



Suvla: The attack of the 163rd Brigade, 12th August 1915

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I am now very much aware that the subject of the so-called 'vanishing Norfolks' has turned into something of a minor industry - attracting the attention not only of military historians, but also mystics, ufo-ologists, meteorologists, an odd Ipswich Town supporter and not a few extra-terrestrials. A great deal has been written of the so-called 'inexplicable disappearance' of almost an entire company of the 1/5 Norfolks in the late afternoon of 12th Aug - much guff and nonsense but also a number of serious efforts to put the record straight¹. I suppose a sort of recent high point of **1/5 Norfolkmania** was reached with the production of the made for TV film, '*All the King's Men*' which was screened on UK TV on the evening of Remembrance Sunday last year (1999). The film was beautifully packaged and no expense spared in costumes, uniforms and camerawork. David Jason, admittedly no Mel Gibson, had a brave stab at the role of the Captain F R Beck of the 'C' (*The King's*) Company prior to his disappearance through the burning scrub and termination with extreme prejudice, in circumstances of near atrocity, at the end of the film. And this is the point. The film was, to distort an epigram, magnificent (as a spectacle) but it was not (the) war. And even though it didn't feature 'Mel' it was still, from the historical perspective near 100% tripe. (*For a comprehensive indictment of the factual inaccuracies contained therein I commend Derek Rayner's article quoted in References*). Nonetheless a great many people who watched the programme went to work the following morning feeling that they knew what had happened to the Norfolks and, additionally, were no doubt reassured that this unit, like all First World War British infantry regiment's of the line had its own aspiring homo-sexual war poet. The film is now available as a video, the cover of which proclaims it as '*the tragic true-life story of the Sandringham Company in the First World War*'. And so the myth is perpetuated - it is such a great and compelling 'story'

But what actually happened on 12th August?

The 1/5 Norfolks did in fact form part of a much larger organisation and their disappearance was very much linked with an ill-conceived and very bodged local attack - whose characteristics plant it firmly in the category 'cocked-up Brigade offensives 1915-style.'

¹ Notably Derek Rayner's excellent and authoritative summary, '*The Sandringhams at Suvla Bay*', in '*Stand To!*' (No 58, April 2000) and Hal Gilbin's article, '*Exploding a Myth? – The Vanished Battalion*', in the *Journal of the Orders and Medals Research Society* in 1981].



The background to the operation

To begin with there were far more participants in the real drama than merely the 1/5 Norfolks. The failure by IX Corps to move off the Suvla Plain after the landings and secure the surrounding hills still greatly rankled with Hamilton, whose exasperation with Stopford was, by 12 August, compounded by the pressure he was receiving from Kitchener for a 'gingering up' of the operations there. The 54th (East Anglian) Division, which landed at Suvla in the afternoon of 10th August, represented to the Commander-in-Chief an instrument for a forlorn hope of salvaging something from the chaos and lethargy that had characterised Corps staff work since the landing on the 6/7th August.

Thus it was on the morning of the 11th August, that Hamilton, ever hopeful, issued an order to IX Corps stating that the 54th Division '*was to seize the Tekke Teppe ridge*' at dawn the following day before the Turks had fully fortified their positions. Receiving no acknowledgment of this order a near totally exasperated Hamilton personally visited Corps IX HQ to make absolutely clear that the advance on Tekke Tepe must be made - though by the time Hamilton and Stopford met it was so late in the day that new arrangements were made to attack the crest at dawn on the 13th. Reluctantly, though quite reasonably making much reference to the difficulty posed by the ground and the activity of Turkish snipers in the Anafarta plain, Stopford complied.

The next morning, 12th August, at the IX Corps Conference preparatory to the Divisional attack Stopford again voiced his concerns about the terrain and the threats posed by Turkish snipers. Responding to his Corps' commanders anxieties Maj Gen Inglefield CIC 54th Division offered his 163rd Brigade as a force to be used to clear the countryside to the foot of the hills and ensure a safe passage for the main attack, still planned for the 13th. This offer was accepted and, as stated in the Official History:

'..it was then arranged that Brig Gen C M Brunker's 163rd Brigade should advance to a line on the eastern side of some shepherd's huts marked on the map about 2,000 yards east of Point 28.'

This line, when it was reached, was to be consolidated by a Brigade of the 53rd Div, and, after nightfall the whole of the 54th Div was to pass through and assault the crest of the ridge at dawn. Stopford forwarded a copy of this plan to GHQ



What actually happened?

