelling of the heaviest order, 4 Company were buried and suffered tremendous losses. The tiny band of survivors manned the ridge. No. 10 Company got wiped out completely, Lt. d. Res. [Lieutenant, Army Reserve] Hellmuth and Lt. d. Res. Spielberg were dead. Spielberg was never to learn of his recent promotion. Of the fighting members of the company, only a man from the light machine gun team and a runner returned, none from 11 Company. Only the company commander, Lt. d. Res. Hermann got a grip on a section of the main front line west of Bayernweg close to No. 8 Company's positions with a group of ten men and a machine gun.

The 'jolt like an earthquake' referred to by Liedtke was more than likely the mines that exploded at Petit Bois and or Maedelstede Farm. The German line he referred to, i.e. 1a Line, was in fact the German front line around the Hollandseschuur known to the British as Nail Trench and Nags Nose. It was very seldom held or even patrolled. In fact the Germans built another trench about 50 yards behind it.³⁸ The losses seemed to be an absolute wipe-out of the company. Following the explosion of the mines and the immediate barrage, there was, as Liedtke wrote, only a 'tiny band of survivors' of this battalion who made it back to safety. In the above account, Liedtke also made reference to Black soldiers. He referred to Zahnstocherwald which was in fact, Inniskilling Wood. Again, it is unlikely there were any black soldiers with the 7th Inniskillings on 7 June. However, it seems that whoever these black soldiers were, they took little or no prisoners. Any unfortunate Germans found alive in the vicinity of Inniskilling Wood, 'were finished off remorselessly by the knives' of these black soldiers. One individual German soldier of the 33rd Fusilier Regiment named Fusilier Paul Schumacher wrote an account of what he saw at about 7:00 a.m. on 7 June.³⁹

In the shadow of the approaching tanks they came closer and closer. Now we could distinguish them. They were Blacks, English colonial troops probably, brandishing short curved knives. We saw with horror how they cut down everyone still alive ahead of us and we knew what was waiting for ourselves. But they did not dare come closer. The way it seemed they were totally drunk judging from the shouting and the brute bestiality of their stabbing everyone they could get their hands on. Among the Blacks were numerous white infantrymen slowly approaching, holding the rifles in their arms.

Fusilier Schumacher seemed pretty certain that some of the British troops who attacked him were black and moreover were English colonial troops. Regardless of who they were, they cleared Schumacher and his comrades off the ridge. The 33rd Fusilier Regiment too was withdrawn from the line and went back east with the remainder of the 2nd (East Prussian) Division. According to IX Corps Intelligence reports, eight officers and 705 other ranks of the 33rd Fusilier Regiment were taken prisoner up to 6:00 p.m. on 8 June.⁴⁰

The 4th Grenadier Regiment. 2nd (East Prussian) Division

These were the German troops that were hit by men from the 47th and 109th Brigades. Lieut. - General Alfred Dieterich wrote the account of the Grenadiers action on 7 June 1917. 'The 6 June', wrote Dieterich, 'passed without any major incident.'⁴¹ The barrage schedule the British gunners set for 6 June was set as normal so as not to trigger anything unusual which would set the alarm bells ringing on the German side who might suspect something was afoot.

³⁸ *The Attack of the British 9th Corps at Messines Ridge* 1917.p.48.

³⁹ Liedtke, Major (Retd). Pp.294-302.

⁴⁰ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

⁴¹ Dieterich, Lieut. - Gen. (ret'd) Alfred Pp.753-757.

It seems the routine barrage on 6 June worked. General Dieterich wrote, ‘enemy’s artillery barrage on the entire section was without any particular increase.’ However, his own artillery had ‘suffered badly from the barrage.’⁴² Oberleutnant der Reserve Scheele was the Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Grenadiers. On the night of 6/7 June, he and a few other men were resting in the battalion headquarters named Pappelhof (Poplar Farm) that lay on the south eastern edge of Wijtschate. The Irish troops knew Papplehof as Torreken Farm. The British bombardment had prevented supplies of food to come up from the rear to Oberleutnant Scheele. ‘We were resting in the Pappelhof again. As food parties hadn’t got through once more, all we got was tinned meat without any bread as that had been eaten before. We then laid for sleep. There was an eerie silence that night.’⁴³ Scheele actually slept on his desk, one must wonder why. Intelligence obtained from captured Germans on 5 June confirmed that the food and water supply to the men in the front line around the Grand Bois was poor. They had to ‘subsist on their iron rations.’⁴⁴ Yet more evidence that the British objective of starving out the front line troops through the shelling of their reserve supply lines worked.

Following the mine explosions at Petit Bois, Maedelstede Farm and Peckham, ‘masses of enemy forces made their way through our trenches and finished off our troops that were there.’ Scheele, back at Torreken Farm noted.⁴⁵

From our shelter we saw a giant cloud of dust coming towards us and a fireworks display of flares and rockets. Eerie emptiness. Dead horses, men and, carts; the earth ploughed upside down two or three metres deep. There were just a few wounded and some brave men trying to get through towards our rear. It seemed an impossible endeavour, and most of them fell in the attempt.....When there was a brief gap in the dust and haze, we saw massed attacking troops, including dismounted cavalrymen, their horses following. Whether *we* got artillery support, too, I can’t say, you couldn’t make out any difference in the noise.

It would seem, according to General Dieterich’s account, few frontline German troops were taken as prisoners by the 16th(Irish) Division. However, according to Oberleutnant Scheele, some men were taken prisoner. He noted, ‘No.8 Company was surrounded and had to give themselves up to the enemy after a desperate defence.’⁴⁶ Some of the 4th Grenadiers did make a stand but because, as he claimed, the flanking 104th Regiment facing the Ulster Division had entirely collapsed, his regiment gave way. The fighting, he wrote, was ‘of unspeakable ferocity.’⁴⁷ The entire 1st Battalion of the 4th Grenadier Regiment was ‘wiped out.’⁴⁸ One company was buried in a tunnel in Wijtschate. More than likely, these were men who had gone into this tunnel or dugout for shelter and were hit by British heavy artillery. Most of them, wrote General Dieterich, were ‘put out of action by carbon monoxide fumes.’⁴⁹ A few ‘unfortunate survivors’ managed to dig themselves out of the tunnel only to be blown apart by the British shelling of Wijtschate.⁵⁰

Remnants of the 4th Grenadiers did however make a stand at Torreken Farm. The first Irish troops the 4th Grenadiers encountered at Torreken Farm were from the leading assault companies of the 10th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 109th Brigade, Ulster Division. Torreken Farm was in fact in the Ulster Division’s objective sector.

