



SECOND SUPPLEMENT

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WEDNESDAY, 14 NOVEMBER, 1917.

War Office,  
14th November, 1917.

The Secretary of State for War has received the following despatch from Lieutenant-General G. F. Milne, C.B., D.S.O., Commanding-in-Chief, British Salonika Force:—

General Headquarters,  
British Salonika Force.  
1st October, 1917.

My Lord,

I have the honour to submit the following report on the operations of the British Forces in Macedonia from 9th October, 1916, to the present date.

Since the 29th November, 1916, when, in accordance with General Sarraill's request, I took over the sector then held by the Italian troops, the army under my command has occupied the front covering Salonika from the east and north, and extending from the mouth of the River Struma along the Tahinos-Butkova-Doiran lakes to the River Vardar, a distance of approximately ninety miles. In addition, from the commencement of December until the end of February one infantry brigade was detached to the neighbourhood of Katerini on the western shores of the Gulf of Salonika.

The necessity of holding this long line placed a considerable strain on the endurance of the troops, especially during the winter months, when, owing to the unprecedented rainfall, the mountain roads became almost impassable and rendered the question of supply one of considerable difficulty, a difficulty overcome only by the energy and determination of all concerned. In spite of the fact that the whole of this force has been in the line without relief for over a year, with only occasional limited opportunities for training and without the encouraging effects of offensive action, a very high standard of morale and efficiency has been maintained.

At the commencement of the period under review, the rôle allotted to the British troops had for its object the engaging of the enemy along the front during the operations which culminated in the capture of Monastir on the 19th November. From that date onwards the advent of the winter season, accompanied as it was by heavy falls of snow and rain, made operations, except on a small scale, a matter of considerable difficulty owing to the paucity of metalled roads and the heavy nature of the soil in the valleys.

In the Struma River valley, since the conclusion of the operations reported in my last despatch, the front line had been gradually

pushed forward across the river so as to include the localities of Ago Mah, Homondos, Kalendra Woods, Cuculuk, and Elisian on the left bank. The mounted troops, supported by armoured cars and contact aeroplanes, pushed their reconnaissances between Seres and Lake Tahinos, and in places even succeeded in crossing the Demirhissar-Seres-Drama railway.

Meanwhile the enemy had been actively employed behind their advanced positions in preparing a defensive line along the foothills on the opposite side of the valley and had occupied the large village of Barakli Dzuma and a line of trenches across the low ground from Savjak to Butkova Lake.

In order to carry out my instructions and at the same time to strengthen the left flank of the troops in the valley, I decided towards the end of October to capture Barakli Dzuma and to advance the whole line. As a preliminary measure the villages of Elisian-Kavdarmah-Ormanli-Haznatar were occupied in order to form a strong bridgehead within which bridges were thrown over the river, then considerably swollen by heavy rain. In carrying out this duty under difficult circumstances the Royal Engineers gained great credit for their skill and rapidity in construction.

The attack itself, admirably conceived and skilfully executed by the troops, was carried out after a short bombardment on the morning of the 31st October, and was a complete success. In conjunction with other operations in the valley, some 350 prisoners were taken.

Under cover of patrol encounters a defensive line was constructed from Jenimah via Osman Kamila-Homondos-Jenikoj-Nevojlen-Cuculuk-Elisian-Barakli Dzuma-Haznatar to Alipsa on the Struma and remained as such during the winter months.

At the commencement of December the Greek regiment which had co-operated in the valley during October and November was withdrawn and transferred to another section of the Allied line. I much regret the severance of the cordial relations which had been established with these gallant troops.

On the Doiran-Vardar front the command was faced with an entirely different situation, and minor operations undertaken with a view to continually harassing an enemy, strongly entrenched in mountainous and rocky country, and to inflicting as much loss as possible, both in material and in personnel, had of necessity to be restricted to continual patrol encounters, raids and artillery bombardments. The most successful of these raids were carried out by battalions of the Welsh and Cheshire Regiments on separate occasions towards the end of October, when, after a heavy bombardment, the enemy's trenches were attacked with great determination and gallantry and severe casualties inflicted.