Aspinall-Oglander's description of the advance of the 163rd Brigade (pp 317-318 of the Official History 'Gallipoli) is a masterly summary - and was the product of much direct contact with the actual participants. Rather than paraphrase this inimitable summary my intention is by:

- Using original sources, to try and portray the events of the day from different angles
- Attempt to offer some insights on the action

The Brigade perspective - based on War Diary of 163rd Brigade (PRO WO)

On the morning of 12th August three infantry battalions of the 163rd Brigade (1/5 Norfolks, 1/5 Suffolks and 1/8 Hants) were occupying trenches, running south from the right of the 10th Division, ('at 117 D y to Point 28'). They had occupied these positions since the early morning of 11th August, and had experienced artillery fire and a certain amount of sniping; they were also suffering from a shortage want of water and great difficulty was had been experienced in getting water to them. At 1.15pm, orders were received at Brigade HQ, which was still situated at the Beach, '**to advance and clear the area up to 118 Squares I N S of snipers**'. Brigade were informed that the advance was to commence at 4pm and instructions were telephoned to Col Sir Horace Beauchamp Bart C.B. (CO 1/5 Norfolks - who was also in local command of the Brigade in the trenches) to order the Brigade to be ready at 4pm.

By 3.25pm Brigade HQ had moved from the Beach and established itself on the forward line of trenches near the HQ of the 1/5 Suffolks. Here Staff Officers were dismayed to hear that the order to be ready to advance at 4 had **not been received** by the Suffolks or the 1/8 Hants. Not withstanding this breakdown in communication, the planned naval bombardment commenced precisely at 4pm. The Brigade attack, as stated in the War diary commenced at 4.40pm, units advanced in a line running approximately North and South in the following order:

N 1/5 Suffolks - with the 1/4 Norfolks in support in rear of Suffolks	1/8 Hants	1/5 Norfolks S
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Anafarta Plain looking towards Tekke Teppe

From the meagre entries in the War Diaries of the participating units it is possible to build up a picture of the action: a 'snapshot' a typical local attack 1915-style. (extracted from the War Diary of the 163rd Infantry Brigade (PRO reference WO95/4325)

The attack is delayed but the bombardment, predominantly naval, is right on time – though largely ineffectual as HE rather than shrapnel is employed, and the targets have not been clearly specified, though the noise would certainly have been comforting for the waiting British troops. The advance starts circa 4.45/4.50 and almost immediately the 1/5 Norfolks' make a half-turn to the right resulting in a separation of forces and confusion (and ultimately damaging intermingling of units). After a about 1000 yards advance across the plain (difficult, thorny scrub, ditches and dry watercourse) the Brigade is subjected to devastating enfilade fire (machine guns and small arms from the left, from the direction of Kidney Hill, and shelling, shrapnel from the right, from the direction of the W Hills; but the firing is less ferocious from the front allowing the advance to progress, although many men fall to sniper fire from well concealed Turkish marksmen (and women?) hidden in the scrub and low well-leaved trees (stunted oaks). Some elements of The 1/5 Norfolks on the right outpace the 1/8 Hants in the centre and the 1/5 Suffolks on the left. The confusion is increased by the scrub being set alight by shell fire and the chaotic advance continues unsupported through thick smoke; component forces getting split up, disorientated and attacked by defending Turks; resulting in many casualties killed and wounded. The men, weak through lack of sleep and water become exhausted and the attack slows; some (notably a number of the Norfolks) press on and, getting beyond the Turkish line are dealt with by the defending forces. The attack halts and a rallying position is established in the sunken track near the Anafarta wells



The personal perspectives

The consequences of the clearly inadequate preparations and confused advance, especially in connection with the fate of the 1/5 Norfolks are revealed by two personal accounts of the action - held by the IWM.

The infantry officer's perspective - 2nd Lt A R (Roland) Pelly, 1/5 Norfolks (IWM Dept of Documents, Ref 91/15/1)

For 2/Lt A R Pelly, the 12th August 1915 was a day of grotesque contrasts. In the morning, although in the advanced line, he had lain about in the shade and had a slack and lovely time, but:

'Suddenly at 4 without any idea what was coming we were ordered out and had a most ghastly fight. For some reason the Division did not back us up and we got Hell. Awful time. I got too far in front and at least one of the snipers got me - in the mouth. Terrible walk and then on a stretcher in floods of blood.'