⁴² Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁴³ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁴⁴ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

⁴⁵ Dieterich, Lieut.- Gen. (ret’d) Alfred . Pp.753-757. Note Petit Bois was known as Markowald to the Germans. See *War Diary 48th Brigade, 1 January 1917 to 30 April 1919*. See Map in diary.

⁴⁶ Dieterich, Lieut.- Gen. (ret’d) Alfred . Pp.753-757.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

By 9:20 a.m. on 7 June, 10th Inniskillings, one of the second wave assault battalions of the Ulster Division, had sent out a patrol under the command of two officers named Davidson and Patterson to a point, '50 yards (forty-five meters) west of Torreken Farm' and there was 'no enemy in sight now.' They claimed to have 'brought back about 50 from a Signal Dugout.'⁵¹ Although there was no sight of the Grenadiers reported, that did not mean they were not still there. As General Dieterich noted, the Grenadiers were ordered to fight 'till the end in dugouts.'⁵² Bravely some, like 2nd Liuet. Arno Wilke from No 5 Company, did exactly that. Wilke was badly wounded and may have been taken prisoner. Much of the British artillery was, as Dieterich noted, guided by 'countless enemy aeroplanes whizzing at a height of 150 meters above the battle zone and the hinterland.'⁵³ By late morning, Papplehof was in British hands. In fact, by early afternoon, Lieut.-Col Jack Hunt, CO 9th Royal Dublin Fusiliers had set up his headquarters at Torreken Farm.

The shattered remains of the 4th Grenadiers made their way back to a position somewhere behind the Sehnenstellung. Oberleutnant Scheele wrote.⁵⁴

Thus we tried to get to the rear with earth and splinters constantly whizzing around our heads. The timed shells threw up house-high fountains of earth. At last, we had become indifferent to all and anything. A Leutnant from Regimental Headquarters fell near us. He had tried to get through to the frontline without success. Nothing was seen of the other company headquarters. At 5:00 p.m., thirteen hours after the detonations, the Major, Sergeant Schmeer, a telephone operator and myself had made it to the Sehnenstellung, finding a way past fallen soldiers, dead horses, abandoned and destroyed artillery pieces. The Sehnenstellung had been manned by clerks, cooks, supply drivers and batsmen.

Later in the day when the attack came from the British 33rd Brigade, a motley crew of surviving Grenadiers, 'Sappers and Saxons' led by Lieut. Neuhaus tried in vain to counter-attack the 33rd Brigade but were driven back by British artillery. 'Few of these brave men returned' wrote Dieterich.⁵⁵

On Friday 8 June, the few that were left of the 4th Grenadier Regiment, forty-four men in total, were pulled out from a position they held somewhere along the Sehnenstellung and put into a combined reserve force dug in at a defence line located at Johannhof (Joanna Farm) which was less than two kilometres east of Wambeke which in turn is about six kilometres by road from the centre of Wijtschate. That evening they were ordered to march further east with the remnants of the 2nd (East Prussian) Division towards Wervik. The 4th Grenadier Regiment of the 2nd (East Prussian) Division was practically wiped out at Wijtschate. They lost forty-six officers and 1,370 men of other ranks dead, wounded or missing.⁵⁶ According to IX Corps Intelligence report, fourteen officers and 760 other ranks were taken prisoner up to 6:00 p.m. on 8 June.⁵⁷ The Grenadiers had never before experienced such a catastrophic loss in battle.

The 104th Regiment. 40th (Saxon) Division.

The Royal Saxon 5th Infantry Regiment Crown Prince No. 104 of the 40th (Saxon) Division .

This was the next German regiment in the line deployed prior to the attack mainly around Spanbroekmolen salient. This was the regiment of the 40th (Saxon) Division that was caught in the process of changing over with the incoming 23rd (Bavarian) Regiment of the 3rd (Bavarian) Division on the night of attack on Wijtschate, i.e. the night of 6/7 June.

⁵¹ *War Dairy 109th Infantry Brigade.* WO95/2508. (London: Public Records Office).Diary of Events 7 June 1917.p.9.

⁵² Dieterich, Lieut.- Gen. (ret'd) Alfred . Pp.753-757.

⁵³ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Pp.753-757.

⁵⁷ *War Dairy 47th Brigade.* IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

It was these men, in total confusion, that faced the Ulster Division's 109th and 107th Brigades in the attack. Captain Ludwig Wolff, an officer who served in the 104th Infantry Regiment, wrote the regimental history based on war diaries and numerous private accounts.⁵⁸

The preliminary British bombardment in the week before the attack on Wijtschate was, according to Wolff, 'Worse than the Somme. Reports from forward commanders stated there were 215 enemy batteries registered as active, compared with sixty-five which had been counted in January and 177 counted in May.'⁵⁹ The barrage was worse on 4 June. Between 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., in a small zone about 200 metres in length between a munitions dump named Heckenschloss and a reserve battalion command post, or, as Wolff referred to it as a *Bereitsschaft Truppen Kommandeur*, BTK, which was located roughly half-way between Wijtschate and Messines, between 2,500 and 3,000 shells of all sizes fell in this small area. The men on the receiving end must have gone insane.⁶⁰

Tremors from the hits were mighty, shaking the massive concrete walls like a ship in a gale. We expected the bunkers to be turned upside down at any moment. Leutnant Schnike tried to get the men of the Battalion HQ to forget the horrors of the moment. He had ordered them to play their mouth organs until the smoke and noise made the music-making impossible.

Another account of the preliminary bombardment from a member of the 181st Regiment in the 40th (Saxon) Division's sector facing the New Zealanders noted.⁶¹

Every day, thousands of shells and mines of all calibres went down on frontline positions and the hinterland, bringing all movements close to a standstill. Repairing and refitting these positions was just not possible. The braves of our regiment were covering in wait in shell holes and craters, ready to fight, and exposed to the rain of iron without shelter – just as it had been at the Somme. Getting rations, ammunition and material to the front line, a difficult task anyway, got immeasurably more complicated under those conditions. Here, too, our brave medical orderlies and stretcher-bearers achieved the nigh impossible evacuating the wounded. Often, the "hell of Verdun" has been mentioned. It would be as justified to refer to the period from 10 May to 7 June as "the hell of Messines - Wytschaete".

Counter barrage by the Germans during the five-day British preliminary barrage was ineffectual. The historian of the 181st Regiment noted.⁶²

Our artillery was not able to respond because it had been wrestled down by the enemy's superior firepower. The few guns that were still operational had to be kept silent so as not to betray their position. They would be needed in the event of the imminent enemy infantry attack. Our position was inhabited by horror.

Moreover, German infantry's confidence in their 'sister arm' as Wolff called their counter artillery, was not very high.⁶³

⁵⁸ Wolff, Ludwig. Pp.58-82.

⁵⁹ Ibid.p.58..