During the month of November and the early part of December these harassing tactics were continued along both fronts, resulting, in the Struma valley, in the occupation of the villages of Kumli, Barakli and Prosenik, where the Royal Dublin Fusiliers captured practically the whole garrison, and an advance against the enemy's positions in the vicinity of Tumbitza Farm. Owing to the decision to withdraw to another area the Greek troops co-operating with us, I decided to discontinue the last-mentioned operation.

The winter season had now fully set in, and the frequent rains had rendered the Struma

valley wet and heavy. Problems of transport and communications became more difficult, and the main Seres road was kept open only with the greatest difficulty. In the valley itself horse transport had to be abandoned north of Orjak, and recourse had to light railways, while the sudden rises of the river rendered communication precarious, and necessitated considerable work in the construction of heavy bridges.

On the left bank of the Vardar considerable damage was inflicted on the enemy by a successful attack on the night 26th/27th November against a portion of the ridge called "Crete des Tentés," lying to the north-east of Macukovo. In spite of climatic difficulties, similar operations with varying success were conducted during the ensuing months, resulting in continual loss to the enemy in killed and prisoners.

During the early months of this year raiding tactics were further developed, and were carried out with an increasing degree of success. Battalions of the Suffolk Regiment, the Northumberland Fusiliers, the Welsh Fusiliers, and the Devonshire Regiment showed conspicuous skill and gallantry, the last-mentioned during a very successful raid on the Petit Couronne hill, south of Doiran, inflicting severe loss on the enemy, who counter-attacked in force. By this means the co-operation of the artillery and engineers with the infantry was constantly practised and a high standard of offensive spirit maintained in the Army.

Towards the end of February I received instructions from the allied Commander-in-Chief to be prepared to commence offensive operations during the first week of April. The rôle allotted to the force under my command was to engage the enemy on the Struma front and to the east of Lake Doiran while making an attack in force west of that lake. The time at my disposal was short, more especially as the unusual inclemency of the weather had reduced the Seres road to such a state of mud as to render motor transport practically impossible beyond Likovan, and thus tended to delay the early commencement of operations in the Struma valley; but the sudden and unexpected change from intense wet and cold to unusual heat, which took place towards the end of March, considerably facilitated preparations. By the 10th of March the Corps on the left had pushed forward for a distance of 1,000 yards on a front of 3,500 yards, extending in a south-westerly direction from Horseshoe Hill, on the ridge which forms the watershed between the Doiran Lake and the Vardar Valley. This ridge, commonly called the "P" ridge, running north into the left centre of the enemy's position, rises to a height of about 500 feet above Horseshoe Hill, and dominates the whole country between Doiran Lake and the Vardar. On both flanks in front of Doiran, and opposite Macukovo, the Bulgarian trenches are pushed forward, forming strong bastions, with flanks resting on Doiran Lake and the Vardar River respectively. These fortifications, which were laid out when the Bulgarian army first arrived on the Greek frontier, are skilfully planned and well executed, the trenches themselves being cut out of solid rock.

Situated some 800 yards in front of the Horseshoe Hill, which formed the apex of the salient between these two bastions, and about 11,000 yards north-east of Krastali village, a hostile advanced work called "P. 4½" formed a valuable observation station to the enemy, and its capture was essential to any further ad-

vance. The front, therefore, selected for the initial attack, with a view to threatening the approaches to Doiran town, extended from the western shore of Doiran Lake, along the enemy's salient in front of the town, to the crest of the "P" ridge.

Preparations for the offensive were completed by 8th April, but for various reasons the Commander-in-Chief found it necessary to postpone operations until 24th April, when the attack was launched after a bombardment of the hostile positions extending over several days, which elicited the fact that the strength of the opposing heavy artillery had been considerably increased during the interval.

