

Section 099

Summary

The Other Battalions

The Royal Berkshire Regiment raised 18 Battalions in the First World War. Many saw infantry service overseas and have been summarised in preceding sections. In this section we deal with the Labour and other Battalions.

3rd Battalion

When war broke out there were the two Regular battalions, the 1st and 2nd, the 3rd (Reserve Battalion), the 4th (Territorial) Battalion and a headquarters organisation for the Regiment known as the Depot.

The 3rd Battalion was essentially a training unit. New recruits went first to the 3rd for their basic training and for eventual posting to one of the regular battalions. The battalion had a staff of officers and NCOs to support the training role as well as a number of men who performed miscellaneous duties. Many of these were men who, either through disease or injury, were no longer suitable for service in active units and who were employed on light duties.

There was also the Special Reserve; made up of men who had completed their term of service with the Royal Berkshires before the war began and who were still liable for military service.

At the time of the Declaration of War in August 1914 the Depot of the Royal Berkshire Regiment and the Headquarters of the 3rd Battalion were at the Barracks, Reading. At this time the Depot was commanded by Major F. W. Foley, D.S.O., and the 3rd Battalion by Lieut.-Colonel F. G. Barker. The Adjutant was Captain A. M. Holdsworth. Colonel Foley went shortly afterwards to raise the 5th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, with which he served in France till he was wounded in December 1915. On the outbreak of war the nominal strength of the 3rd Battalion was 1200

men.

The first duties of the Depot and the 3rd Battalion Staff on the order for mobilization were the calling up, clothing, and equipment of all army reservists of the Regiment. About eighteen hundred were called up, of whom five hundred and forty were despatched to complete the 1st Battalion at Aldershot. The calling up was completed between the 4th and the 8th August 1914.

The remaining one thousand two hundred and sixty reservists proceeded to Cosham with the 3rd Battalion, which had been mobilized on the 8th August and sent to Cosham, and on to Fort Purbrook with a strength of about five hundred and fifty men.

Portsmouth

At Fort Purbrook the battalion formed part of the Portsmouth Reserve Infantry Brigade. The other units of this brigade were the 3rd Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, 3rd Highland Light Infantry, and 3rd Leicestershire Regiment.

Sgt Tiesteel commented very favourably on the quality of the reservists from the 3rd Battalion when he was serving with the 1st Bn. In 1915 he had the opportunity to serve with them himself after recovery from his wounds.

A spell at Portsmouth under Lt Col F C Barker who I must say gave every consideration and help he could to the returned wounded soldiers.

The quarters of the Royal Berkshire Battalion were changed, on the 27th October 1914, from Fort Purbrook to Victoria Barracks, Portsmouth, where it remained with the same brigade till the 12th November 1917, when it was transferred to Portobello Barracks, Dublin.

In January 1917 Lt Col Barker gave up the command of the battalion which he had held since he replaced Col Walter Thornton in 1909.

It had moved from Portsmouth to Portobello

Barracks in Dublin on the 12th November 1917. Col F W Foley had taken over temporary command after Col Barker had retired in March 1917. Major P W North had been assigned the command but was permitted to remain on active service with the 20th Durham Light Infantry until the war was over. He finally assumed command in December 1918 when Col Foley was at last allowed to retire.

During the War 21,605 men passed through the 3rd Battalion, besides officers and at its greatest strength was 3300.. Of these 21,605 other ranks, 13,533 were trained and despatched in drafts to the Expeditionary Force. Deducting these, and also 1,062 still serving with the battalion on the date of its final disembodiment, there remain in round figures 7,000 to be accounted for. These were non-effective for various reasons; transfers, discharges, deaths, desertions and demobilizations, spread fairly evenly in small numbers over the whole period of the war.

The average strength of the battalion was about 1,600. Of course fluctuations of the total were occasionally considerable; as, for instance, on the 1st September 1916, when there was a sudden influx of 590 from the disembodied 9th Battalion, or at periods when numbers were reduced by especially large drafts. Of the total of 21,605 it is estimated that only about 4,000 joined as untrained recruits. The rest were men who served with the Expeditionary Force from one to five times.

