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AUSTRALIAN PATROL OPERATIONS, STRAZEELE, JULY, 1918.

By LIEUT.-COLONEL A. M. ROSS, C.M.G., D.S.O., *p.s.c.*

IT is hoped that the patrol operations of which a detailed description is given may be of interest in themselves. But the chief object is to provide instruction for the regimental soldier. The example given is authentic. It is taken from the latest war, and bears out the principles of the pre-war Infantry Training. Patrol-work is freely taught, but one meets with few instances of an operation actually carried out and then got up as a matter of instruction. The portrayal of an action, accompanied by a diagram on the blackboard, filled in as the lecture proceeds, or by a map showing essentials only, carries great weight.

The example quoted is the handiwork of men of the First Australian Division. Without in the least decrying the British soldier, it is fairly generally admitted that the Australian had peculiar gifts for this work. His very mode of life, independence of character, initiative, and upbringing fitted him for this special duty. Add to this, great bravery and a thorough belief in keeping a clear No Man's Land, and there is little more to be said. The Digger disliked raids; he considered them too costly for the results; but he liked "to have no Jerries near the posts at night," and was always to hand for any reasonable patrol. The great variety of ways in which he carried out his task space forbids to describe here; but he constantly changed his methods, formations and ruses. The example given seems to be almost a model under the circumstances. The *morale* of the Germans was not low at the time.

In lecturing on the subject, instructors are recommended to pick out just a few of the many little lessons, and drive them home. No attempt has been made to embellish a plain statement of facts.

SUBJECT OF THE INSTRUCTION.

Instances Nos. 1 and 2 are instances of patrols sent out with a view to obtaining information and not to fight.

Instance No. 3 is that of a genuine fighting patrol.

One map covers all three operations.

For instructional purposes it would be better to deal with and criticise each operation before proceeding to the next. The points of reference in the narrative from which lessons are drawn are numbered and inset (L, etc.), and correspond to the number of the lesson.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION.

On 11th July, 1918, the First Australian Infantry Battalion was holding the front line between Strazeele and Merris, astride of the railway which runs to the south of both of these villages.

The country consisted of fields of deep crops, with scattered farmhouses or garden enclosures bounded by hedges.

The battalion front was held by two companies, each having three platoons forward and one in support. Each of the three front-line platoons in each company formed a picquet. The battalion thus had six posts in its front line. A third company was in support, and the fourth in reserve.

The company astride of the railway was holding three platoon posts. The central post (No. 2) was actually touching the southern side of the railway. The southern post (No. 1) was about 250 yards south of it. The northern post was 150 yards ahead, and slightly to the north of the railway.

OPERATION NO. 1.

In front of No. 2 post and 300 yards away was a small house. This house was immediately south of the railway. The grass space surrounding the house was enclosed by a hedge and bordered on the railway. No. 2 post and this grass plot each bordered on the south side of the railway, with about 250 yards of tall crops separating them.

The platoon commander of No. 2 post, on taking over, had been told by the officer whom he relieved that he believed this house to be occupied. The post, however, had a bad field of view, as the land rose slightly in front of the post and dipped again to the house.

When daylight began to break, the incoming platoon commander sent out a sergeant and one man along the ditch on the south side of the railway to a point near the top of the rise, where they could get a better view. They returned at 5 a.m., when a corporal and one other man were sent out to take their place for two hours.

During this time the platoon commander and a corporal crept into a shell-hole about 50 yards in front of their post and fired some rifle grenades at the house and the hedges round it.

No movement of any sort was seen during these periods from No. 2 post. The platoon commander reported to the company commander at 8.30 a.m. He learnt from the commander of No. 3 post (across the railway to the north) that when the rifle grenades were fired Germans had been seen to leave the house (L 1).

Identifications were needed. It was, therefore, decided that a patrol from No. 2 post should go out and examine the house.

At 9.30 a.m. the platoon commander from No. 2 post took out the sergeant and corporal who had been patrolling up to that time as described above, and one other man. Each carried two or three bandoliers of ammunition and four bombs. The officer and sergeant also had

revolvers. They crept along the south side of the railway till they reached the hedge enclosing the grass plot round the house. The railway afforded a very good avenue of approach to the house because it ran along an embankment about 9 feet high, which shut off all view from anyone to the north. Along the bottom of the embankment on its south ran a continuous hedge, and along the south side of this hedge a ditch 2 or 3 feet deep. Immediately south of this ditch sprang the crops.

The party crawled along this ditch to the corner of the hedge near the house. The house stood on the east or far side of the grass enclosure, about 40 yards south of the railways.

It was decided that the officer and the corporal should creep farther up the ditch to a point north of the house (marked A on the map), from which they could cover the surroundings of the house (L 2), while the sergeant with the other man turned south along the western edge of the enclosure, then along the southern side of it, and so up to the back of the house, going round three sides of the enclosure, and finally getting into the house from the back. This they did, the sergeant and his companion crawling along the outer side of the hedge surrounding the enclosure.