The assaulting infantry succeeded in entering the hostile trenches along the whole front attacked, meeting everywhere with very severe opposition. On the right, owing to the very heavy artillery and trench mortar fire encountered, more especially in the Jumeaux ravine, a deep and difficult obstacle with steep sides which separated the opposing lines, only the leading troops were able to gain a footing, and reinforcements found the greatest difficulty in advancing to their support. During the night several determined hostile counter-attacks were repulsed with heavy loss, but eventually, after several hours' hard fighting, the attackers were forced back to their own trenches. This operation was carried out with the greatest gallantry and determination by representative battalions of English county regiments, among whom the Devonshire Regiment and the Berkshire Regiment deserve special credit for their dash and tenacity.

On the left all objectives were gained, and the enemy's front trenches occupied on a front of nearly a mile from Hill "380," five hundred yards north of the ruins of Doldzelli village, to the enemy's work of Hill "P. 4½." During the following days the captured position was consolidated in spite of repeated counter-attacks, during which battalions of the Manchester Regiment and the Shropshire Light Infantry inflicted severe loss on the enemy, who fought with great determination.

Preparations had been commenced with a view to taking advantage of the commanding position gained on the ridge by advancing our line on its western slopes, when information was received that, owing to climatic and other reasons, it had been found necessary again to postpone the Allied operations on the right bank of the Vardar River and in the vicinity of Monastir. Finally, I received instructions that the 8th May had been selected as the date for the re-commencement of the Allied advance, on which date the army under my command should again concentrate its main effort in the vicinity of Doiran.

On this occasion it was decided to restrict the attack on the salient to the section lying between the lake and the "Petit Couronne" Hill. After a preliminary bombardment, the leading troops advanced, and succeeded in reaching the enemy's trenches under very heavy artillery fire. A battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in the centre, advancing in a most spirited manner, had not only commenced consolidation of the position gained, but had pushed forward to Red Scar Hill on their immediate front, when, owing to counter-attacks both in front and in flank, they were compelled after severe hand-to-hand fighting, in which all ranks greatly distinguished themselves, to relinquish their position. Mean-

while, the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, supported by the Berkshire Regiment, assaulted the eastern end of the "Petit Couronne" Hill, and, though met by heavy artillery and trench mortar fire, repeatedly returned to the attack with great determination. After defeating several counter-attacks, they succeeded in establishing themselves on the slopes of the hill, which they held till about mid-day of the 9th, when it was found impossible to maintain the positions gained. The dash and gallantry exhibited by all ranks of these two battalions is worthy of high praise.

On the western slopes of the Horseshoe Hill Ridge the attack succeeded in advancing to a depth of 500 yards on a front of two miles, and in seizing and occupying an important underfeature, termed Goldie's Hill, 2,000 yards south of Devedzili. The positions gained, after being further increased on the 15th, and again on the 20th, were consolidated in spite of the enemy's repeated endeavours to recapture them, and now form the main line of defence, which runs along the ridge of hills from just south of Krastali village to Sejdelli village.

Meanwhile, operations on the Struma front had been held in abeyance pending the development of events in the west, but, on the 15th May, the village of Kjpuri was seized and held, and a series of intermediate trenches between Ernekoj and the River Struma were captured, about 100 prisoners being taken. A further advance was in progress when, on the 24th inst., definite instructions were received from General Sarrail that offensive operations were to cease all along the front.

As summer was commencing, I now had to consider the best means of maintaining the health and efficiency of the Army during a period when malaria and dysentery are more or less prevalent in the low-lying areas. In view of the experience gained last year, and in spite of the fact that a considerable amount of anti-malarial work had been carried out in the valleys during the winter, I decided to abandon the forward positions on the right and centre of the line, and to retire to the foothills on the right bank of the Struma River, and to the south of the Butkova Valley. All bridge-heads were garrisoned and arrangements made for the vacated area to be daily patrolled, an arduous duty, for the successful carrying out of which during the whole summer the Derbyshire and Surrey Yeomanry deserve the highest commendation. By the 14th June the withdrawal had been carried out without incident or interference by the enemy.

