



SOMME COMMEMORATION MEETING (29 June 2016)

Matthew 24:44: “Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.”

It was now the early hours of Saturday morning – 1st July 1916. The day for the big offensive on the German lines had finally come.

It seemed like a most appropriate day for Ulstermen to engage their enemy, for it was on the same day that their forebears had defeated the Jacobites on the Boyne in 1690.

At 1.10am, down in the Brigade HQ in ‘Paisley Avenue’, Thiepval Wood, ‘zero hour’ was finalised. Watches were synchronised and tear-gas shells and goggles were used. This news about ‘Zero hour’ was passed on to all the officers in the assembly trenches.

By 4.00am, dawn started to break through. Birds could be heard singing and the company cooks started to get ready. The Ulster men were to be well prepared for the day ahead – strong sweet tea, rashers, fried bread and jam. Cold tea and lemon was put in their water bottles.

Some men tried to calm their fears by going through the motions of everyday rituals Apparently, "There was a fellow Hobbs from Lurgan, and would you believe it, he was shaving. When he was finished, he took out a clean pair of socks and put them on, just as if he was back in barracks."

German shells were falling on the Ulster lines in concentrated bursts at 6.00am and the Armagh Volunteers suffered 50 casualties from shell-fire even before zero hour.

25 minutes later, the final British barrage opened up, soon to be joined by the trench mortars in short bursts of intense fire. This was the 'hurricane' bombardment. Instead of lasting - as it had every other morning - to 7.45, it would lift at 7.30 this morning. That was 'Zero hour.' The hope was that the Germans would be caught all the more unawares when the Infantry poured across at them.

As the bombardment proceeds, the mist of the early morning begins to clear. It was warm and the sun shone down on the fury of the bombardment. Some men in the Ulster trenches knelt and prayed; hymns were sung and communion was taken. Some made out their wills in paybooks. Others stared at photographs of family, or thought of what might be happening at home just at this hour of the morning. (Maybe one - or more - of them belonged to your family?).

Some men had acquired Orange Lilies, the symbolic flower of the Battle of the Boyne celebration and placed them in their tunics. A few men had managed to stow away their Orange Sashes and now placed them around their shoulders. Orange Lodge meetings were held in the last minutes.

By now lane ways had been cut through the 36ths own barbed wire by special groups of wire cutters. Gaps had also been cut in the parapet within the last hour, to give platoons easy access to no-mans-land.

Major-General Oliver Nugent devised a plan that was different to most other Divisional Commanders. He sent his men in the Ulster Division 'over the top' and out into no-mans-land twenty minutes before Zero Hour. There they would lie down in long lines and wait, protected by the curtain of shell-fire on the German lines, and therefore be much closer to their objective when the whistle blew. The second wave would follow five minutes later, the third at 7.20 and the final wave at 7.30am. Hidden by smoke and by the earth thrown up in the explosions and especially by smoke shells and tear-gas shells fired into the Ancre Valley, they nervously anticipated the crucial moment.

In those last tense moments the bombardment seemed to reach its horrific crescendo. All along the Somme front a whole generation of young men awaited battle, tensing themselves for the silence that would herald the start, at long last, of the big push.

At 7.30am, the gunfire from the British artillery stopped. There was a few moments of stillness before the officers whistles were blown and the men rose to their feet to commence the walk to the German parapet. This was the last few seconds in which communities, villages and families would remain intact. The Ulster Volunteers waved farewell to the world, strode towards the 'Devils Dwelling place' and into the sights of the enemy

In the German trenches, the stress caused by the seven-day artillery barrage made those Germans hope the British would attack with ground infantry.

One German letter, written at this time by Unteroffizier Hinkel of the 7th Company 99 RIR, summed up the men's feelings:

"Seven long days of artillery fire without a break, that in itself still more heightened the effect of the barrage's violence. In addition, on the 27th and 28th June, gas on our trench. The torment and fatigue are unspeakable, only competing with the strain on the nerves. Merely a prayer in our hearts, 'Lord, release the pressure in us, give us escape through battle, give us victory; Lord God! Allow the Englishman finally to come.' And the desire grew with each successive fall of shell."