The house had been occupied recently—playing-cards were found—but there was no clue by which the occupants could be identified. The sergeant crept back to the officer, going across the grass plot this time. From where the officer and corporal had been waiting there could be seen in the crops behind the house several very large shell-holes. The sergeant was instructed to clear these shell-holes. He crawled back and across a cleared space behind the house into the edge of the crops and up to the shell-holes, the officer and corporal covering him from the same point behind the railway (L 3). The railway embankment prevented the sergeant being seen from the north. The shell-holes were empty and had never been occupied.

The sergeant returned and the whole party then crawled across the grass plot and southwards along the inner side of the hedge in front of the house until they reached the point marked B, just inside the S.W. corner of the enclosure. Here they lay for some considerable time, the officer searching with glasses the crops to the west of him (*i.e.*, between him and his own post) and the sergeant doing the same to the south. Three suspicious-looking shell-holes were seen in the crops (L 4).

These are marked X, Y, and Z on the map. The earth on the edges of the holes had the appearance of having been newly turned. In the case of Z, suspicion was made nearly certain by the fact that the edge of the crater had been camouflaged by laying on it the crops which had been cut round it.

The party crawled through the crops towards the nearest shell-hole. When 20 yards from it, at point W., the corporal and one man were left with instructions to cover especially the rear of the other two. Then the officer and sergeant worked quietly up to the back of the crater and looked over the rim. A machine-gun was mounted, facing towards our own posts.

The sentry was sitting down in the crater talking to another German who was lying on the bottom of it. The sentry had a revolver in its case on his belt. Both men were completely surprised. They were covered by revolvers, and began at once to cry "Mercy." A threat induced them to be quiet. The officer asked them where the other German posts were, and they pointed readily enough to the crater at Y. If they did not understand the words, they understood the intention.

Being already certain of the crater at Z, this information made the officer sure that the craters at Y and Z were both occupied. They then took the two prisoners back to the corporal and other man at point W. The two Germans carried their machine gun with them. As soon as they knew what was wanted they were very ready to do it.

The officer decided to rush the other two posts together. He left the two prisoners with the two men at W, and then he crawled out toward the southern post (Y), while the sergeant took the northern one (Z). The distance to the southern post was rather longer. It was arranged that the sergeant, when he got into position, should wait until the officer gave the signal; they should then rush the two posts together. It was necessary at frequent intervals to get the head above the crops to see the position. They each reached a point about 10 yards from their respective shell-holes. Then the officer waved his helmet and they both rushed in.

The sergeant found four Germans in his shell-hole and the officer eight. In each shell-hole was a machine-gun pointing the other way. In each case as they came up a shot was fired at them. They are uncertain whether the Germans had been aroused by some noise from the taking of the first post. Both the officer and sergeant fired shots from their revolvers. The officer's second shot hit the N.C.O. in charge of the post at Z in the arm, and the Germans held their hands up. They had no idea how many there might be behind the single man they saw in each case (L 5).

A bomb would have settled each party in the craters; but bombs were not thrown because the sound would have informed Germans in the surrounding crops that a fight was in progress, whereas a revolver shot told them nothing.

The whole party of prisoners was hurriedly disarmed and taken back to our post (No. 2) by the shortest route. They were marched overland through the crops at the best possible speed. They were seen by enemy from the houses 250 yards south at point C and were fired on, but none were hit. On reaching the post the prisoners were pushed off at once under escort to company headquarters.

Instructions were then given that all shell-holes in the neighbourhood of the others were to be cleared. The same patrol, with the addition of two other men, went out at once. It worked straight through the crops at all shell-holes near the posts previously captured. From these shell-holes 18 Germans were taken. These were observers or members of the gun-crews who lived in the craters close at hand. The living position generally took the form of an undercut driven into the side of the

shell-hole facing our posts and then sunk some feet down. The opening was covered by a sheet, and was so unobtrusive that in certain cases when looking straight down into the shell-hole it was not easy to discover it. During this operation the sniping from the house to the south continued, and one man was hit. It had been decided to advance our line to the far side of the house near the railway which had first been visited. The corporal and two men, therefore, stayed out there to prevent the enemy from re-occupying it, and three Lewis guns were sent up there in the afternoon (L. 6 and 7). The remaining members of the patrol returned.

Altogether the patrol had been out $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours and had taken 32 prisoners and three light machine-guns (L. 8 and 9).

The lessons to be drawn from this operation are:—

- (1) Quick *liaison*. Watchfulness.
- (2) and (3). Covering.
- (4) Reconnaissance.
- (5) Quietness.
- (6) Consolidation.
- (7) Forward move.
- (8) Small size of patrol. Big results.

