

Extract from 'The Weary Road'
'Recollections of a Subaltern of Infantry'
by Lieutenant Charles Douie

'Dramatic value can hardly be found in the annihilation of the flower of an English county by a death which came whining and screaming through the trees, dealt by an enemy whom no one could see.'



Lieutenant Charles Douie served with the 1st Battalion The Dorsetshire Regiment on the Somme in 1916 as a platoon commander. In his book, *The Weary Road*, was first published in 1929. In it he gives a powerful description of the events leading up to the battle in but the whole work is more as a set of recollections than a diary. He does not cover the attack on 1st July in detail but he does allude to it.

The extract starts with Douie walking forward, receiving the route that the battalion was to take on the morning of the attack. The battalion were in reserve in the area of Blackhorse dugouts on the bank of the River Ancre below the ruins of Authuille.

From Blackhorse Bridge, the way to the south lay along the bank of the river towards Aveluy. Passing this way I found a battery in action in a green meadow leading down to the Ancre. I felt a certain envy of the gunners; they looked so clean and free from care, and they lived in quarters so much better than those of the infantry. Across the river was a small chateau reputed to have been a shooting-box in happier days. Shooting on the Ancre had of late assumed a different character, and the duck enjoyed a happy immunity, broken only by the occasional depredations of the more leisured gunners. Crucifix Corner lay ahead girdled by tall trees, but I turned aside to enter Authuille Wood. Not yet had the gunfire seriously thinned the trees nor deprived them of their foliage, and the wood was cool and green, in welcome contrast to the sweltering fields and roads, deep in chalk dust, which represented the usual scenery of this countryside. Cool and green on that day were no doubt also those other woods of Mametz, Trones and Delville, and High Wood, where within a month the horror of modern warfare was to reach its dreadful climax. The wood of Authuille held its presage of things to be, for it was thronged with fatigue parties busily engaged on completing bridges, gun positions, and ammunition dumps. On the eastern edge, I came to our front line. Concealed emplacements held guns, which were destined to fire over open sights at Leipzig Redoubt when the time came. For the present, they were silent. I came to a bridge over a defile, which our plan of attack required us to cross, and examined it with interest. Its span was less than ten yards. A few days later the bridge, marked with unerring accuracy by the German machine gunners, was heaped with our dead and wounded so as to be almost impassable; and a platoon forty-eight strong on one side emerged with a strength of twelve. But on this summer afternoon I could cross it without apprehension, and from a convenient machine-gun emplacement could survey the Leipzig Redoubt and the long valley up which our advance was planned to sweep. At its far end I saw Mouquet Farm, our objective, the roof sparkling in the sunlight, to all appearance unfortified and at peace. Not for one moment did the thought cross my mind that this wood and the open stretch of "No Man's Land" before me would be carpeted with our dead and wounded, and the trench line less than a quarter of a mile away be the farthest limit of our advance.

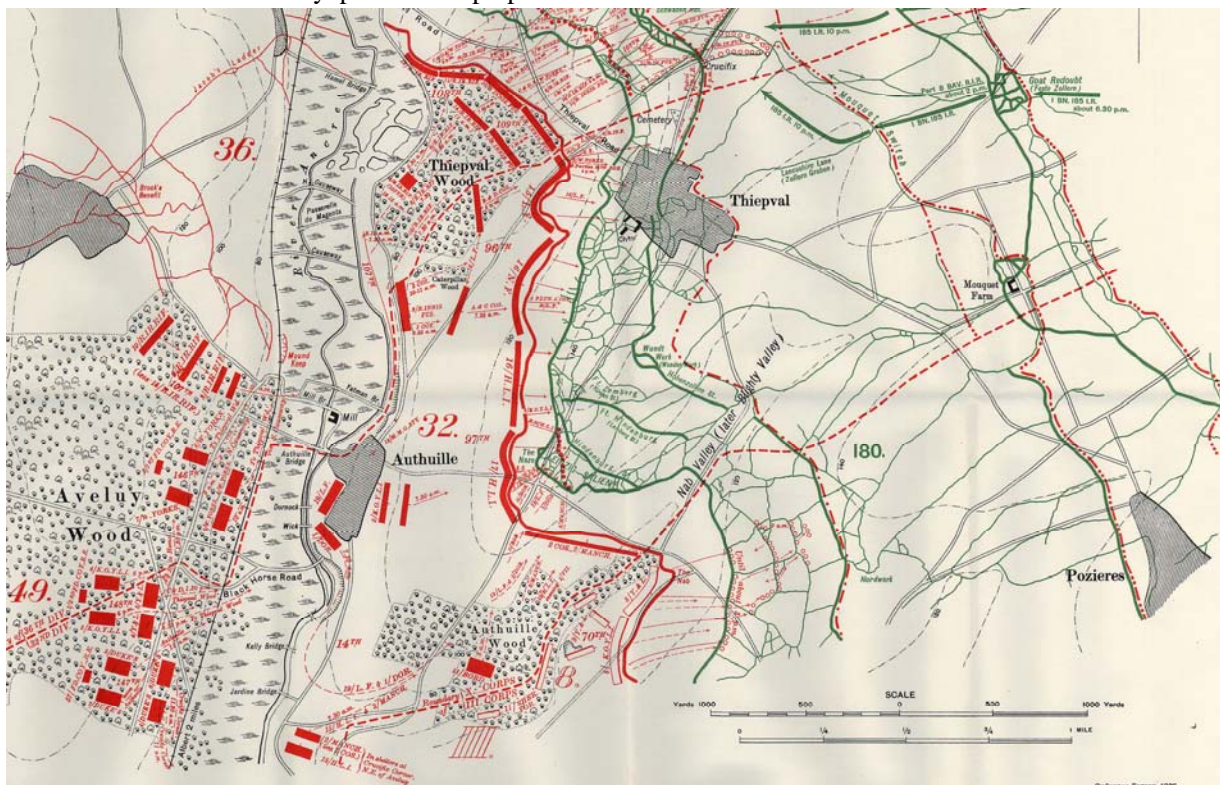
My reconnaissance completed, I moved away from the emplacements and into the wood; a moment later the rush and roar of shells resounded through the trees. The German gunners were alert, but the trees gave concealment, and I was able to stroll quietly down an old drive and to enjoy the lights and shadows of this sunlit wood. I crossed again the shell-scarred meadow bordering the Ancre and turned aside to the gunners whose lot I had envied