⁶⁰ Ibid.p.59.

⁶¹ Pflugbeil, Hanns, *Das Kgl. Sächs 15. Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 181. Nach Den Amtlichen Kriegstagebüchern Bearbeitet Im Auftrage Des Ehemaligen 15. Kgl. Sächs. Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 181 Von Hanns Pflugbeil, Hauptmann Im Stabe Der 4. Division, Im Felde Kommandeur Iii./181 - the Royal Saxon 15th Infantry Regiment No. 181. Compiled from Official War Diaries on Behalf of the Former Regiment by Hanns Pflugbeil, Staff Captain in the 4th Division and Battalion Commander of 3rd Bn 181st Rgt in the Field.* (Dresden: Berlag ber Buchbruderei ber Wilhelm und Bertba b. Baenfch Gtiftung, 1923).p.70.

⁶² Ibid.p.71.

⁶³ Wolff, Ludwig.p.60.

Our artillery's main objective was to hold down enemy batteries. However, the young man in the trench would not notice any achievement of our sister arm because of the enemy's supremacy in firepower, although it was the right measure from a tactical point of view. In addition, when a barrage was requested to counter enemy patrols, our firing commenced immediately but at a very slow pace. Trust in the sister arm was shaken to such an extent that it could not be regained by reports about strong artillery reserves behind our frontline.... The enemy's air supremacy was increasingly paralysing our artillery.

The lack of confidence between German infantry and artillery at Wijtschate was confirmed from German prisoners captured after the attack. They were baffled as to why their artillery did not come in and support them. The British IX Corps intelligence report stated that German prisoners were, 'unable to account for the lack of support given them by the artillery, but were inclined to put it down to cowardice on the part of the German gunners. There appears to be a great lack of good feeling between the infantry and the artillery.'⁶⁴ It would seem that the German prisoner from the 33rd Fusilier Regiment taken in the week during the preliminary bombardment who told his interrogators that their artillery was 'in good and plentiful supply' may have been correct in terms of strength but wrong in terms of the will to fight.⁶⁵

On 5 June, orders came through to the 104th Regiment that they, along with the rest of the 40th (Saxon) Division, were to be relieved by the 3rd (Bavarian) Division. The 1st Battalion and Machine-Gun Company of the 104th Regiment were to be relieved in the line by the 23rd Regiment of the 3rd Bavarian Division. Major Koch of the 104th Regiment was assigned the responsibility for the relief operation. According to the IX Corps intelligence report, it seems the Germans did not expect the British to attack on 7 June. Rather, they expected the attack to take place two or three days later and in that assumption it, 'was the enemy's (Germans) intention to relieve all the troops which had been subjected to the heavy bombardment by fresh troops, more capable of withstanding the attack.'⁶⁶ The change-over was to begin at 3:00 a.m. on 7 June because it was, 'the time of least enemy artillery activity. Thus casualties for the changing parties would be kept at a minimum. The decision meant doom for Koch and his battalion.'⁶⁷

In the hour before the change-over, the scene Major Ludwig Wolff recorded in the regimental history along their front line was serene. This would agree with the British accounts about the hour before the mines exploded. The British shelling was nothing out of the ordinary and had slackened off from the intensity of the previous days and nights. It is interesting to note, that Wolff doubted the wisdom of relieving the Saxon defensive division with a Bavarian attack division. Both had a different function and training regime. However he acknowledged that the Saxons had been worn out and were due to be relieved.⁶⁸

After 3.30 a.m., (sic) skies were brightening up, the moon appeared and the whole scenery was lit by the unique mixture of moonlight and early morning dawn. It was so silent one could hear birds singing. The solemn silence was fitting for the day of the Feast of Corpus Christi. Shortly before 3:00 a.m., the first sections of III / 23 (3rd Battalion of the 23rd Infantry Regiment) had arrived at the Bereitschaftsstellung. (...) Members of I./104 (1st Battalion of the 104th Infantry Regiment) were delighted about the quietness of the front. There were good prospects to get away from the horror of recent days. In a few hours' time, it was hoped, one would be able to wash oneself properly, to clean up and to lie down for a good long rest.

⁶⁴ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

⁶⁷ Wolff, Ludwig, p.69.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.70.

At 3:10 a.m., ten minutes after the change-over began, the mines exploded at Spanbroekmolen and Kruisstraat. The mine at Spanbroekmolen was a few seconds late and it literally caught both the incoming Bavarians and the outgoing Saxons in mid-stream. Ludwig Wolff wrote.⁶⁹

The end of the world seemed to have come..... In the first position the massive detonations had cleared away the remaining obstacles and defences, knocking out most of the troops so that the Englishmen gained ground up to the Kaiserschanze position. All over the battle ground swarms of enemy planes criss-crossed at low height, almost within reach. The number of balloons, these eyeballs of death, had more than doubled ...Our own infantry spotter plane had to yield after setting barrage markings with red flares. The balloon which had gone up in our divisional sector got shot down quickly and was floating away guideless.

At 4:00 a.m., the Bavarian Kamp Truppen Kommandeur in 1 Line sent a message carried by a pigeon back to the Divisional HQ to inform HQ that the 2 Line was lost to the Englishman. In fact, they were Ulstermen.

With the follow-up British artillery attack, there was utter panic in the ranks of the Saxon and Bavarian troops. The Bavarian troops waiting in the communication trenches were blown to bits. Moreover, communications broke down between the Saxons and Bavarians. The British shelling had cut their telephone lines. The 1st Battalion of the 104th Regiment were in the line at the time of the change-over which was in fact cancelled. Sensibly, the Commanding Officer of the 104th Regiment told his men to hold their positions and fight. He sent out runners into the hail of machine-gun and shellfire, brave men indeed, with an order that stated. 'Relief interrupted. Companies to defend current positions.'⁷⁰ With the Spanbroekmolen salient now a big hole in the ground, their efforts of holding their positions were in vane simply because there was few if any left in the front line. Leading battalions from the Ulster Division, such as the 11th Inniskillings and the 14th Royal Irish Rifles from the 109th Brigade simply brushed the remaining Saxons aside and took prisoners who surrendered.

