

The Battle of Arras 1917

A personal account from the Danish-minded South Jutland Th. Lorenzen, who took part in World War I in German service, about how the 18th German Infantry Division distinguished itself in the defense of the town of Roeux.



"The 18th Infantry Division, which consisted of the 85th, 86th and 31st Regiments, was in ... position on the outskirts of a small town, Roeux, which was much mentioned in the General Staff reports of the time.

In the afternoon [*of April 12, 1917*] we lay dozing at the bottom of the trench. I woke up to a loud banging and became curious to know what could be going on. I got up on the parapet and saw that over on the other side, at a distance of approx. 1,500 meters, quite a few small dots came down a hillside. On the crest of the hill a new line appeared and we soon became aware of what was going to happen; the enemy would storm our position.

In a hurry I got my comrade on his feet and the rifle ready to fire. We opened fire with visor 1,500 meters. - The shooting was really pointless, as you couldn't take a specific target in sight, and we wasted our ammunition to no avail. Should the enemy come upon us with such great superiority, the position was lost. Presumably we had a whole regiment, several thousand men, against us.

We saw more and more new rows emerging over the crest of the hill. The advance was slow, step by step as at home in the barracks, and not, as when we had to advance to a storm, in a quick run 30-40 meters forward, then seek cover until an opportunity to advance further was seen. They came walking, as if on a peaceful hunting trip, with the gun under their arm. How would we fare when we brought all these men closer to life. We soon realized the futility of our firing and stood in anxious anticipation of how this would turn out. He sent us some shells and shrapnel which fell around us in the position. They did mischief on our left wing. Now the first rows had come closer, approx. 800 meters from us. The sight was adjusted down to 800 metres, and now shot after shot followed with steady aim. We could see the effect and burst into the advancing ranks. The barrel became hot, almost glowing, and the lock would not work. A dead comrade lying nearby no longer needed his rifle. I could therefore alternately use both guns.

From all the guns in our entire front line the firing was now in progress, the machine guns with their screeching voices also came into action, and the enemy ranks were mowed down like straw before the scythe.

The feeling of anxiety began to recede; one gained new courage, especially when now the artillery started with the deep bass tone. The volleys were directed with great accuracy and fell precisely in the ranks of the advancing enemy. So

came to life in the tommies. They ran for cover where they could be protected from this hail of iron and steel, but the prospect of salvation was very small. From there on, they were also not held accountable. Our position was bombarded with showers of shells and shrapnel, a hellish music as if the world was going to end. There was no time to think of fear, the enemy was before us and could only be kept from life with the rifle.

A section of 6-8 men with their leader had come to a distance of 200 meters from us. They were close to us, so to speak, and were taking cover behind a dyke. The man on the wing lay at the end of the dike and tried to get the other comrades to go forward. I held them down with the rifle. As soon as they made an attempt to stand up, a sure shot sat over there. - But now the ammunition dwindled. I had wasted 220 cartridges and had only a few left which I had to keep in reserve for the last desperate melee. Hand grenades lay scattered in the dirt. I gathered them together as a last reserve. Life had to be sold as dearly as possible.

In seven ranks, the English storm columns had surged down the hills, and only a few had reached the German positions and were now caught in the crosshairs. The enemy artillery showered us with shells and shrapnel, but there was no time to see what was happening next door, only the danger that came to meet us could be guarded against, it was about keeping a distance. Many a comrade died, and many were maimed for life. You had no time for worries, just look ahead, gun to cheek, ready to shoot.

The few who were lucky enough to get near our line were lost. But these guys had courage, a few hundred meters away they stood upright with the rifle to their cheek and fired. They sent us a greeting immediately after signing for a killing bullet. For two hours this terrible battle raged. On the left wing of the company, which had suffered a good deal, some of our comrades began to throw their hands in the air, but some skilful blows from the fists of the superiors brought them to their senses, and they took up the rifle again.



The enemy's ranks became thinner and thinner, and finally the advance stopped. In small clusters, some individuals retreated to get cover and out of range. Some had come so close to our position that they could neither go forward nor back. They indicated that they considered themselves lost. We waved to them to come forward. However, they did not come, they had no confidence in us. After repeated calls, however, a few came out of their hiding places. It was a command sergeant and five men. They threw away their weapons and with their hands in the air came running over to us. It was at nightfall. Now the murder was finished, and we began to look around for the comrades whom fate had put out of the game. The company had escaped rather fortunately, and the loss was not overwhelming.

The enemy had suffered terrible losses. Even on the third night after the storm, there were wounded wretches out there crying for help. The medical staff could not bring themselves to save the many mutilated comrades, although we did not hinder them in their work.