So runs his personal diary entry for that day. In a later letter to his Dad he desperately tried to make sense of the afternoon of 12th August:

*'What a lot has happened since I wrote ... The same night we had the most awful smack. We were suddenly ordered out at 4pm and down we went into the Turks. For some reason or mistake no regiment, of which there were loads, backed us up to shove us through. We were opposed by a wall of bullets and were knocked over right and left. I got too far ahead, lost my way and trying to find it again, was bagged by a Turkish sniper - which swarm - at very close range. The bullet broke my left lower jaw, tore my tongue in shreds and then out through my right cheek. Then after an awful wandering the RAMC got me; by 11pm they had carried me right back to expert care... One or two wounded followed - Purdy, Oliphant, Seymour and told me **we had been most frightfully cut up and almost wiped out...** That was an awful night - absolute HELL - and surely if there had been someone behind we should have gone right through.'*

Interestingly 2/Lt Pelly's account makes no mention of the order to make a half turn to the right, immediately after the advance had begun, which effectively distanced the Norfolks from the two other attacking battalions. A manoeuvre well documented by the unit history (Lyle Petrie) and the recent article by Derek Rayner who makes great play on this detail as explaining the Norfolks' ultimate, break up of cohesion, fatal separations and high casualties.



The infantryman's perspective: interview with Tom Williamson 'F' Coy, 1/5 Norfolks (IWM Sound Archive ref 9317/6))

The experience of the ordinary infantryman in the action is graphically conveyed by the account of Sgt Tom Williamson held in the IWM's Sound Archive in which he describes his unit's advance in '*short consecutive rushes*' and comments on the foolhardiness of attacking, with fixed bayonets - as their consequent sun-glinted progress clearly invited long-range attention. His admiration for his Commanding Officers' coolness in the action was unbounded as he records they (Col Beauchamp and Capt E R Cubitt) were smoking as they advanced in the midst of heavy fire and shelling. Clearly re-called too are the scrub fires caused by the shelling and the confusion in which he believed that Norfolks advanced beyond their objective, and got behind the enemy lines. Having been wounded in the arm, he decided to double back - en route he might have seen Lt Pelly as he states:

'I saw and passed many who had fallen. Some were wandering aimlessly. One officer was faltering strangely and I noticed with horror that his bottom jaw had been completely shot away. I could name this officer - a young Lt.'

It was in his account of his journey back that he describes the last stand of some Norfolks '*sheltering in a barn in a scrub like area*' and recognised a Sgt from 'C' Coy (The King's) trying to rally men round him. A description seized upon by the film-makers and fantastically re-worked.

Consequences

The advance of the 163rd Brigade failed for all the old familiar reasons: inadequate preparation: complete absence of reconnaissance; failure to identify objectives, ineffective artillery bombardment, lack of experience of troops; inefficiency – indeed possible incompetence of leaders; and, very importantly, the resolute resistance of the Turkish defenders.

As a result of the failure of the Brigade's attack that the major offensive towards Tekke Tepe attack by the 54th Division, planned for the dawn of 13th August, was cancelled

Some thoughts on the 'disappearing Norfolks' – controversy, mystery – and myth

In actual fact, 'E' Coy, *The Sandringham Company*, - formed in 1908, effectively and quite officially disappeared on 8 January 1915 when the 5th Norfolks was converted from an eight to a four company battalion. 'E' Coy was merged into the larger 'C' Company (The King's) but still commanded by Capt F R Beck, King George V's Sandringham Estate Land Agent.



More difficult to explain is why the 12th August attack is always regarded as the affair of the 1/5 Norfolks, the 1/8 Hampshires and 1/5 Suffolks are rarely mentioned - even though the both these units incurred considerable casualties.

The emphasis on the Norfolks - Important factors to be taken into account in this connection:

a) Hamilton's ill-considered use of the adjective 'mysterious' in his account of the 12th August in his final despatch of 11 Dec 1915, is often cited as the source and root of the controversy. He wrote:

*'...In the course of the fight, creditable in all respects to the 163^d Brigade, **there happened a very mysterious thing**' and he goes on to describe Beauchamp as 'a bold self confident officer' (it is not certain if he had ever met him) and the disappearance of 'part of a fine company enlisted in the King's Sandringham estates. Nothing more was ever seen or heard of any of them. They charged into the forest and were lost to sight and sound. Not one of them ever came back'.*

This intriguing reference may have been given extra force in the description later supplied by the usually sober Official History which clearly echoed Hamilton's slant and stated that 'a portion' of the 1/5 Norfolk - consisting of 15 officers and 250 men' continued to press forward unsupported and '**was never seen again**'. Such a statement clearly invited speculation.

