

Section 092

Summary

The 2nd Battalion

The 2nd Bn was one of two Regular battalions formed originally in 1881. In this section we summarise their activities in WW1.

The 2nd was serving at Jhansi in India when war broke out. They embarked at Bombay on the troopship SS Dongala on the 27th September 1914 and reached Liverpool on October 23rd. After a brief stop-over at Winchester where they joined 25th Brigade they set out for France and arrived at Le Havre on the 5th November with 30 officers and 978 other ranks.

Their first job was to relieve the 1st East Surreys in trenches at Fauquissart and suffered terribly from trench feet and illness caused by the abrupt change of climate. When they fraternised with German soldiers from a Bavarian unit at Christmas they were consoled by the fact that the Germans were just as cold and muddy as they were. The next three months were spent in and out of trenches until 8th Division were replaced by 7th Division and they could retire to billets at Riez Bailleul.

First real bleeding came at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle between the 10th and 15th March 1915 when they lost 75 men killed, 223 wounded and 17 missing. Further losses were incurred on the 10th May in a confused raid on German trenches near Bac St Maur. The summer was spent alternating between front line duty and billets

They were part of the first phase of the Battle of Loos on the 25th September 1915. None of them managed to get into the German 2nd line trenches and they suffered 131 killed, 206 wounded and 60 missing. This was followed by a spell in Divisional reserve at Fleurbaix and then two months of intensive training to incorporate all the new men who had been drafted in to replace the casualties.

From January to March 1916 they remained west of Lille with some trench duty. On the 28th March they were moved to the Somme

area as part of the build up for the coming offensive. Towards the end of June they conducted a silent reconnaissance on the German trenches and found the Germans quite snug and happy in their deep dugouts despite the artillery bombardment which had supposedly reduced the Germans to minced meat. They reported their findings to higher authority but were told they were mistaken.

The 2nd were attacking Ovillers on the first day of the Somme offensive and had 437 casualties. A few days later the 5th Battalion covered the same ground and found themselves tripping over the bodies of their comrades. The remnant of the battalion had to withdraw to reform and recuperate and the rest of the summer and early autumn was spent near Vermelles with only a few periods of trench duty. They came back to the Somme area on the 10th October and were in and out of trenches with a few raids to break the monotony until the 5th June 1917 when they were moved to relieve the 1st Worcesters at Ypres.

They had two major engagements in the Paschedaele horror: at the Battle of Lengemark on the 16th August and near Passendaele on the 2nd December. When the German Spring offensive broke on the 21st March 1918 the 2nd Battalion was moved back to the Somme area to try to stem the attack. They saw action first on the 24th March and gradually retreated until 25th Brigade were withdrawn on the 28th March. From 27th April they were in the French sector and faced the third German attack on the Aisne on 27th May. The casualty return almost tells the story: killed 2, wounded 51, missing 653. They had been overrun and virtually wiped out.

The remnant of the battalion which then comprised 7 officers and 120 other ranks was merged with the other remnants of 8th Division to form the 1/8th Composite Battalion. The Division was reduced to two such battalions, the 1/8th and the 2/8th. On the 12th June they were transferred back to the British Army and moved to near Dieppe where the 2nd Battalion

was rebuilt.

They were back in the line at Vimy Ridge on the 22nd July and were part of an attack on the 21st September when the advance to Victory began. The Germans were pursued towards Douai and the 2nd Battalion were at Pommeroeuil when the Armistice took effect on November 11th.

They returned to Reading on the 17th May 1919 having been reduced to cadre by leave and demobilisation. A detachment of the Battalion was sent to North Russia to fight the Bolsheviks but spent most of the time sailing up and down the Volga. The detachment returned to England on the 27th September to reform for peacetime duties.

The rest of the 2nd now comprising only 4 officers and 59 other ranks were sent to Dublin 7th August 1919 and took over 34 officers and 1032 other ranks from the 3rd Battalion which was then disbanded.