

CEREMONY

At midnight on Monday, the 16th of September 1918, four companies from 1/5th Battalion HLI took over the front of the Hindenburg Support Line between Inchy and Moeuvres from 1st Battalion Munster Fusiliers.

B and C Companies took up positions in the front line, with A and D Companies behind, in support. A full-strength C Company would have numbered 150 men. On 16th September, there were only 35. The right-hand post of C Company, closest to the village of Moeuvres, consisted of Cpl David Hunter and six men. Cpl. Hunter had only been posted to that battalion three days previously – Friday 13th September.

Their post consisted of a shell hole measuring nine feet by four feet and about five feet deep, which allowed the seven men standing room only. It was encircled by a zagged fringe of wire. They carried with them a Lewis gun and ammunition, a few bombs and their rations and water for one day.

The village of Moeuvres, a few hundred yards to the south of them had already been razed to the ground as a result of numerous attacks and counter-attacks by both sides. Nothing of the village stood above waist height.

That first night passed quietly by the standards of the Western Front. As one of Hunter's men put it afterwards, "There was just the usual shelling, nothing to worry about."

On Tuesday, the 17th September there was, according to the battalion war diary, "heavy shelling on the Hindenburg Support Line all day". During the day, C Company was forced to withdraw, but managed to re-occupy its position. During the withdrawal, however, contact with Hunter's post was lost.

The enemy attacks culminated at dusk, when a rain of gas and high explosives descended on the British posts and the Germans attacked in full force forcing the British troops back and recapturing the village of Moeuvres.

Frequent patrols and parties tried to reach Hunter's post, but they were all beaten off. By now, C Company was reduced from 35 men to 24, 7 of whom were missing.

The heavy enemy shelling continued throughout Wednesday, the 18th September and the battalion war diary reports that "attempts to find missing men were all driven off by the enemy" and "we were compelled to assume that the post had been scuppered." The seven only realised that they were isolated when their rations failed to arrive. According to one of Hunter's men, "We had got no further orders, so we decided to hold on."

By now, the seven had neither food nor water and were reduced to drinking the filthy water lying in the bottom of the shell hole. The weather was miserable – driving rain and wind.

Late on the 18th, Hunter sent two men out to try to make contact with their unit. They never came back. Pte Mulhill, from Edinburgh, was killed. His body is buried in Moeuvres cemetery. The other man, Pte McFarlane, from Glasgow, wandered for eight hours, lost in the featureless No Man's Land, was badly wounded and only reached the British lines as dawn was breaking on the 19th. On finally reaching his colleagues, he simply said that he had been "sent to see about rations and give information about the post."

That night, the 18th, as Hunter wrote later, "the machine gun which was persistently firing at us was annoying and I determined to get rid of it". So, under the cover of darkness and the rifles of his men, he crawled to the side of the ridge and managed to get within 20 yards of the enemy position. He threw a bomb into the enemy bunker and

when he advanced with fixed bayonet, there was, in his words, “very little left of the six men”. The noise of the grenade, however, caused the other enemy posts to fire into the darkness and it took Hunter three hours to crawl back to his men, loaded down with a German machine gun and valuable ammunition.

After what remained of Hunter’s post beat off repeated German attacks throughout the night, Pte Jones, from Peebles, made an attempt to crawl back, but returned to the shell hole, having found it impossible to break through. As Hunter said later, “There was nothing to do but hold on.”

On the morning of the 19th, they heard what should have been a welcome sound – the clatter of British guns. But, it also meant that they were now in danger from both their own and enemy guns. The battle roared around them all that day.

At 5.00 p.m. a concerted attempt was made to reach the isolated post. A barrage of fire was laid down every 5 minutes, with A Company advancing 100 yards every 4 minutes. They were held up by enemy fire just short of their objective until support came from D Company.

At about 9 p.m., two of Hunter’s men came back into Advanced Company HQ, explained that they belonged to Hunter’s post, that Hunter and two men were still holding the post and that they had been sent in to find out what was happening.

A platoon was immediately sent out and brought the remaining three men back. They refused the offers of a stretcher or ambulance and walked back to their HQ to be greeted warmly by their colleagues.

As a result of their efforts, Cpl Hunter was promoted to Sgt and awarded the VC and the other six men were each awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Hunter's was the 500th award of the VC during WW1 and it was one of the very few VCs awarded to an NCO otherwise than posthumously.

On 16 November 2018, Hunter went to Buckingham Palace, where King George V presented him with his medal.