The battalion war diary of the 14th Royal Irish Rifles referred to defiant machine-gun fire that came from what they called Jump Point. Col. Cheape, CO of the 14th Rifles noted. 'We killed about 20 German Officers round about Jump Point. 2nd Lieut. Mc Hugh rushed about 80 Boche – shot an officer and a few men; the rest surrendered. We tried to get captured machine guns into action here, but the locks were thrown away and filled with mud.'⁷¹

The Germans referred to Jump Point as Feste Harstall.⁷² The German machine-gun fire that took on the 14th Rifles around Jump Point came from two machine-guns. One from No. 1 Machine Gun Company of the 104th Regiment under the command of Offizierstellvertreter Decher and the other from the 2nd Machine Gun Company of the 4th Grenadiers. According to Ludwig Wolff, these machine gunners, 'caused heavy losses to the English attack columns.'⁷³ However, according to Col. Cheap of the 14th Rifles, the Saxons suffered heavily too. One must wonder was Offizierstellvertreter Decher amongst Cheap's statistics. In reality they both caused each other suffering and like most of these accounts, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

⁶⁹ Ibid.p.71. The Kaiserschanze was a command post along the German second line named 2 Line on the eastern side of the Spanbroekmolen salient. It was located along what today would be called the Wulverghemstraat.

⁷⁰ Ibid.p.71.

⁷¹ *War Diary 14th Royal Irish Rifles* WO95/251. (London: Public Records Office).Post-battle report by Lieut.-Col. G.R.H.Cheape. 19 June 1917.p.4.

⁷² *4 German Trench Map Wijtschate*. (Wijtschate, Depover, Jose: RDFA Archive).

⁷³ Wolff, Ludwig. Note. The title Offizierstellvertreter was rank literally meaning Deputy Officer. The German Army had tried to counter the losses of career and reserve officers during the war by appointing Offizierstellvertreter or Feldwebelleutnants from experienced senior NCOs who lacked the formal qualification or were not considered 'officer material'. Their position within a battalion was not always an easy one

One fascinating note written by Ludwig Wolff on page seventy-two of his book on the 104th Regiment states, that as the ‘English’ troops charged the line around Jump Point (Feste Harstall), they were heard singing the words. ‘And if perchance we do advance to Woytschaete (sic) and Messines, they’ll know the gun that strafed the Hun were wearing of the green.’⁷⁴ These, one might recall, were the words of a song put together by the 16th (Irish) Division concert party in reference to the elaborate green camouflage used to cover the 16th Divisional artillery in their attack on Wijtschate.⁷⁵ One must wonder as to how Ludwig Wolff came across these words to write in his book. One must also wonder if the men from the 14th Royal Irish Rifles, the Belfast YCVs, knew these words that were primarily from a song about the 16th (Irish) Division’s artillery. Regardless of these questions, Ludwig Wolff poignantly concluded, ‘their singing did not always match the grim reality.’⁷⁶

The grim reality that Wolff referred to was that the 104th Regiment suffered the loss of thirteen officers and 320 men of other ranks on 7 June. Of that number, the 1st Battalion of the 104th suffered a loss of nine officers and 258 other ranks.⁷⁷ The balance was made up from machine-gun and minenwerfer crews. According to IX Corps Intelligence reports, ten officers and 137 other ranks were taken prisoner up to 6:00 p.m. on 8 June.⁷⁸ Between 20 April and 10 June 1917, the 104th Regiment suffered a total loss of eighteen officers and 883 other ranks.⁷⁹ The 23rd Infantry Regiment whose 1st Battalion were due to relieve the 1st Battalion of the 104th Infantry Regiment when the mines exploded suffered a loss of twenty-four officers and 1,012 men of other ranks. Many of these casualties came from British artillery fire after the mines exploded. They were caught in the open.⁸⁰ According to IX Corps Intelligence, five officers and 240 other ranks of the 23rd Infantry Regiment were taken prisoner up to 6:00 pm on 8 June.⁸¹

The 181st Regiment. 40th (Saxon) Division

The 181st Regiment were at the southern end of the IX Corps front and in fact faced the New Zealanders during the preliminary bombardment of Wijtschate. They had come through this bombardment and had suffered appallingly. What was left of them following the bombardment was taken out of the line. Their historian noted.⁸²

The regiment had been worn out to such an extent that it was necessary to relieve it. Companies were just fifteen to twenty strong. Those few men who had borne the brunt with unimaginable heroism had been almost incapacitated by the mighty preparations. On 4 June, amidst strongest English barrages, the order came. Bavarian Infantry Regiment No. 17 was to take over from I.R. 181 in the night 6/7 June.

On the night of 6 June, their place in the front line was taken over by the 17th Bavarian Infantry Regiment of the 3rd (Bavarian) Division. On 7 June when the attack began, the majority of the 181st Regiment, or what was left of them, had been relieved and were back out of harm’s way in Comines.

⁷⁴ Ibid.p.72.

⁷⁵ Johnstone, T, *Orange Green and Khaki* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992).p.270.

⁷⁶ Wolff, Ludwig, p.72.

⁷⁷ Ibid.p.80. See Email from Jose Depover, Wijtschate, 1 February 2005 in 104th Infantry Regiment file.

⁷⁸ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

⁷⁹ Wolff, Ludwig, p.80. See Email from Jose Depover, Wijtschate, 1 February 2005 in 104th Infantry Regiment file.

⁸⁰ Ibid. See Email from Jose Depover, Wijtschate, 1 February and 27 June 2005 in 104th Infantry Regiment file.

⁸¹ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

⁸² Pflugbeil, Hanns. Pp.71-72.

The 17th Bavarian Regiment. (3rd Bavarian) Eingreif (counter-attack) Division

The historian of the 17th Bavarian Regiment, Herman Kohl began his account of the attack on Wijtschate with the heading. ‘Corpus Christi 1917. A Witches Sabbath for the Regiment – The Wytschaete (Sic) Earthquake.’⁸³ Towards the end of April 1917, new troops were arriving from the training depot of the regiment in preparation for what Kohl termed ‘the Battle for Flanders.’⁸⁴ Regiments from Palatinate were based around the villages of Wervik and Comines and were part of what Kohl named ‘an Alert Division.’⁸⁵ Obviously the Germans knew something big was afoot and began to prepare for it. His battalion acted as a counter-attack battalion. The food shortages back home in Germany had spread to the troops in the front line. According to Kohl:⁸⁶

The Arras interlude is over. Since April, 3rd (Bavarian) Division have been billeted in the Roubaix area. The division was designated Army Group Reserve Force for Wytschaete (Sic) Group. Grave days lay ahead. New men came streaming into the companies. They were from the regiment’s reserve battalions at home and from the training depots in the hinterland. Tough drill was used to weld the troops into an effective counter force for the expected battle for Flanders. All this was going on at a time when the soup provided by the field kitchens had become lean. ‘Nettle patrols’ went out and about almost daily and brought in their ‘booty’ to add to the menu card.

