

Captain Eric Alfred Charles Fazan and the Battle of Aubers Ridge.



The late Colonel E. A. C. Fazan, M.C., T.D., D.L.
Commanding Officer of the Battalion, 1930-35,
and author of this book.

[xii]

Author: Fazan, Eric A. C

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Summery

Eric A C Fazan was a GP from a well off family in Wadhurst when he joined the Royal Sussex Regiment (RSR) to fight during the First World War. On the 9th May 1915 he was involved in one of the most significant battles for not only Wadhurst but for all of West Sussex due to the large amount of casualties and deaths from the 2nd and 5th Battalions. He was considered a distinguished soldier and he was awarded medals for his bravery on the field. This information was found in original documents written by Eric himself that are kept at the West Sussex Record Office (WSRO) as well as national documents found on Ancestry.com.

Introduction

A work placement module was offered during my second year studying History at the University of Chichester and it gave me the opportunity to work with Worthing Library and the West Sussex Record Office to create a case study for the 'West Sussex and the Great War' project. This project aims to create a website that will contain case studies of many people from West Sussex who were involved in the First World War for the forthcoming centenary in summer 2014. We were given a choice of people to research and I chose Dr Eric A C Fazan, this is because I thought it would be very interesting to look at a person's perspective not only of a battle but a disastrous battle resulting in major losses. There were also many newspaper articles covering the event allowing me to compare how it differed between a first-hand account and the reports back 'home'. There were a variety of sources available for Fazan, the principal sources were his war diary, newspaper cutting book on the 5th battalion from August 1914 to August 1915 which were both original documents found in the West Sussex Record Office. Fazan also wrote a book 'Cinque Ports Battalion, The Story of the 5th (Cinque Ports) Battalion, the Royal Sussex Regiment (RSR Association, 1971)' which was also very helpful and was available at the West Sussex Record Office. The 1911 census on Ancestry.com was also a very useful place for background information on his life and family.

Background

Eric Alfred Charles Fazan was born on the 24th March 1887 in Kensington to parents Charles Herbert Fazan and Fanny Fazan. The 1901 Censusⁱ shows that the Family moved to Wadhurst on the Kent-Sussex border which had a population of around 3,500 people. Here is where they had four more children, Roy, Frances, Endor and Doris. They were a fairly well off family as the 1911 censusⁱⁱ shows that they had two maids and one cook. By 1911 Eric was living in Hampstead, London as a medical studentⁱⁱⁱ and then became a GP in Wadhurst where the rest of his family were living. At this time his younger brother Roy was also a medical student^{iv} hoping to become a doctor. In 1914 when war broke out both Eric and Roy joined the 5th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment (RSR) where he was a Captain of A Company and later became a Colonel. The Battle of Aubers Ridge, 9th May 1915 was the most significant battle that Eric was involved in. The Battle of Aubers Ridge was part of the larger campaign, The Second Battle of Artois and it was fought the same time as the Battle of

Ypres. The aim was for the British to capture the enemy trenches and take Aubers Ridge however the landscape was very flat and the enemy could see the allies advancement leaving them open to gunfire. It was the most disastrous battle for Wadhurst as they lost 23 men in battle.