In accordance with my instruction, two detachments were despatched during the month of June to co-operate with the French in the occupation of old Greece. One detachment was placed under the orders of General Regnault at the Piræus and in Corinth. The second, under those of General Venel, in Thessaly. These detachments returned in the course of the next six weeks.

In spite of the intense heat experienced during July and August, during which latter month the mean temperature was 5 deg. in excess of that of last year, minor encounters with the enemy have been of almost daily occurrence, among the most successful being a raid on the village of Homondos by battalions of the Royal Scots and the Scottish Horse, when 35 prisoners were taken and two guns destroyed. Another small raid by the Lancashire Fusiliers,

when the number of enemy killed was nearly double the strength of the raiding party, forms a good example of the spirit which permeates all ranks. In all operations which have taken place the co-operation of the Royal Artillery and Field Companies, Royal Engineers, has been of a high standard.

During the past year the Royal Flying Corps has rendered very efficient service. Towards the end of February the hostile aircraft were reinforced by a powerful bombing squadron, and it is due to the unaided efforts of the Royal Flying Corps that but little damage was caused in the British area. Towards the end of April, the Vice-Admiral Commanding Eastern Mediterranean Squadron kindly placed at my disposal bombing and fighting machines of the Royal Naval Air Service, by whose welcome assistance complete mastery of the air was obtained during the May operations. During the summer months almost daily bombing attacks have been made on the various hostile railheads and encampments, and in the numerous air combats which have taken place our pilots have shown marked gallantry and skill.

I am greatly indebted to the Army Signal Service for the efficient manner in which their work has been carried out over such a large extent of country.

The maintenance of communications has been one of my most difficult tasks. To appreciate fully the work done under this heading it is necessary to realise what facilities existed in the winter of 1915-1916, and compare them with those that now obtain. In 1915, apart from two partially-metalled roads, one to Monastir and one to Seres—both of which were in a deplorable condition—no roadway possible for mechanical transport existed. Now these two roads have, by constant work, been improved out of all knowledge, widened and drained; cross-roads have been cut through the hills; new roads in base and forward areas constructed and old roads re-made; while the construction of a further main route from Salonika to Kukus, and thence to the fronts on either side of Lake Doiran, has rendered dependence on the Doiran railway no longer essential. Moreover, the winter of 1916-1917 was exceptionally wet, and the difficulty of road maintenance correspondingly increased, the absorbent nature of the soil in many parts of the Seres road especially causing portions of the roadway to disappear after prolonged spells of snow and rain. Determined efforts on the part of the Royal Engineers and of the infantry working with them, however, successfully prevented interruptions of any length in the supply machinery.

The expansion of hospitals, erection of huts, improvements in landing facilities, provision of water supply, &c., have thrown heavy work on the Engineer services at the base, but satisfactory results have been achieved.

The railway directorate has been fully occupied with the construction of new standard gauge as well as Decauville lines, with the improvement and maintenance of existing tracks and in the formation of railheads. The dock system, too, has been supplemented, and rapidity of transit largely increased.

Recently, further transit facilities at this port have been acquired, consequently the speed of off-loading ships has been quickened up, and the military landing staff under the Base Commandant have turned to the best advantage all the resources now at

their disposal. The system adopted for the clearance of docks and quays works well and smoothly.

To the Principal Naval Transport Officer—Commodore F. Travers, R.N.—and to his assistants, my thanks are due for their unflinching co-operation in all matters relating to embarkation and disembarkation.

During the past year the supply of the troops has proceeded satisfactorily, in spite of the attendant difficulties. During the worst of the winter the work devolving on the drivers of the mechanical transport was arduous and trying, but all ranks displayed the greatest zeal and cheerfulness in the performance of their duties.