For several weeks, the 3rd (Bavarian) Division trained in the art of counter-attack and were not accustomed to manning static trenches. On the night of 6/7 June 1917, according to Kohl and the historian of the 181st (Saxon) Regiment, Hanns Pflugbeil, the 17th Bavarian Regiment relieved the 181st Saxon Regiment of the 40th (Saxon) Division. This would suggest that the 18th Bavarian Regiment would have relieved the 134th (Saxon) Regiment further down the line because it was the 18th (Bavarian) regiment who defended Messines on 7 June 1917. The men that faced them were the New Zealanders from the II ANZAC Corps. In the week before they went into the line in the changeover, the 17th Bavarians were in Comines. Hermann Kohl was attached to Regimental Headquarters as a liaison officer. He described what happened during that week before 7 June while they were in Comines. He portrays a town in utter chaos. It is interesting to note that the Germans moved the civilian population out of the town. Despite the propaganda during the war of civilian atrocities committed by German soldiers in occupied Belgium, in Comines the Germans evacuated the civilian population perhaps out of concern for their safety. After all, they knew what was coming.⁸⁷

Enemy artillery activity was ever increasing between Wytschaete (Sic) and Messines. The civilian population had to be evacuated from Komen (Comines). At midnight all bells rang. The area was not alien to our soldiers. In 1914, they fought at Hollebeke, storming the Eickhof. They celebrated their first wartime Christmas in Comines. The old sweats felt almost at home. *Flanders towns – Flanders maids*. There were fond and half-forgotten memories but there was no real sense of cheerfulness. There are difficult decisions ahead. First shells came rolling towards Wervicq, ploughing the cobbled stones in the streets. A hidden depot with bottles of wine was unearthed by the shells. In the evening, drunken soldiers sprawled over the street.

Referring to the British artillery, Kohl noted their gunners had learned lessons from the Somme, particularly in the use of aircraft in cooperation with artillery.⁸⁸

⁸³ Kohl, H.p.162. The feast of Corpus Christi fell on 7 June 1917, a religious date Kohl and indeed Fr. Willie Doyle SJ were very much aware of.

⁸⁴ Ibid.p.162.

⁸⁵ Ibid.p.162. Palatinate is a region in the south-west of German which was then part of the Kingdom of Bavaria.

⁸⁶ Ibid.p.162.

⁸⁷ Ibid.p.163. (*Flanders towns – Flanders maids*’, was a rhyming pun, in German it was. Flandrische Städtchen – Flandrische Mädchen.

⁸⁸ Ibid.p.164.

Out, facing Messines, the uneven struggle of the gunners continued. Gas attacks and reconnaissance raids by English battalions kept the German troops busy. We were supposed to relieve 40th Infantry Division who was worn out totally. Dozens of enemy aeroplanes flew along over the German lines. They were busy gathering information about the remotest corners and trenches. They secured English mastery of the skies and tried to influence our troops' morale by that impressive display. They directed English artillery fire towards every assembly place, storage point and ammunition dump they could spot. The English artillery fired well. Enemy commanders made good use of the experience gained at the Somme and Arras. It was a sultry early summer.

It seems the objectives of the British artillery to cut off the German rear area supply lines was achieved in this sector of the line too. By mid-night on the 6/7 June, Kohl's 17th Bavarian Infantry Regiment had relieved the 181st Infantry Regiment. In accordance with German order of battle procedure, their 1st and 3rd Battalion of the regiment occupied the front line positions. The 1st Battalion's H.Q was at Barbarahof. The 3rd Battalion's H.Q was located at Thummelschlof.⁸⁹ Barbarahof was in Bas Warneton or as the Germans called it Neerwasten. The farm lay roughly halfway along the road (N515) between Comines and Warneton on the western side of the Lys Canal.⁹⁰

The Bavarians may well have named Barbrahof, (Barbara Farm) after the patron saint of gunners and of miners, St. Barbara. Many of the men who came into the front line were, according to Kohl, 'completely exhausted by the advance. Their march up from Comines to Messines and the front line brought them through some of the British preliminary shellfire of 6 June. The change-over procedures that British units adhered to when they relieved each other were no doubt somewhat similar on the German side too. The outgoing battalion would brief the incoming battalion as to what was happening in the section. It seems the Saxons believed that the British mining operations in their sector had either stopped or been abandoned. Some of the officers from the 181st Saxon Regiment remained for a while with 17th Bavarians after the change over. Kohl at the time probably believed his Saxon comrades. With a sense of disgust of the British for using mines as a weapon and a sense of betrayal from his own side in allowing the mines to exist, Kohl wrote many years after the event in hindsight.⁹¹

Mining warfare had gone to bed. Tunnelling had affected both sides for a long time. It took lives in a mean and inescapable way, day by day, neither running out of energy and resolve nor of cunning ideas and daring plans. But then, tunnelling had got tired. All reports from 40th Infantry Division confirmed that picture. The ever-present knocking and hammering of enemy miners had been replaced by silence. At long last, the war at Messines had turned humane and bearable. Or is it?

Is there, after all, deceit? Indeed! A tragic deceit it was since the opposite is true: English miners were deep underneath the German positions, working frantically. They are at a depth where they could not be heard, where all sounds were swallowed. They were ordered to achieve the maximum, to mark the coming holiday in their way. The English Marshal was keen about it. The Entente desperately needed a success. The French were downhearted; there was an atmosphere of crisis. The whole world was meant to listen to the band about to play for Corpus Christi in the *Wytschaetebogen*. While the German troops were taking the seemingly unexpected quiet with cold fatalism, on the other side thousands of boxes were making their way through the underground labyrinth. A terrible event was afoot, protected by German carelessness.

Sometime after mid-night on 6 June, Kohl wrote of sensing that something was wrong.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid.p.165.

⁹⁰ *1 German Trench Map Wijtschate*. (Wijtschate, Depover, Jose: RDFA Archive).

⁹¹ Kohl, H.Pp.164-165.

⁹² Ibid.p.165.

After midnight the rear of this section of the frontline became eerily silent. Something was brewing. Filled with anxiety, the companies approached the dangerous heights to the southwest of Wytschaete (Sic) and Messines. Instinctively everybody sensed future events.

In the hours before Zero hour, the British gunners had lulled the Germans into believing that nothing special was afoot. What happened at 'the fourth hour' of European Time, certainly did surprise the Bavarians.⁹³

Then – at about the fourth hour of the morning a giant quake gripped the earth. The ground skipped and rocked as if gaps opened up and swallowed all life. A horrible awakening tore the German trenches. Ten giant fountains of earth, flanked by snake-like flames, came towering into the skies. A hail of stones came raining down on the trenches, crushing all unprotected life. War is truly awesome in its destructive energy! Death was jumping among the dugouts. The land, covered in smoke, had become an island of horror.