Detail

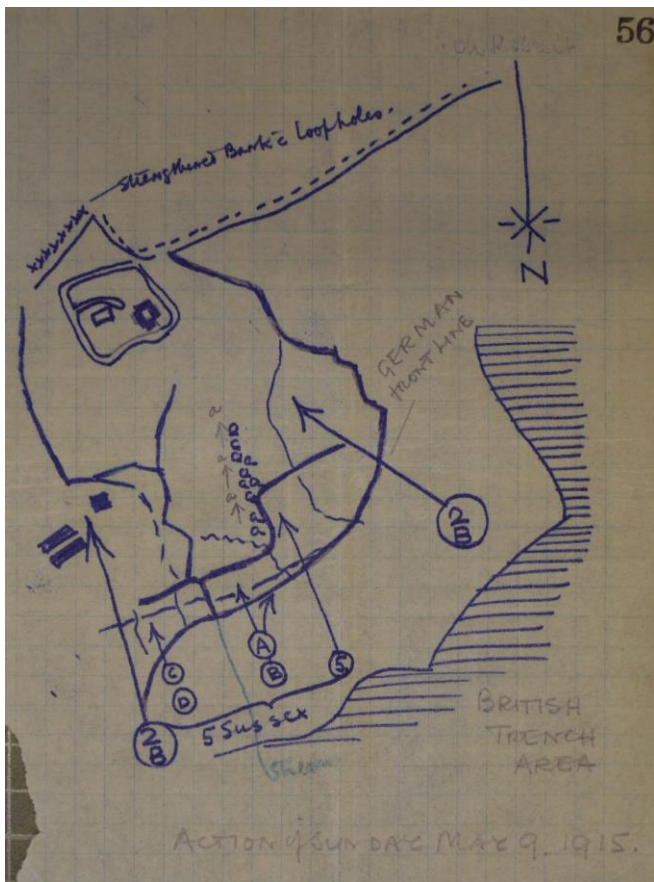
In Fazans book where he looks at the history of the RSR (Clique Ports) 5th Battalion he describes their training before leaving for France. On the 26th July 1914 they were assembled in camp Bordon for its annual training, this included a four day march to Salisbury. They arrived on the 3rd August and on the next day war were declared. This meant they had to move to Dover Castle to make sure they were ready for service on the front line. After this in early October they were moved to the Tower of London they were then informed on the 23rd January 1915 that they had been selected for service on the continent. Finally on the 18th February 1915 they left for an unknown location in France.

Using Fazan's Diary we are able to see a day to day life of a soldier in the trenches, most significantly for Fazan was the run up to and the Battle of Aubers Ridge itself. On the 28th April 1915 the 5th Battalion left for the trenches near Aubers Ridge to take over from the RSR 2nd Battalion. The very next day they were bombed by the enemy but luckily this resulted in no serious casualties. The next attack from the enemy was on 1st May 1915, the shelling begun at 3:30am and it was directed towards the supporting trenches resulting in one soldier from A Company dying and four were wounded. On the diary entry of the 3rd May 1915 Fazan discusses the events of the 1st May, he states

"This really was an ordeal. I have since spoken to artillery officers who say the bombardment was very heavy. Everybody expected us to have heavy losses from it ... I know now that they nearly all expected to be killed, with some reason"^v

On the 5th May he explains that orders were sent to make sure everything was packed up by 9:00am on the 6th May to be ready to move at half an hour's notice after 10:00am the same day. However on the 6th May he explains that the morning was not clear enough for the planned bombardment and him and his company were not told to move to the newest trenches the following evening to take part in a planned assault on the enemy. After moving to the new trenches on the 7th May plans for the bombardment were confirmed on the 8th May ready for the start of the battle of Aubers ridge. His RSR 5th Battalion were to support the RSR 2nd Battalion; the bombardment was to start at 5:00am and continue until 5:30am, intense bombardment would then start and continue until 5:40am. A decision was made however that if the morning was too misty and unsuitable they would start at 9:00am to avoid another failed attempt.

As planned the bombardment started at 5:00am on the 9th May 1915 however in Fazan's book^{vi} he explains that due to casualties in the trenches and the 60 with measles meant only 600 soldiers were ready to fight on the 9th May. The initial bombardments were a success and in his