as I went up the line. T had no occasion to envy it now. The gun emplacement was a shambles; the gun would never fire again.

It was the late afternoon. The officers of the regiment were assembled in a dug-out looking out over the Ancre at Blackhorse Bridge. Plans for the attack were gone over in detail by the adjutant; duties were allotted. Everything was businesslike and matter-of fact. I have known orders for a field day in England to be given in a more portentous manner. The proceedings were marked by no high seriousness, and occasionally degenerated into hilarity when a duty of unusual difficulty or danger was allotted. This reached its climax when a young officer received instructions that his duty was to convey a Bangalore torpedo up to and beyond Mouquet Farm, to place it under the wire of the German third line, and, having exploded it, to consolidate beyond this somewhat advanced position. Even our high hopes on the eve of battle did not enable us to visualise quite so remarkable a feat of arms, and no one was more amused than the young officer who had been honoured by this duty. Four subalterns were allotted a duty to them more distasteful, to remain in regimental reserve. One of them, confused and distressed beyond measure by this unexpected blow, raised his voice in protest. The adjutant, ignoring a breach of discipline caused by such great provocation, hurriedly passed on to the next order. The subaltern sat unheeding and inconsolable, with bowed head.

In the best account so far written of the blocking of Zeebrugge the author of *By Sea and Land* describes how he came to take part in an engagement described as "something very pink," and how, as he left the Admiralty and walked round St. James's Park, his heart was in his boots. He then left for Chatham, inspected *Vindictive*, and found in the company assembled there in an atmosphere inimical to anxiety." That happy phrase most adequately expresses the morale of the Dorset Regiment, and indeed of the British Army, in June of 1916; and while it is well that we should remember the material horror and carnage of the Somme, it is not well that we should forget that many men there found their manhood, there first knew the triumph of the spirit over fear and fatigue, there enjoyed a comradeship which was in itself a sufficient recompense for all things forfeited.

The dugouts sheltering under the high bank of the Ancre at Blackhorse Bridge were the headquarters of the battalion acting as brigade reserve in the sector from Thiepval to Authuille Wood. I have therefore many memories of days and nights spent under this high bank, looking out over the broad marshes of the Ancre and the great trees of the wood beyond. Here we constantly paraded in preparation for the relief of trenches and for the incessant



fatigues, which, as the day of battle drew nearer, became onerous in the extreme. Under the bank, the regiment paraded on the fateful morning of July I, when the thunder of our barrage was such that orders could not be heard. On that occasion the regiment moved to the south to Authuille Wood, but generally, our route was to the north through the village of Authuille and up the communication trenches leading to Thiepval.

I remember many summer evenings when, after watching the sun set over the marshes, tingeing them with fire and shedding on all Nature the gift of rest and peace, I turned to the north up the path to Thiepval, where through the night the star-shells rose and fell and the sound of gun and rifle fire echoing without end through the trees spoke of the unresting vigilance of warring men. ...

But there was little that was dramatic in the assault of the divisions astride the Ancre. The fortress villages of Serre, Beaumont-Hamel, Thiepval, and Ovillers were impregnable to frontal attack; their machine guns mowed down the attacking infantry as with a scythe. The Dorset Regiment, moving forward from the banks of the Ancre in support of the Highlanders assaulting Leipzig Redoubt, came under the fire of massed machine guns before ever they reached our own front line at the edge of Authuille Wood. A small part of the German front line was captured and held by the few survivors of two Highland regiments, the Border Regiment, and the Dorsets, but this represented the furthest limit of the advance. The splendid exhilaration which accompanies the forward sweep of successful advance over open country after months of trench warfare underground was not the lot of the attacking divisions on the first day of the Somme. The lot of many, if not most, regiments was similar to that of the Dorset Regiment, massacred by the fire of machine guns in Authuille Wood before ever the advance was begun.