OPERATION NO. 2.

Meanwhile the left picquet (No. 3), which occupied the post north of the railway, from which a view had been obtained of the Germans leaving the house near the railway, had embarked on a separate operation (L. 1). Less than 200 yards in front of this picquet was an enclosure, surrounded by a hedge and bordered by trees. This enclosure was known to be occupied. At the far southern edge of it was a house. The hedge and drain which made the southern edge of this enclosure continued out into the field in which No. 3 post was sited. About 10.30 a.m. a patrol of one officer, one N.C.O., and two men left No. 3 post and crept under cover of the hedge and drain to the house (L. 2).

One man was left at the corner of the hedge nearest to our post (at the point marked D on the map (L. 3)). The southern edge of the enclosure and the house were found to be unoccupied.

The enclosure to the north of the house was known to be occupied. The patrol decided to search it. A covered-in dug-out was seen by the patrol, who approached it unobserved from the flank. The Germans inside were covered with a revolver and at once surrendered. Two more dug-outs were dealt with in the same way.

The prisoners were then sent back in charge of the N.C.O. The man from the corner of the field (D) was called up. This left the officer with two men. They moved up the field, the officer in the centre, the men on either side of him at 10 to 12 paces interval (L. 4). This enabled three dug-outs to be dealt with at once and the occupants to be captured.

In two dug-outs at the north end of the field, however, some resistance was met with. It became necessary to fire several shots.

Quick action was clearly demanded, for the enemy in the remaining

dug-outs were aroused by the shooting. Bombs were therefore thrown into several of the dug-outs, and two of the patrol were closed in to cut off the enemy's line of retreat (L. 5).

The bombs demoralised the garrison and it surrendered without trouble. Altogether 36 prisoners and four light machine-guns were taken. The patrol finished its work shortly after noon. Later, when the battalion on the left (Fourth Australian Battalion) had cleared in like manner the German posts to the north of this position, our line was advanced, and a post sited in the field which had been the scene of this operation (L. 6).

The lessons taught by this operation are :—

- (1) The true soldier is "jealous in honour."
 - (2) Small numbers used.
 - (3) Protecting own line of retreat.
 - (4) Formation—variety.
 - (5) Prompt action when compelled to fight.
 - (6) Line advanced at once. Line brought forward on the left.
- Influence of action of platoon commander No. 1 operation.

OPERATION No. 3.

Operations Nos. 1 and 2 were both the work of the left company of the First Battalion. It was decided to exploit the success and advance the line (L. 1). This made necessary the capture of the farm buildings at C, from which the first operation had been steadily sniped.

These houses were in an enclosure just south of a road running roughly east and west parallel to the railway, and 200 to 300 yards south of it. Across the road, about 250 yards west of the houses, was No. 3 (left) picquet of the right company First Battalion.

A patrol had already left this picquet about 10 a.m. to explore the buildings with a view to an intended raid (L. 2). An officer and four men made their way up a drain in single file towards the farm. When about 40 yards from the place they formed into single line at five paces interval and crept in this fashion for 20 yards. They were not fired on. A N.C.O. and two men were therefore detached to see if the hedge along the southern corner of the farm enclosure was wired, and also to locate any enemy posts. This party came upon the enemy at the point marked K on the map, and captured seven men with slight resistance. This, however, roused the German post farther south at L, and the party was fired on from there. The prisoners were taken back to our post, two other members of the patrol covering the process (L. 3). Soon after this it was decided to clear the enemy out on our right flank and advance the line.

At 4 p.m. instructions were issued that the farm buildings were to be taken by the right company. The method of attack was to be from the left and rear (L. 4). No. 3 picquet right company was moved northwards from its position across the road to No. 2 post of the left company, by the railway line, and from which the first patrol had issued that

morning. The post thus left vacant was garrisoned by another platoon, while a further platoon was moved up in close support.

The three Lewis guns at the house first captured near the railway line were ordered to give covering fire if needed (L. 5). Several Lewis guns facing the objective from the front were to do the same.

The attacking platoon moved from No. 2 post out towards the house by the railway line and then southwards and south-westwards against its objective, the farm. The platoon was formed in two lines of skirmishers, the first to attack, the second to act as support, guard the flanks and reinforce as necessary. The Lewis guns and rifle grenadiers in the hedge south of the house by the railway covered the advance.

At about 30 yards from the German post at K and from another post 100 yards north of it, the line was fired on by rifles and machine-guns. The posts were at once rushed. Nine Germans and two machine-guns were taken without a casualty. When the left flank of the platoon attempted to advance, however, it came under heavy fire from the right. It was decided to place the post immediately in front (east) of the farm buildings in the position captured (L. 6).