The Englishman's artillery, confident of victory, reached for new shells with rage and enthusiasm. The hinterland was cut off by an impregnable hail of fire. For some time, any support action by the alert (Eingrief) battalions was blocked. Black dots came emerging out of the fog and smoke, masses of them swarming all over the place. A flood of men came washing over the torn earth, like gales of storm. It was just unbelievable. Still, masses of English infantry came streaming from their dugouts. Our fighting battalions were annihilated completely. Earth had swallowed them. Just a few machine guns were still working. Their hammering sound was an indication of German resistance and of a German will to resist. That will made the machineguns bark up against the storming blacks and whites. But they were too weak. A fanatical struggle raged for Messines. From their hinterland, squadrons of enemy tanks approached. Despite their slow and clumsy approach they dominated the battlefield in the end – because almost all German artillery had been wrestled down and were short of ammunition. Red flares went up screaming for a counter barrage, but our artillery remained silent.

Messines and Wytschaete (Sic) were typical examples of modern Materialschlacht. They illustrated the triumph of matter over mind, of force of material over the force of human will and soldierly valour. At about 6:00 a.m., the ruins of both places were in the enemy's hand. Almost all officers and men of the battalion headquarters from I/181, I/17, III/17 were pulverised after a direct hit at the door of Thümmelschloß, the command post for the battalions. Major von Kohlmüller fell, one of the bravest and most dare-devil officers of the regiment. Hauptmann (Captain) Senn was critically wounded and died after been taken prisoner by the English. Leutnant (2nd Lieutenant) Brander, slightly wounded, was the only officer to escape the grim fate that had befallen the remainder. Leutnant Reitingner was seriously wounded.

Kohl tried to escape to a dugout from the shelling after the mines at Kruisstraat and Ontario Farm had exploded. He claimed to have seen the Red Baron himself.⁹⁴

My route took me towards the Barbarahof area. The farm had been ploughed through miserably by the shells and resembled a freshly ploughed acre. The farm buildings had been reduced to smoking heaps of rubble. The area looked like a chessboard with craters bordering on yet more craters. The work of just one. Scattered soldiers from our division were everywhere, wandering around like straying sheep from a dispersed flock.

⁹³ Ibid.Pp.166-167.

⁹⁴ Ibid.Pp.168-170.

There was no leadership. The men were lying in craters, lying by the roads, everyone waited for orders.

At Barbarahof, I clashed with a Saxon Leutnant. The man must have suffered a nervous breakdown. He was just shouting at me, words to the effect that I was supposed to be in the frontline and take part in the renewed assault. In the evening, there was a heroic performance by Richthofen and his loyal band in the skies singing the song of the German heroic spirit above the shattered Wytschaetebogen. Like caressing hands on the wounded hearts of men near desperation, this helped to give back to the men some measure of calm and confidence.

One can only imagine this crazed German officer shouting at Kohl, completely driven mad with what he had seen and come through. Hermann Kohl was one of the lucky Bavarian officers to survive the British attack on the Wijtschate - Messines Ridge in June 1917. His regiment however was practically wiped out. The losses were thirty-four officers and 1,151 men of other ranks along with three horses. These losses, he wrote were, 'for one day only.'⁹⁵ According to the IX Corps Intelligence Report, the number of prisoners taken by the Corps who belonged to the 17th Bavarian Regiment was, two.⁹⁶ In essence, the 17th Bavarian Regiment ceased to exist. The IX Corps intelligence report.⁹⁷

The enemy has suffered very heavily in killed, wounded and prisoners and a considerable amount of war material has been captured... The loss of the Wytschaete (Sic) -Messines Ridge will be a great blow to the enemy. Prisoners' state that the general feeling had been that the ridge would be held at all costs, firstly on account of its commanding position, and secondly owing to the heavy losses which had been sustained in its capture in 1914.....Prisoners when captured were for most part very hungry and thirsty and quite satisfied to be captured.

How could any General expect and ask his men to stand and fight if they were hungry and thirsty. Is it any wonder so many Germans simply surrendered. As stated, the strength of the German order of battle on the IX Corps front at Zero Hour of 7 June 1917 was estimated to be approximately 5,500. This included units in reserve and at rest. The number of Germans prisoners who had passed through the IX Corps Divisional Cages by 9 June was, sixty-three officers and 2,840 other ranks. If one assumes that the Germans suffered heavily in killed and wounded both during the preliminary bombardment and in the attack on 7 June, the only conclusion one can come to is that made in the IX Corps Intelligence report written after the battle which states. 'It would appear therefore that the 2nd Division as a fighting formation has practically ceased to exist. The same fate has befallen the 3rd Bavarian Division.'⁹⁸

One of the first major German command casualties was the commander of the Group Wytschaete, General der Kavallerie von Laffert. He was removed from command on 16 June and was replaced by General Diffenbach. Von Laffert was blamed especially for using the two trained *Eingreif* Divisions (3rd Bavarian and 35th Prussian) to relieve the two front divisions immediately before the battle and for employing as *Eingreif* divisions the 1st Guards Reserve and the 7th Division which were new to the district and untrained for the specialist task.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid.p.173.

⁹⁶ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 429. 7 June 1917.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Passingham, Ian.p.147. See also. Edmonds, J.E. Sir. (Brigadier-General).p.94.

Table 2. An estimation of German casualties suffered by the units who faced the Irish Regiments on 7 June 1917 ¹⁰⁰

Division	Unit	Taken Prisoner. Officers	Taken Prisoner Other Ranks	Losses Officers	Losses Other Ranks
2 nd (East Prussian)	44 th Infantry Regiment	17	574	32 (15)	992 (418)
	33 rd Fusilier Regiment	8	705		
	4 th Grenadier Regiment	14	760	46 (32)	1370 (610)
	10 th Jaeger zu Pferde	1	8		
40 th (Saxon)	104 th Infantry Regiment	10	137	13 (3)	320 (183)
3 rd (Bavarian)	23 rd Bavarian Regiment	5	240		
	17 th Bavarian Regiment		2	34 (34)	1151 (1149)
	18 th Bavarian		1		
Totals		55	2,427	155 (84)	3,833 (2,360)

Note. There were several other units attached to each of these divisions from which prisoners were taken and because of their small numbers are not listed above. The ‘Losses’ column lists the number of officers and other ranks recorded in the regimental histories used in this text. The difference between the reported total loss in the regimental histories and the number taken prisoner according to the IX Corps intelligence report would give an approximation as to the number who was killed. These figures are listed in Red. It would seem that the unfortunate 17th (Bavarian) Regiment suffered the highest losses against the New Zealanders facing Messines.