That prayer was answered

As the leading soldiers of the 36th Ulster advanced towards the first German line, their walk turning to a charge as they neared the objective. There were cries of, "NO SURRENDER BOYS."

However, the truth is:

[1] THEIR TASK WAS PRACTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE.

Impregnable Position

The German position had been carefully chosen, a naturally strong position, but it was made almost impregnable in April 1916. Major von Fabeck - a meticulous soldier - arrived in that month to take charge of the defences around Thiepval. On the day he arrived, Von Fabeck inspected the entirety of his new regimental sector and immediately ordered that **the defences should be improved**. He demanded that each dugout should be deepened to 7 metres, with three exits. Of course German engineers could dig as deep

as they liked in the Picardy chalk – and they sculpted systems of earthworks that would rival small towns. These dugouts were to be clustered into groups of three, connected by tunnels. Complexes capable of housing large numbers of men were to be built, each sunk 8-10 metres deep and with multiple exits.

Thiepval ridge became like an anthill, with the Schwaben Redoubt ‘the nest of the queen.’ This colossal structure was formidable above ground – and equally impressive below ground. Both sides regarded it as an imposing location, with a fantastic complex of trenches, command posts, machine gun nests, telephone exchanges, and underground shell proof shelters. It housed a hospital, a telephone exchange and more than 1000 men at a depth of 30 feet. This was the tactical key to the battle on Thiepval Ridge. If the Schwaben could be taken, then Thiepval Village would be exposed to an attack on equal terms from the north and this fortress village would then become vulnerable.

The relentless British bombardment for 7 days before the attack did little more in the Schwaben than force a flicker from the newly installed electric lights.

However, the bombardment had not been as effective as promised and now the heavily burdened Infantrymen faced fierce and accurate gunfire. As the men of the Ulster Division reached the German trenches and the first men jumped into them, through some shattered wire, the German machine-guns began to open up from Thiepval and from across the river to the north. The enemy were out of their dugouts and shelters and manning their guns – not just on the Schwaben Redoubt but on the high ground on either side of the Ulster sector.

Machine Guns

The German regiment faced by the Ulstermen was the 99th Reserve Infantry Regiment. It had two machine gun companies and those guns covered the entirety of their regiment’s front at Thiepval. 25 guns were available on 1st July 1916, including one captured Russian weapon and one British.

Von Fabeck’s thoroughness extended to the defences and communication systems above ground. The two machine gun company commanders were told to find premier positions for each of their guns, giving the best fields of fire. They were also instructed to identify alternative sites for each weapon in case their forward positions were located by the British artillery and rendered unusable. The forward trenches in the front of the chateau at Thiepval Village were organised to provide interlocking fields of fire ... in effect, this meant that the battlefield around Thiepval was practically impassable.

When the men from the 107th battalion came out of Thiepval Wood in the second wave of attack that morning, they were simply mown down like the grass.

Barbed Wire

It may be thought that barbed wire should be one of the least of their worries (in fact, the soldiers were assured that the 7-day bombardment would have cut the wire to shreds), but the German barbed wire was a most lethal weapon – and it remained so.

A sufficient amount of wire had been cut to allow many of the Ulstermen through, but right along the 30km frontline of the Somme that day, the British soldiers discovered to their horror that the artillery shells had caused the wire to bounce but not break.

Barbed wire obstacles had been enlarged from one belt stretching back 5–10 yards (4.6–9.1 m) wide to two, 30 yards (27 m) wide and about 15 yards (14 m) apart. Double and triple thickness wire was used and laid 3–5 feet (0.91–1.52 m) high.

No wonder the comment was made that when men looked forward, they saw ‘a black wall’ in front of them!