b) Though hardly explaining anything about the failure of the advance Hamilton's reference to the Norfolks was clear evidence of a genuine concern for his men but it may also have reflected his appreciation of King George V's deep distress at the loss of a number of his Sandringham Estate workers. Indeed the King and Queen's desire to discover the specific fates of their lost servants (and in the case of Captain Frank Beck, a personal friend) was of **crucial importance** in keeping interest in the fate of the Norfolks' alive. This deep concern to 'know' was paralleled by thousands of other 'next of kin' (most notably Rudyard Kipling in connection with his son John, lost at Loos) in their unstinting efforts and enquiries over long periods of time, to discover what precisely had happened to their missing loved ones whose mortal remains were never found.

c) But elements of the Norfolks were not the only ones to go missing in action in the Suvla operations; in the dawn attack of 9th August on the crest of Tekke Tepe of 7 officers and 140 men of **6th East Yorks** were 'swept away' by an 'onrush of Turks and never seen again. ('Half way down a winding gully they were trapped and shot one by one...' (p.169 'Gallipoli. The Fading Vision', John North, 1936); and the **1/5 Suffolks** claim a 'disappearance' in connection with their involvement in the 12 August advance. The unit history records that of the 11 Officers and 178 NCOs casualties (killed, wounded and missing) on that day:



*'Only three men afterwards were reported prisoners, so all these Officers, NCOs and men must be presumed to have been killed. It is thought that these fine men were the foremost and quickest to advance, and in their keenness had bravely rushed forward in isolated parties and without adequate support. **They seemed to have completely disappeared. No one came back who could give and account of what had happened to them**'.*²

Sounds familiar.

d) The Norfolks 'mystery' is compounded by the findings of a War Graves Registration unit in 1919 which reported finding over 100 'unidentified' Norfolks (and some Hampshires, Suffolks and Cheshires). This discovery has ever since have been the subject of dark interpretations and murmurings of atrocity, quite without foundation, have bubbled up, which, no doubt, gave further scope for future imaginative embroidery. Absurd explanations have entered the equation - abduction by aliens and disappearance within strange-shaped clouds. It is not surprising that the myth should have spawned such a fantastical celluloid re-creation as '**All the King' Men**'. Myth feeding on myth and media attention.

A possible 'explanation'

I suppose the full story of the vanishing Norfolks (the presumptuousness of name ensures the propagation of the myth) will never be known as no utterly comprehensive description of the attack exists; it can only be re-visited through the perspectives of a number of retrospective reconstructions. These reveal that in the chaos and confusion of the fighting, in common with a multitude of other vicious local attacks (in all theatres of war and at different times) men of the 163rd Brigade 'disappeared' in and after action, they fell into the thorny scrub, killed and wounded, by small arms and shell fire, they fell as result of twisted ankles and heat exhaustion in a chaotic advance over an extensive smoke-filled heath land. Some advanced parties probably got behind the Turkish line and were dealt with, beyond the view of British eyes, by resolute defenders in isolated groups. The bodies of some killed and wounded were no doubt consumed by the intense scrub fire. But many of the wounded or exhausted and disoriented participants did, in time (up to three or four days) get back to British lines. It has been calculated³, in contrast to the original War Diary claim that the 1/5 Norfolks lost 22 officers and 'about 350 men', that the actual figure for the 'abortive advance' was in fact 14

² On the theme of disappearances see also page 132 of George Davidson's '*The Incomparable 29th and the 'River Clyde'*'. On July 13th 1915 at Helles as a serving member of the RAMC he heard the rumour '*of a lost regiment*' and later discovers '*that a whole battalion of the KOSB's are amissing...The curious thing is the officers are said to have turned up, and can give no account of what happened. I expect this is not the exact truth. They are said to have pushed too far forward, which is the usual case of our worst disasters*'.

³ Derek Rayner, op.cit.



officers and at least 142 men, of which 1 officer and only 16 men were literally 'Sandringhams'. In the light of such analysis it is at least possible to argue that though the Norfolks certainly lost very heavily on 12 August, they did not on that tragic afternoon entirely and permanently disappear.

The unidentified remains of some of those vanished Norfolks reside as part of a mass grave of unidentified soldiers in lonely Azmak Cemetery, on the Suvla Plain. The names of these 'missing' warriors are recorded on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorial at Helles.

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- Capt J H Jewson MC (13 May 1931)