When taken prisoner, German troops were processed as per 2nd Army Instructions. One German officer from the 104th Infantry Regiment recorded the following passage in the official history of the regiment. His observations, particularly on the progress of the battle, conditions of what he saw around Kimmel, and his treatment make interesting reading.¹⁰¹

The contrast between German and English positions is best illustrated by comparing hell and heaven. On and around Kimmel Hill, there was traffic almost under peacetime conditions. At 10.10 a.m. (9:10 a.m BST) English field artillery moved forward in a relaxed and easy-going way. English trenches had been almost unaffected, connecting trenches to the rear line of their forward positions were in an excellent condition. Narrow gauge rail lines terminated here, transporting ammunition and wounded on their lorries. There were almost no concrete shelters. Reserve troops in sunken roads around the Kimmel or in shelters protected with sandbags. Kimmel Hill trees bore no traces of shelling. Heavy and long-range artillery was placed in clefts or covered by big trees. Ammunition was lying in the open air covered only by straw. Only our own new 13,7 cm artillery seemed to be feared.

When taken prisoner, the majority of the officers and men were robbed of their valuables by English soldiers threatening them. The first assembly point for POWs was set in the blazing sun and was a large wire cage. All prisoners, including the wounded, had to bear this place for three hours. The next assembly place was Lokre (Sic). There we had to stay on a pasture with high grass for two nights and a day in pouring rain.

¹⁰⁰ *War Diary 47th Brigade*. IX Corps Intelligence Report No 430.8 June 1917.

¹⁰¹ Wolff, Ludwig. Pp.81-82.

There was no cover and no hot meals, only a small portion of hard tack and half a tin of beef. Even water was withdrawn at random for periods.

The camp commander's behaviour was unbelievable, especially towards officers. The journey to Le Havre by rail took twenty-four hours. Thirty men were crammed into dirty railway carriages (livestock wagons) and had to make do without warm food and sparse provisions. Almost no consideration was given for the supply of water and the opportunity to relieve ourselves of basic needs. The behaviour of the very young Lieutenant escorting the transport was also unbelievable. He even dared to beg for an Iron Cross Class One as a "souvenir". The behaviour of other officers had been immaculate. On board the ship from Le Havre to Southampton we were billeted on the deck on bare planks without blankets. The ship lay in the outer harbour for a day. No warm meals were handed out. From Southampton onward treatment was immaculate.

Another officer of the 104th Infantry Regiment, Offizierstellvertreter Schmidt, recorded the following very disturbing statement on his treatment.¹⁰²

I was brought back with twenty-four men. At the ammunition dumps we were ordered to carry ammunition towards the front. I refused. An English officer held his loaded pistol to my head and threatened to shoot me. I still refused. I was separated from the remainder and brought to a shelter where I was searched and interviewed by an officer who spoke German. I did not answer. From my leave passport he could see that I had been on home leave shortly before my capture. The same day I was sent to Lokre (Sic) where I was locked up on my own. Nobody was allowed to speak to me. From 7 to 15 June I had to lie in the open without hat or cover. Each day I got half a tin of bully beef and two biscuits. Often, English officers came by car and tried to question me about machine guns and our positions. They tried to force me to confess about alleged grievances back in Germany. They promised better food a quick transport to England in turn.

When they did not succeed, they threatened to punish me. I was not given a card to write home. On 16 June I was brought to Bailleul. On 17 June I was ferried to Cassel by car, handcuffed, along with two NCOs. Up to 26 June, I was locked up in a damp cellar, two days without food.

A senior officer made various promises and tried to force me to sign various statements. They wanted me to sign that we made use of human corpses for food and that there was hunger and starvation in Germany while at the front all we had got was horsemeat twice a week. "I'm not going to sign lies", I said. This went on for days.

On 26 June I was transported to a prison in St. Omer, remaining there until 2 July. I had to do the mopping and every morning I got a serving of rice, either uncooked or half cooked. On 3 July myself and some NCOs were allotted to 79 Labour Company. We got considerably less food than the Company, received one blanket only and had to sleep on the bare ground. I had not had any opportunity to wash myself and we had not been given towels, underwear, cutlery, bowls, or soap either. Only on 23 July were we allowed to send a postcard home but were not allowed to send an address. On 25 July we were brought to Le Havre and then to England.

Regardless of their treatment, these two German officers were the lucky ones. Their war was over. In a twisted irony, there was many a Tommy that would have liked to have been in Offizierstellvertreter Schmidt's boots.

¹⁰² Ibid.p.82.

Note.

The comparison of the contrasting conditions on both sides of the line made by the captured German officer of the 104th Regiment are backed-up by the description of the German and British lines after the battle made in a letter home to his wife on 8 June 1917 by Lieut.-Col Jeffreys of the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers.¹⁰³

The battlefield is a most extraordinary site and you cannot realise what it is like. The land here is absolutely torn to pieces and not a single German dugout left standing, all blown in. The difference to our side is so marked. All the grass with us is grown and green, not a blade of green of any sort on this side. We are in what was a large wood (Oosttaverne) but there are only the remains of a few stumps. This is a very wooded country, but all are the same.

The tone of the German after battle reports was one of defiance and bravery. The Commander of the German 4th Army, General Sixt von Armin knew he was beaten by a better army and acknowledged it. However, like most men in his position, he tried to paint a brighter picture than there actually was.¹⁰⁴

Supreme Command 4th Army
10 June 1917

Armeebefehl [Army Order of the Day.]

The bitter fighting of 7 June cost us our forward positions in Wytschaete-Bogen (Sic). This is regrettable, but we do know now that the enemy could only be successful due to the use of a force superior in numbers and through their massive employment of all kinds of warfare technology. The great sacrifice made by our troops in tough resistance and powerful counter-attack make this day yet another day of honour for us. My warmest thanks and recognition go to all who fought on 7 June. Leading such troops makes me expect future challenges in confidence.

The Commander-in-Chief
Sixt von Arnim
General of the Infantry

von Armin's suggestion of a 'powerful counter-attack' was wrong. The XIX Korps Commander of Gruppe-Wytschaete, General der Kavallerie von Laffert wrote in similar patriotic and defiant language.¹⁰⁵

The 2nd Infantry Division has left the Wytschaete Group today. After weeks of reliable work, it has done all that was humanely possible under days of a relentless artillery barrage and in defence of a superior attack. Devastating detonations destroyed most of the crews in the trenches. The Division sacrificed all remaining resources for the Fatherland, fighting heroically against an overwhelming enemy in a landscape of craters bereft of its defenders. I thank the Division for its loyalty and express my fullest recognition and admiration for its achievements.

Major General Commanding
von Laffert.

¹⁰³ Jeffreys, Lieut.-Col. R.G.B, *2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers* (Dublin: RDFA Archive).

¹⁰⁴ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst. Pp.242-247.

¹⁰⁵ Passingham, Ian.p.147.

On 16 June 1917, a little over a week after the attack on the Wijtschate- Messines Ridge, von Laffert too was removed from his command and replaced by General Diefenbach.