It was quite something that many of the Ulstermen did breach the German defences and swarmed over the Schwaben! Largely due to their super tactics in leaving early, the first wave was close to the German front line by the time the whistles and bugles sounded. Some older hands had ditched their packs. With shells still falling, the four lead battalions won the race to the parapet of the German front lines around Lurgan, Lisburn and Cavan. The Germans were slow to climb the many steps of their shelters. As they emerged, the Riflemen ‘potted them like ferreted rabbits.’ More than 500 prisoners were taken.

At 7.47am, a message from the 9th Inniskillings was received by telephone at their battalion HQ: “*All is well,*” the voice said.

The 11th Royal Irish Rifles, with men from the 9th and 10th ‘Skins,’ pressed up onto the Schwaben from three sides. In what was described as, “a Belfast riot on top of Mount Vesuvius,” the Ulstermen fought a vicious ‘streetfight’ with grenades, trench knives and rifle butts. For almost every one of them, it was their first experience of bayoneting - and experience described by one as like thrusting “a knifepoint into chilled butter.” One Inniskilling had improvised his own weapon from a pick shaft and a pear-shaped lump of cast iron. “*No matter where it hit a man it broke bones,*” a fellow ‘Skin’ later

wrote. *“He must have killed a dozen Germans. The blood had got about the tongue of our boots and our socks were soaked with it.”* German and British wounded lay together in the maze of trenches.

“I found a German, badly wounded,” recorded a Lance Corporal J. A. Henderson of the Belfast Young Citizens. *“I could see from his face that he was mad with thirst. I gave him my water, although it was against orders. Then I found one of our men; he was terribly wounded, shot in the head and his leg nearly off. He begged me to kill him, but I couldn’t do it.”*

And that comment opens the door to another point:

[2] THEIR SACRIFICE WAS ABSOLUTELY INCREDIBLE.

Sacrifice started early that morning on the 1st of July.

At 6.45am, men of the 14th Royal Irish Rifles witnessed an astonishing sacrifice. A party of bombers in Thiepval Wood was making final preparations in a densely packed trench when a box of grenades was knocked to the ground by a shell blast, dislodging the pins from two of them. Without hesitation, a 20-year-old line apprentice from East Belfast, William McFadzean, dived onto the grenades before they exploded.

Despite the air being filled with shrapnel, men removed their helmets as William McFadzean’s remains were taken out on a stretcher. McFadzean was one of 4 Ulstermen that day to earn a Victoria Cross.

Behind the leading Ulster battalions, the follow-up (second wave) 107th Brigade now left Thiepval Wood.

- To the right, the attack of the 32nd Division in front of Thiepval Village has collapsed. Five German machine guns in the Village had ensured this. It was said that the only way anyone could have got across into Thiepval Village was if they were “bulletproof.”

- But ... on the other side of the Ancre River, the men from Antrim, Armagh, Cavan and Monaghan were cut down. Even though a smokescreen covered their advance, the German artillery batteries and machine-gunners had their target lines pre-set to a yard and they fired into the smoke. Their attack was shattered.

So ... all the machine guns in the area were now trained on the 107th Brigade.

Division HQ had issued orders that no battalion staff should join their men, but with his soldiers beginning to fall in large numbers, Lieutenant-Colonel

F.P. Crozier and Lieutenant-Colonel H.C. Bernard, the COs of the 9th and 10th RIRs, now disobeyed.

- A trench mortar barrage from Thiepval Village killed Bernard as he left the wood.

- Rallying the remainder of the men, Crozier flung himself across the sunken road, followed by his breathless batman.

However ...

- By 8.15 am, the war diarist of the YCVs reordered, *“Corpses were piling high on the Sunken Road.”* It was a matter of what one survivor was to call *“Playing leapfrog with death.”*

- By 6.00pm fewer than 300 men remained inside the Schwaben Redoubt. Major Peacock of the 9th Inniskillings sent a message to the rear: *“Please do all that you can to send up Vickers machine gun belts, bombs and SAA (small arms ammunition). I think we shall hold on only men are rather done up.”*

An hour later, a further message was received from Lieutenant McClure of the 10th Skins just south of the Crucifix. The gist was the same. Only 120 men remained. Short of water and ammunition, they were described as *“rather done up”* too.