From this position patrols of three or four men one after another worked and took from the flank and rear three German posts just south of them. But there were still other posts farther south causing trouble by machine-gun fire. A patrol of an officer and four other ranks was sent out from another platoon to silence them (L. 7). Two posts were located, one on each side of a road 300 yards south-west of the farm (marked E on the map). These posts were tackled in a manner similar to those previously taken. There was a sharp fight, in which nine Germans were killed and three wounded. Fourteen prisoners and one light machine-gun were taken; two other machine-guns were found but not brought in.

In front of these posts the crops had been cut for a space of from 40 to 80 yards. This operation was over by 6 p.m.

The lessons taught by this operation are:—

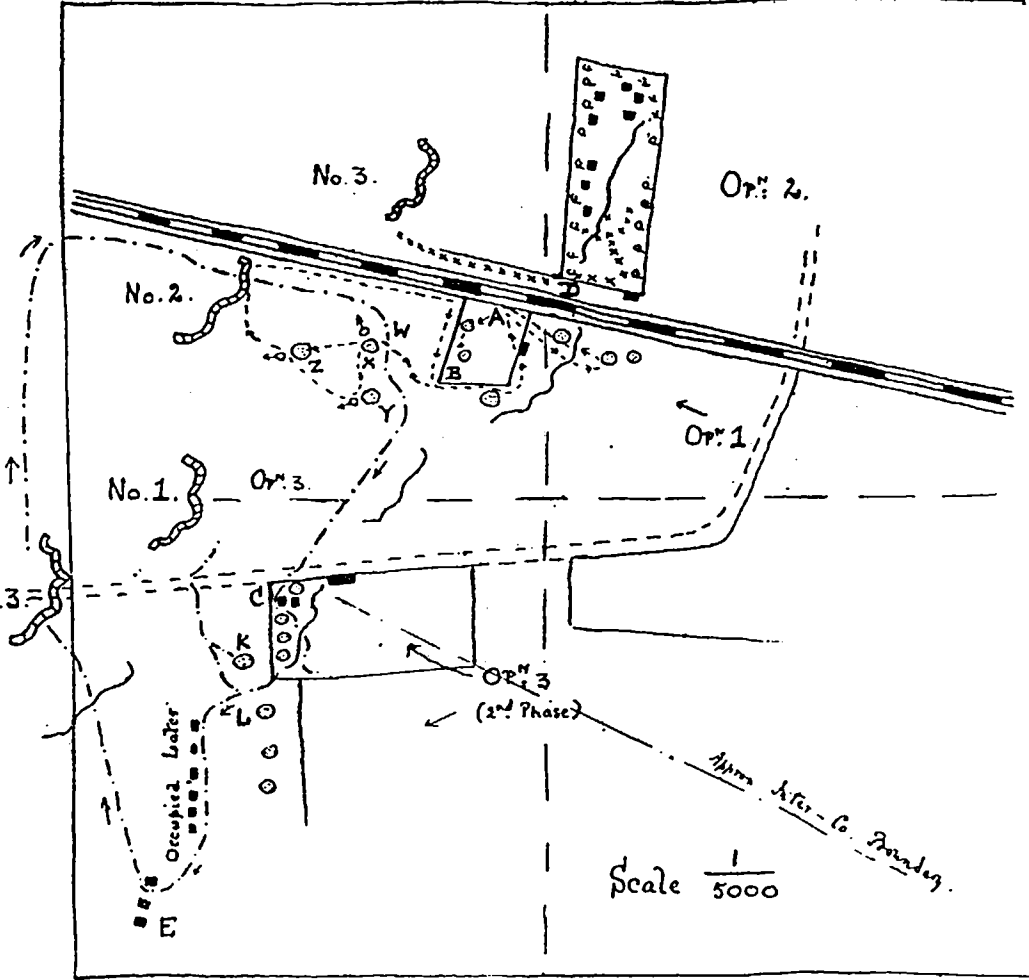
- (1) The infectious spirit.
- (2) Study of formations.
- (3) Reconnaissance before a strong patrol.
- (4) Method—route—against exposed flank and rear.
- (5) Covering fire.
- (6) Prompt appreciation. Consolidation.
- (7) Prompt reversion to a SMALL patrol.
- (8) Value of attack from behind.
- (9) No. 1 platoon of company moves up. Half this company is still fresh.

RESULTS OF THE OPERATIONS.

The total captures were 101 prisoners and 12 machine-guns. Nine Germans were killed. Our casualties were three men wounded. Truly a brilliant example of economy of force, and of resource, initiative, and courage worthy of these splendid men from Overseas.

PATROL CHART

11/7/18.



- LEGEND.** Original Posts = Ultimate " =
Dug-outs or Buildings =
Shell-holes =
M. Guns =
Railway =

- Patrol Tracks**
Operation 1 =
" 2 =
" 3 =

A.M.R.