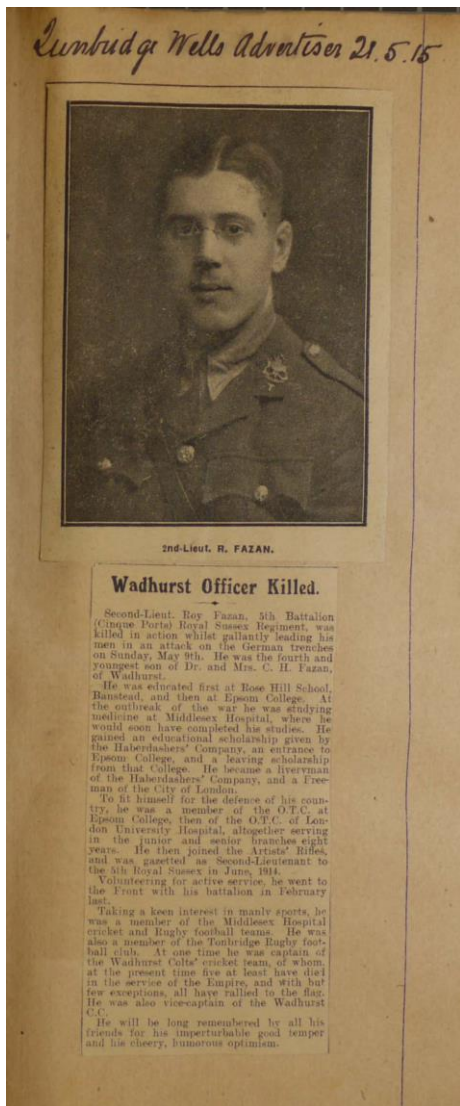
Map of Trenches on the 9th May 1915. RSR5 Museum Acc. 5021 Fazan's Diary and Documents, p.56

diary Fazan describes the front line trench was full of enthusiasm. RSR 2nd Battalion then lead the left of the attack across 300 yards of no man's land but although the bombardment had gone well it had failed to destroy the enemy trenches^{vii}. In his book Fazan explains that "they met such murderous machine gun fire that the remaining company had to be held back."^{viii} In his diary he gives a list of some of the officers who were wounded early such as Penny who was saved by the bullets hitting the bombs he was carrying. Also Major Tangham, Naffen and Dodd. Practicly the whole of B and C Company were wounded for example a Captain was blown back into the trench from the top. Captain Grant then led a charge of both 5th and 2nd Battalions RSR, he was very carm but when they went over the top they discovered that the distance between them and the enemy trenches was much larger than expected. He explains that the soldiers from 5th Battalion got about half way to the German trenches and 2nd Battalion got slightly further before they were all shot down. Instead of the bombardment finishing at 5:40am as planned it went on for hours longer. Sadly

he states "After a time we thought all of the front line of the 2nd Sussex must be killed. Actually all the men around me where hit and many killed."^{ix} Another Captain he was with was shot in the back and he tried his best to care for him however he was not able to go with him once he was found as he had no orders to do so. He became very emotional while crawling through the trenches to avoid gun fire as he found dead bodies of his comrades. As the bombardment and gunfire continued they had to lie in the trenches until dark before they were ordered retreat.

"Under such devastating fire no attack could possibly succeed and only a few were able to advance within 100 yards of the German lines ... so out there they lay, many of them killed or wounded while the guns of the enemy blasted away at their comrades in the breastworks and communication trenches behind them, parts of which were reduced to shambles."^x

There was another attack at 4:45pm by 1st Brigade who were joined by some Sussex men, none of these survived. This battle was one of the biggest disasters for Sussex and in particular Wadhurst, losing 23 men



that day. In his diary Fazan recorded C Company had 16 killed, 40 wounded and 40 missing and in his correspondence book he recorded B Company had 13 killed, 5 missing, 33 wounded and 3 had died from their wounds. His A Company came out with the fewest losses but he believed that overall there were around 200 people wounded. He also found out that his brother Roy had been killed during the battle. He had to write home to some families to inform them of the death of a family member. On the 30th May 1915 he wrote to Mrs Grant to notify her of the death of her son at the battle on the 9th May^{xi}.

The Sussex News on the 18th May 1915 reported on the wounded and dead of both the 2nd and 5th Battalions. 27 officers died and 682 unofficial rank soldiers died on the 9th May^{xii}. On the 21st May 1915 the Sussex News headline was "The famous ninth of May, high praise for the 5th Battalion Royal Sussex"^{xiii} Colonel Langham gave an account of the day stating the men were "splendid but helpless"^{xiv}. The newspapers did not pretend the battle was a success but it appears that they tried to hide some of the horrors and saw their men as fighting gloriously.