The 2nd Infantry Division report referred to the effect of the preliminary shelling on the men's morale, the incendiary blast designed by the Royal Engineers fire on the Bois de Wijtschate and the superiority of the Black Englishmen who that attacked them on 7 June. ¹⁰⁶

The impact on the infantry's morale was extraordinarily big. Giant detonations at four points in the divisional sector led into the strongest barrage and the gassing of the entire rear. Incendiary mines hitherto unknown were fired. All forward positions were covered by dust and smoke. At the major points of impact tanks and black Englishmen appeared. Still the line was held by infantry and machine gunners in exchanges of fire as well as in hand-to-hand fighting. It was only lost when the enemy got a grip on it from the flanks, especially from our left and the back. Wytschaete (Sic) and the ridge to the north were only taken by 9.30 a.m., the Rondellwald by 2:00 a.m. In the end, both were taken from the rear.

The after battle report written by the commanding officer of the 4th Grenadiers was another glorious in defeat statement. His regiment had suffered the highest number casualties of any of the German regiments that faced the 16th and 36th Divisions on 7 June 1917. ¹⁰⁷

Although the 4th Grenadiers cannot reflect on a victorious encounter, nor on a success achieved in a spirited attack, the few officers and men returning from the bloodiest of fights were secure in the knowledge that they had stood by their duty and did all that was humanely possible. The Regiment commemorates with pride those heroic comrades who sealed their bravery and panache with the ultimate sacrifice. It remembers those men who defended their position to the very last, despite the enemy's overpowering superiority and despite the cruel means at his disposal. The unassuming heroism of the individual will come to light only gradually. But I am absolutely convinced that every man knew what he owed his proud Regiment. Honour to the memory of the heroes who went home for Kaiser and Empire!

The final few words on what happened to the 4th Grenadiers written by Major-General (Retd) Traugott Hoffmann and Lieut.-Colonel (Retd) Ernst Hahn in their history of the regiment written in 1930, although acknowledging the superior British forces, ended with an interesting sentence. A sentence that had implications ten years after it was written. ¹⁰⁸

The Englishman's success was only due to his superiority in material of all kinds such as artillery, aeroplanes, mine-throwers, and tanks, and also because of the intrinsically disadvantaged tactical position of our exposed lines, which were hit by enemy firing from all sides. The German infantry always felt that they themselves were far superior to the English infantry in fighting skills. They considered the English poorer in performance than the Russians.

¹⁰⁶ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst.Pp.242-247.

¹⁰⁷ Dieterich, Lieut.- Gen. (ret'd) Alfred .Pp.753-757

¹⁰⁸ Hoffmann, Traugott ; Hahn, Ernst.Pp.242-247.

In conclusion

It would seem the Germans at Wijtschate were unlucky because the change-over of the divisions occurred on the night of the British attack on Wijtschate. The men were in the line since mid-April and were exhausted and ready to be taken out when the attack came. Conversely, one could argue the British were lucky. In his assessment as to where it went wrong for the Germans, Cyril Falls noted in his history of the 36th (Ulster) Division.¹⁰⁹

The higher Command was well aware that the troops in the trenches were in no fit state to meet it, after days of terrific pounding, heavy losses, and shortage of food. It was in the act of relieving them when the attack was launched. The relief of one Division was incomplete when the mines went up and the British bayonets came in the dark upon the columns in the communication trenches. The confusion must have been indescribable.

In his book *In Flanders Fields* first published in 1959, by way of explaining as to why the Germans lost the battle of Wijtschate on 7 June 1917, Leon Wolff wrote the following.¹¹⁰

On 29 April 1917, a spy advised the German High Command that the British would attack the Wijtschate – Messines Ridge two weeks after the stopping of their effort on the Arras front – an estimate which was very nearly correct. About the same time, Germans aerial observation disclosed that British movement on the roads and railways behind the salient was reaching alarm proportions. Hence the regular bombardment of the back areas around Kemmel and Dranouter. After weighing these and other Intelligence reports, Crown Prince Rupprecht decided that the Arras attack was merely a large scale feint and that the Wijtschate – Messines Ridge was Haig's true objective. From that moment on, and for the next five weeks, the Germans would reinforce their positions and increase their shelling substantially opposite Plumer's army.

But five German weeks were not equal to five British months. In those five weeks, the German air arm covering the Salient was driven out of the sky, and the formers batteries were nearly crushed by counter bombardment. A few figures tell the story. And in reading them one senses the intensity of this greatest of all counter-battery operations and the despair of their defenders who helplessly watched the shattering of their artillery shield. By early June almost half the German howitzers, light and heavy, were out of action. Hardly one captured Russian gun remained operable. The 2nd (East Prussian) Division that faced the IX Corps lost fifteen out of their eighteen medium and heavy howitzers. Under such conditions, German infantry had only trivial support during the British attack. British gas shelling on an unprecedented scale had indeed accomplished its purpose of keeping the enemy awake for days and the disruption of food supply had further demoralised the Germans on the ridge. So shaken by the British shelling to which they could little respond, that five divisional replacements had to be consumed during the first week of June, one of these replacements as we shall see later actually occurred on the morning of 7 June facing the Irish attack. Too late it dawned on Crown Prince Rupprecht that he was in trouble and during the last few days the Germans worked feverishly to save the situation. More small bodies of infantry were hustled into action. Artillery was added, especially on the flanks of the threatened sector, more planes, pioneers and machine-guns were thrown into pre-attack fighting. On 3 June, 13,000 gas shells poured in the Australians around Ploegsteert Wood and on 6 June believing the attack was on the next day or day after, Rupprecht ordered an even heavier gas barrage in an attempt to smother the British artillery and catch troops in the open on their way up to the jump off lines.

¹⁰⁹ Falls, Cyril, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (Belfast: M'Caw, Stevenson & Orr, 1922), p.103.

¹¹⁰ Wolff, L, *In Flanders Fields* (London: Longmans, 1959). Pp.97-99.

In doing so they caught 500 men from General Monash 3rd Australian Division. However, Rupprecht's last minute efforts were too little too late. He had been outwitted underground, out manned and out gunned above the ground and overpowered in the skies. In effect, the battle of the Wijtschate-Messines Ridge had been lost by the Germans before it had even begun.

Unlike the British memorial to the missing at Thiépval and the Menin Gate, the Germans who died at Wijtschate have no memorial to their missing. Many of those whose bodies were found were buried in small cemeteries around Wijtschate and Oosttaverne. Sometime in the 1930s and 1950s, the remains of the German soldiers buried in these small cemeteries around Wijtschate were removed and brought to the Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof at Langemarck. They lie there to this day and may they rest in peace.

Tom Burke
14 July 2017.

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