At 10.00pm, Peacock ordered all remaining men to withdraw to the German front line. The wounded were left to cope as best they could. *“We collected all the ammunition we could from our own dead, a terrible task, but it was necessary,”* one Ulsterman recalled, *“for we knew we would need every bullet we could get. In the big trench we set up sentries and some of us tried to get some rest. It was hard for we kept seeing the bits and pieces of the dead bodies and the terrible bleeding of the wounded, and the smell of the sweat and the hunger kept us from sleeping.”*

By midnight, every able-bodied Ulsterman was back where he started.

Nearly 10,000 volunteer soldiers of the 36th Division had gone into battle during 16 hours of fighting. Men in their ranks had advanced further into enemy territory than any other unit on the whole 15-mile front that day. Yet by the end of it they had given up their gains, and 5,500 of them had become casualties.

Their tremendous bravery and awesome sacrifice deserves to be remembered.

[1] THEIR TASK WAS PRACTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE;

[2] THEIR SACRIFICE WAS ABSOLUTELY INCREDIBLE;

[3] THEIR MEMORY IS FOREVER INDELIBLE.

Major-General Nugent wrote to his wife the next day: *“The Ulster Division has been too superb for words. The whole army is talking of the incomparable gallantry shown by officers and men. They went forward with every line dressed as if for the King’s inspection, torn from end to end by shell and machine gun fire. The Ulster Division no longer exists as a fighting force. It has proved itself and it has indeed borne itself like men. I cannot describe to you how I feel about them. I did not believe men were made who could do such gallant work under the conditions of modern war.”*

Other accolades poured in.

The chief came from the King Emperor in whose name they had fought: *“In these days of rejoicing,”* he said after the Armistice, *“I recall the deeds of the 36th Division Throughout the long years of struggle which have now so gloriously ended, the men of Ulster have proved how nobly they fight and die.”*

And this is why, 100 years later, we still celebrate and cherish their memory.

Of course their courage – and sacrifice – brings into my vision another field of conflict, another gruesome struggle, another sacrificial victim ... Christ Jesus my Lord on Calvary.

The hymnwriter C. Austin Miles phrases it wonderfully:

*They nailed my Lord upon the tree
And left Him, dying, there:
Thro’ love He suffered there for me;
‘Twas love beyond compare.*

*Upon His head a crown of thorns,
Upon His heart my shame;
For me He prayed, for me He died,
And dying, spoke my name.*

*"Forgive them, O forgive!" He cried,
Then bowed His sacred head;
O Lamb of God! my sacrifice!
For me Thy blood was shed.*

Crucified! crucified!

*And nailed upon the tree!
With pierced hands and feet and side!
For you! For me!*

Jesus left the splendour of heaven and descended onto the battlefield of earth to die for sinners; His open, avowed enemies.

Romans 5:6-8: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

He was **assaulted from every side:** men, devils – and, because He was our Substitute, having volunteered to pay the full, hellish price of our sin – God the Father directed all the wrath of heaven against Him. And on that cross, dragging from what seemed like defeat to human eyes, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for my salvation.

Soldiers at the Somme found salvation in Christ.

A soldier who had entertained the ‘modern thought’ theories wrote home from the Front and said: *“You are right, father. I know you are praying for me. Whatever a man might be, when face to face with death his thoughts run to the higher sphere. There were times, I know, when I caused you sorrow, but this I know (this cruel war has thought it to me), your teaching is true, and is the only comfort I have in this time of danger. There is no comfort in the other ideas of the teachings of Christ. Only in the true teaching is there any strength or security for the life beyond.”*

*His voice I hear, His love I know;
I worship at His feet;
And kneeling there, at Calv’ry’s cross,
Redemption is complete.*

Have you yielded to Him? Signed up to His army? Started to march with Him to heaven? If not, do so today.

He promises – **John 6:37:** “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”

And He does not lose a single soldier. Each one will be gathered home.