It is satisfactory to be able to record that the wastage amongst the animals of this force, in spite of the heavy strain during the winter, has been exceptionally low. The supply of all material to the troops necessitates the use of both wheeled and pack transport, while the tracks branching outwards from the main routes, although in dry weather providing a good running surface, are, in the majority of cases, deep in mud after prolonged snow or rain. The calls on horse flesh have hence been severe, and it speaks well for the Army Veterinary Services that the mortality and loss through wastage has been kept to such a low figure.

Valuable work has, too, been performed by the Remount Department, and the institution of convalescent depots for debilitated animals has proved a success.

The Ordnance Services, under Brigadier-General Sir C. M. Mathew, K.C.M.G., C.B., D.S.O., whose departure I much regret, have been most ably conducted, and skill and forethought have been shown in the establishment of workshops for the manufacture of articles ordinarily sent from overseas.

The Army Postal Department has continued its unostentatious methods of collection and delivery of postal matter, and is deserving of high praise for the successful manner in which it has overcome all obstacles.

The work of the Army Pay Department has been most satisfactorily performed.

Financial transactions in this area are at times somewhat complicated, and my thanks are due to the Financial Adviser—Colonel A. B. Beavis—for his able assistance in all details connected with finance.

The Allied organisations referred to in my despatch of the 8th October 1916, viz., the Customs Control and the Claims Compensation Commissions—have performed most useful work. The machinery adopted has been thoroughly tested, and has proved reliable and efficient.

A word of praise is due to the Officer Commanding and Staff of the Expeditionary Force Canteen. Every effort to meet the requirements of the troops has been made, and energy has been displayed in the management and conduct of this institution.

The health of the troops has been on the whole satisfactory. With the advent of the cold weather malaria abated rapidly, and the sick rate remained low during the winter. Preparations for the next summer in the form of anti-malarial work were however steadily pursued, drainage of swamps and canalisation of streams were extended, and the personnel for technical work strengthened; but what proved of almost greater importance was the instruction of all ranks in the value of field sanitation

and the prevention of disease in the field. The results have been most satisfactory, and, while giving full credit to the various ranks of the medical services and to the devoted band of nursing-sisters, I consider that the great diminution in disease in this Army as compared with last summer is due chiefly to the fact that the value of preventive measures is fully realised by all ranks, and that the whole Army has profited by the experience of last year.

The arrangements for retaining all sick and wounded in this theatre have worked most satisfactorily, and the decision has, in my opinion, much to recommend it. The arrival of sufficient transport and the opening up of new roads has permitted the establishment in the hills of hospitals and convalescent camps, where, under trained instructors, convalescents are put through a graduated course of physical drill before returning to the depots.

As regards the general work of the Royal Army Medical Corps and the assistance afforded by the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St. John, I can only reiterate the remarks contained in my last despatch.

I desire to take this opportunity of placing on record my appreciation of the very high state of discipline and efficiency maintained by all ranks of this Army under what are, at times, trying and arduous conditions, always borne with loyalty and cheerfulness.

My thanks are due to Vice-Admiral Sir Cecil Thursby, K.C.M.G., and to the officers and

men of the Royal Navy and R.N.A.S. under his orders, for their close co-operation and ready assistance at all times, more especially on the occasion of the landing of troops at Katerini under difficulties, and during operations in the vicinity of the mouth of the Struma River.

Finally, I desire to bring to your Lordship's notice the good services rendered during the past eighteen months by my two former staff officers, Major-General W. Gillman, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., and Major-General Travers Clarke, C.B., the latter of whom had been with this force since it first landed, and both of whom have lately been transferred to other theatres of war, and by Surgeon-General Sir H. R. Whitehead, K.C.B., whose tactful administration has been fully appreciated by our Allies, and with whom I part with much regret.

I propose to submit, in due course, a list of the names of those officers, non-commissioned officers and men whose distinguished and gallant services I consider specially deserving of mention and reward.

I have the honour to be,

My Lord,

Your Lordship's obedient servant,

*G. F. Milne,*

Lieutenant-General, Commanding-in-Chief, British Salonika Force.

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