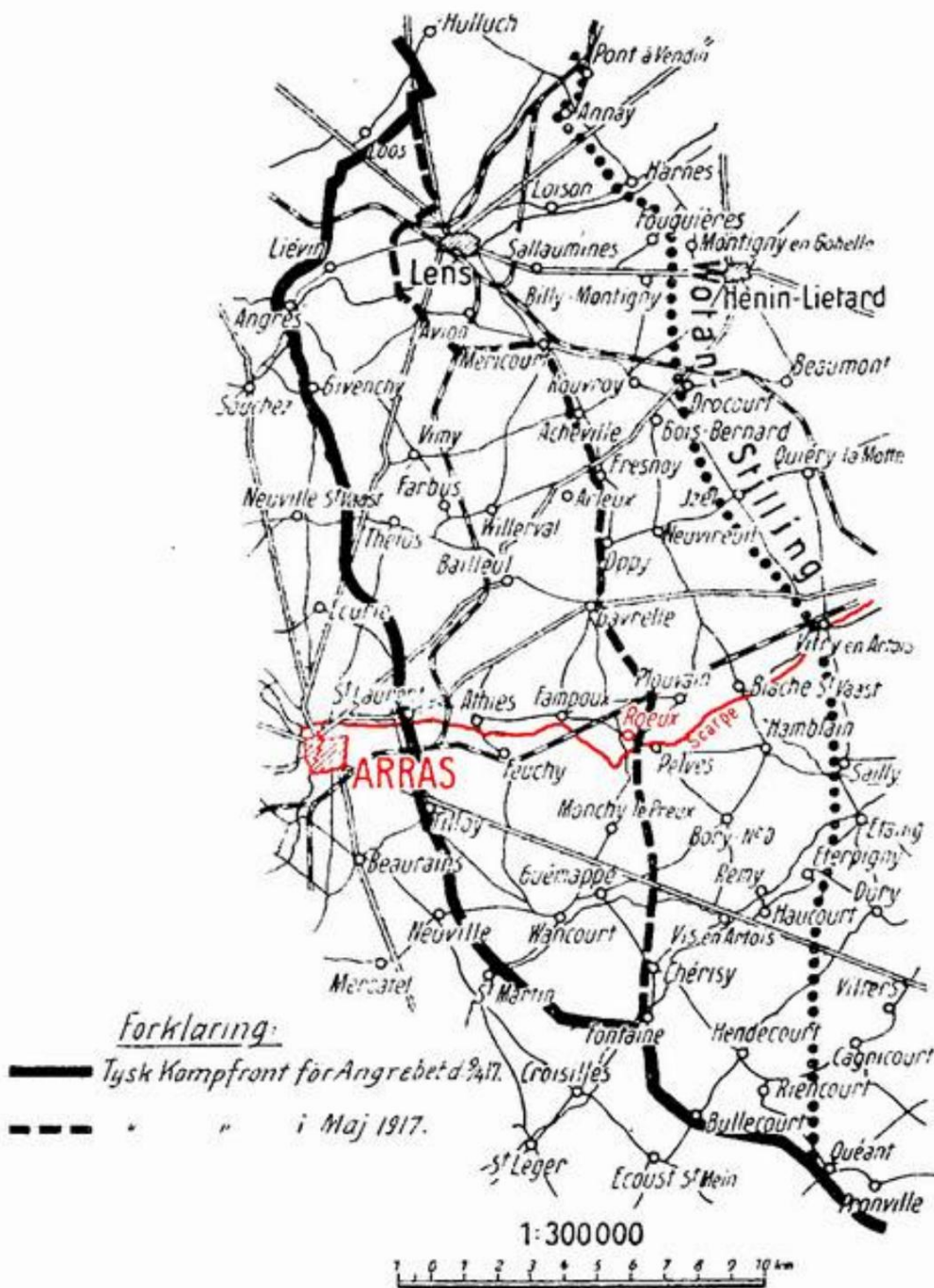
This was the first battle for the town of Roeux. It came to cost a lot of blood on both sides. On the third night after that, the relief finally came, and everyone was glad to have escaped this time. The regiment came to rest, and we were awarded twenty Iron Crosses to the company as an award for bravery."

The story of the battle

The Second Battle of Arras 9 April - 20 May 1917

The second battle of Arras was a British offensive which took place at the same time as a French offensive in the Aisne and Champagne. The offensive is best known for the 9 April attack on Vimy Ridge, where Canadian troops achieved remarkable results by capturing the strategically important ridge completely in three days.

The French offensive has since attracted the most attention because it led to widespread mutinies and the replacement of the French commander in chief with General Petain.



The offensive was started a few days before the French offensive. After an extensive bombardment for 3 days, the British attacked on 9 April 1917 on both sides of Arras and the river Scarpe. Significant results were achieved north of the river, mainly due to the use of gas.

In the next few days, the Germans are slowly pushed back. Locally, the Germans achieve results by an energetic counterattack and by repulsing an attack against Roeux. On 14 April, the Germans evacuate large coal mining areas near Lens. The British witness hundreds of explosions. The Germans had declared that if forced back they would leave the entire coal district in ruins. Over 1 ton of explosives were distributed in the area, and the destruction enormous.

There is now a pause in the battle of a week before the attack is resumed. The fighting waves back and forth, during which the Germans retreat under strong resistance and numerous counterattacks. On 14 May the Germans are driven from Roeux, and the fighting continues until 20 May, when the British finally stop the offensive.

The British had achieved no strategic breakthrough and were pushed to less than 10 km in total. forth. The total losses in dead, wounded, missing and prisoners of war were 150,000 British and 100,000 German.

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