His diary shows how they were all expected to continue to follow orders and carry on as normal even after such large losses, it must have been very difficult. Fazan had to stay strong to support his men and to be able to notify families of their losses, even with the loss of his own brother.

RSR5/65 Cuttings book on the 5th Battalion August 1914 – August 1915. Report of Roy Fazan's Death in the Tunbridge Wells Adviser.

Conclusion

Eric and the rest of his family were inevitably affected by the death of his brother Roy during the Battle of Aubers Ridge but after the war Eric spends the rest of his career as a GP in Wadhurst where he was

considered a great doctor. He took a particular interest in families of ex-servicemen due to his understanding of their problems and needs. During the research some sources were much easier to read and understand than others. For example the newspaper cuttings book found in the WSRO was very easy to read as it was printed however Fazan's war diary also kept at the WSRO was much more difficult to interpret as it was hand written in pencil on thin paper during his time at war. The problems I faced with this document were although generally his handwriting was quite easy to read, some of the pages had faded, making it difficult to interpret. The most important lesson I learnt from using these original documents is to read slowly and take as much time as you need to re-read the documents to make sure nothing is missed. Working with and at the West Sussex Record Office was a great experience, during this research the staff were very helpful, they taught us how to use the online archives and were able to recommend other documents that were useful to the research.

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- ⁱ 1901 England Census about Fanny Fazan www.ancestry.co.uk
- ⁱⁱ 1911 England Census about Roy Fazan http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=1911England&rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=and&gsfn=Roy&gsln=Fazan&dbOnly=F0006301%7cF0006301_x%2cF0005DFC%7cF0005DFC_x%2cF0006866%7cF0006866_x%2cF0006867%7cF0006867_x%2cF0005DFD%7cF0005DFD_x%2cF0006300%7cF0006300_x%2cF800686D%7cF800686D_x%2c83004005%7c83004005_x%2cF000686E%7cF000686E_x%2c83004006%7c83004006_x&uidh=an6&pcat=35&fh=0&h=51223374&recoff=
- ⁱⁱⁱ 1901 England Census about Eric Fazan http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=1911England&rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=and&gsfn=Eric&gsln=Fazan&dbOnly=F0006301%7cF0006301_x%2cF0005DFC%7cF0005DFC_x%2cF0006866%7cF0006866_x%2cF0006867%7cF0006867_x%2cF0005DFD%7cF0005DFD_x%2cF0006300%7cF0006300_x%2cF800686D%7cF800686D_x%2c83004005%7c83004005_x%2cF000686E%7cF000686E_x%2c83004006%7c83004006_x&uidh=an6&pcat=35&fh=0&h=1628458&recoff=
- ^{iv} 1911 England Census about Roy Fazan (see above)
- ^v RSR Museum Acc. 5021 Fazan's Diary and Documents p.43
- ^{vi} E. A. C. Fazan, *Cinque Ports Battalion: The Story of the 5th (Cinque Ports) Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment* (RSR Association, 1971)
- ^{vii} Fazan, *Cinque Ports Battalion*, p.107
- ^{viii} Fazan, *Cinque Ports Battalion*, p.107
- ^{ix} RSR Museum Acc. 5021 p.58
- ^x Fazan, *Cinque Ports Battalion*, p.107
- ^{xi} RSR5/77 Pocket Book with Copies of Battle Records May-June 1915
- ^{xii} RSR5/65 Cuttings Book on 5th Battalion August 1914-August 1915 p.58
- ^{xiii} RSR5/65 Cuttings Book on 5th Battalion August 1914-August 1915 p.59
- ^{xiv} RSR5/65 Cuttings Book on 5th Battalion August 1914-August 1915 p.59+

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RSR5/78 Field Service Book, May to August 1915 at the West Sussex Record Office.

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