

Section 095

Summary

The 5th Battalion

In this section we summarise the activities of the 5th Battalion in WW1

The 5th were the first of the new Royal Berkshire battalions to be formed after Kitchener's appeal for 100,000 volunteers. Lt Col Foley was given the task of forming the new unit. After a few days at Brock Barracks the new recruits were moved to Shorncliffe on 15th August with six regular officers, and a few regular NCOs. Training began immediately although there was a severe shortage of equipment. They moved to Folkestone on 2nd January 1915 and on 23rd Feb to Aldershot to join the rest of their new Division. They were now part of 35th Brigade, 12th Division. They moved to France on Sunday 30th May.

Their initial training was at Armentières and they moved to Ploegsteert June 14th to learn trench warfare from a regular battalion. Pte Lovett [10602] became the first casualty when he was wounded on 6th July. Throughout the summer of 1915 they alternated between trench duty and periods in reserve and for most men it was all a great game. When the Battle of Loos opened on 25th September they were engaged in creating diversions and uncertainty in the German lines well to the north of the main battlefield. The following day however they began a move south and were brought to grim reality by the sight of casualties and appalling conditions. They made their attack on the 13th October at Hulluch Quarry and acquitted themselves well but 65 were either killed or died of their wounds and 91 wounded, many of whom later died.

They retired to Reserve and Christmas was spent at Béthune. The next few months were spent either in the trenches or training for the 'big push' They were transferred to III Corps on 16th June 1916 and made their debut at the Somme on 3rd July at Ovillers fighting over ground strewn with the bodies of men from the 2nd Battalion. This engagement won them

6 MCs, 6 DCMs, and 17 MMs but the Battalion was reduced to 340 men. They came under severe counter-attack on the 8th August winning another 14 MMs.. 300 reinforcements joined them in October and they retired to Arras to recover.

The winter of 1916/7 was spent in and out of the trenches and training. They engaged in a short raid on the 17th March which was modestly successful. On the 9th April they moved out from Arras through a network of tunnels and distinguished themselves once more at Battery Valley where they captured many German guns, even managing to turn some of them on the fleeing Germans. The summer of 1917 was spent mainly in and around Arras but there were no major actions.

They arrived at Peronne on 15th November to prepare for the Battle of Cambrai which was launched 20th November. They achieved all their objectives despite their tanks suffering breakdowns but lost 6 officers and 161 ORs out of a starting tally of 17 officers and 590 ORs. The German counter-attack came on the 30th November and were forced to retire. Their German opponents later commented on the quality of the greatcoats and the ample supply of food which the 5th had been obliged to leave behind. The Germans were most appreciative of their windfall. By the time the battle concluded the 5th had lost 8 officers and 295 ORs. but they won 2 DSOs, 4 MCs, 2 DCMs, and 10 MMs.

They went into Reserve for the winter of 1917/18 around Béthune but had to move south rapidly when the German Spring Offensive began on the 21st March. However despite coming under occasional attack their role was primarily defensive and they were able to return to Reserve on the 29th March. They came under attack at Bouzincourt on the 5th April but it was beaten off. The 5th joined up with Anson Bn on the 24th May to launch an attack on the 24th May at Hamel. They captured a number of prisoners and guns but lost 14 dead with 73 wounded and 19 missing, mainly a reflection of the inexperience of the

newly drafted reinforcements.

By the 30th June they were back to full strength of 719 and ready to join in the final defeat of the Germans., however they first had to deal with Private John Swain who was shot for desertion on the 14th August at Montigny. After that the advance was in full flight with engagements at Meaulte on the 22nd August, at Carnoy 26th August, Nurlu 5th September, Epehy 17th September and Tetard Wood 19th September. They were moved to Arras on the 5th October and saw their final engagement at the Canal de l'Escau on the 28th..

When the Armistice came on the 11th November the 5th were at Vieux Cond and then retired to winter quarters at Erre near Valenciennes.. Demobilization began on the 1st Jan 1919 and Colours were presented on the 14th Feb. The remnant of the battalion left France on the 15th June and they had a Civic Reception at Reading on the 18th. Demobilization was completed immediately afterwards and the Battalion disbanded.