

## Battle of the Sambre 1918

The Second Battle of the Sambre (4 November 1918) (which included the Second Battle of Guise and the Battle of Thiérache) was part of the final European Allied offensives of World War I.

At the front, German resistance was falling away. Unprecedented numbers of prisoners were taken in the Battle of the Selle, and a new attack was quickly prepared. The French First Army and the British First, Third, and Fourth Armies were tasked with advancing from south of the Condé Canal along a 30-mile (48 km) front toward Maubeuge-Mons, threatening Namur. Together with the American forces breaking out of the forests of Argonne, this would, if successful, disrupt the German efforts to reform a shortened defensive line along the Meuse.

At dawn on 4 November, 17 British and 11 French divisions headed the attack. The Tank Corps, its resources badly stretched, could provide only 37 tanks for support.

The first barrier to the northern attack was the 60–70-foot (18–21 m)-wide Sambre Canal and the flooded ground around it. It was there that the BEF had fought over four years earlier. The XIII and IX Corps reached the canal first. German guns quickly ranged the attackers, and bodies piled up before the temporary bridges were properly emplaced under heavy fire. The 1st and 32nd Divisions of IX Corps lost around 1,150 men in the crossing, including celebrated war poet Wilfred Owen.

Even after the crossing the German forces defended in depth amid the small villages and fields, and it was not until midday that a 2-mile-deep (3 km) by 15-mile-wide (24 km) breach was secured. Lieutenant Colonel D.G. Johnson was awarded the Victoria Cross for leading the 2nd Battalion Sussex Regiment's crossing of the canal

The Regiment's War Diaries state - At 0530h on November 5th 1918, the Norfolk Battalion led an attack with the 1st Bedfords at Jolimetz in immediate support. The weather, which had been splendid, had now broken and the advance was made in a downpour. At first no opposition was met and by 0730h, when the first objective had been gained well within the forest, the Bedford Battalion passed through to continue the attack. The 1st Norfolk re-formed at the Crossroads at Le Godelot, ready to give assistance, which however, was not required.

On 6th November the Battalion went on to La Haute Rue, near the eastern edge of the forest. A bridge in front had been reported safe, but by 1930h it was found to have been blown up by the retreating enemy, as well as a footbridge. Late that night a working party was detached to help in the reconstruction of the bridge at the lock.

By 0600h on 7th work had been abandoned owing to the hostile machine gun fire. At 0730h the attack was launched across the river, with the railway running north Maubeuge as its objective. The passage was made by a pontoon bridge constructed during the night by the Royal Engineers. The railway was reached and made good by the Cheshire Battalion and a platoon of B Company of the Norfolk Regiment. At about 1630h the Devonshire Regiment of the 95th Brigade passed through the Norfolk and Cheshire Battalions to continue the attack. Fontaine, on the right was taken but the Devonshire men were held up at St. Remi-Mal-Bati on the left.

At 0530h on the 8th the Devonshire Battalion were attacking near Avesnes-Mauberge Road, and at 0930h the 1st Norfolk were withdrawn to the railway, whence, on the 9th and 10th, they went back to reorganise at Jolimetz on the west of the Mormal Forest.