Most of the Regiment's new men joined from the 9th Battalion during its existence from November 1914 till September 1916. After that they went from the Training Reserve Battalions to the Expeditionary Force. In April 1918, however, the 3rd Battalion Royal Berkshire received about eight hundred new men direct. That was just after the great German offensive of March.

Colonel Foley had instituted an excellent system of messing and the men were always well fed. They were also provided with plenty of amusement in the shape of football, boxing, cross-country running, etc., for the fit. The wounded or sick, who could not join in these, looked on till they were sufficiently recovered to have their time occupied with ceremonial parades, musketry training, and an occasional battalion parade with a picnic dinner in the Phoenix Park.

There were occasional rounds up of Sinn

Feiners, which the men enjoyed, and in which fortunately there were no casualties.

Colonel North's difficulties in demobilization were perhaps not very different from those of other commanding officers in a similar position; but he was very successful in overcoming them and keeping the battalion contented and efficient to the end. Of the 1,062 men left on the 5th September 1919, when the battalion was disembodied, 1,040 were made over to the 2nd Battalion, and 22 to the Depot.

The officers' plate was put in the hands of trustees, on terms suggested by the Earl of Abingdon, Honorary-Colonel of the Battalion. The various regimental funds were also settled in terms which were published in the 'China Dragon' at the end of 1923.

The 3rd/4th Battalion

The 9th Battalion

The 10th Battalion

The 10th Battalion was formed in the latter part of 1915 under Col J H Balfour as a Labour Battalion. It was based at Cambridge Barracks in Portsmouth and was formed of men who were deemed not suitable for front line duties. After October 1915 large numbers of conscripts began arriving and those classified as for Labour Service were initially allocated to Headquarters Works Companies but these were then formed into the 10th Battalion. They were brought back briefly to Reading over the Christmas of 1915. On the 7th May 1916 they were mobilised and embarked for France after having been delayed by influenza, on the night of the 18th/19th June.

They went to no 3 Labour camp at Rouen where they were employed on loading and unloading supplies from trains. They became the 158th and 159th Companies of the newly formed Labour Corps on 12th May 1917 and virtually severed all links with the rest of the Regiment.

Six men from the battalion died on active service although all but 2 died after the transfer to the Labour Corps.. A further 72 former Royal Berkshiremen died serving with the

Labour Corps of whom a majority are likely to have been from the 10th.

A cadre of the battalion was reconstituted on 31st August 1916 to receive the colours which were then laid up at St George's church Reading.

11th Battalion

12th Battalion

13th Battalion

1st Home Service Garrison Battalion

Initially men classified for Garrison Home Service were posted to the 3rd Battalion starting with number 24615 on the 5th June 1916.

The First (Home Service) Garrison Battalion began to be formed 28th August 1916 when batches of men arrived from the Worcestershire Regiment and the Ox and Bucks LI. They were numbered 29528-29695. Further batches arrived 2nd September numbered 31604-32296, again from west country regiments plus large numbers from the Royal Warwicks. A further batch arrived on the 9th September numbered 32297-32320 from the Worcesters and until 22nd October numbered 32321-32606. These were almost all Derby men who had been classified as serving for Home duties only and included in their number were men from Berkshire as well.

More men were transferred in October and November numbered 32699-32797 and towards the end of December numbered 33753-33874.

For the next few months the regiment was mainly concerned with calling up Berkshire men many of whom finished up in the 1st Garrison Bn as they were classified for Home duties.

Transfers into the 1st Garrison Bn resumed on 25th Feb 1917 (numbers 34684-34753)

A large number of men were transferred on to the Home Service Battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers on the 10th Feb 1917

Thereafter there was a trickle of men posted to the 1st Garrison Bn mainly from men who were called up.

The Battalion was used mainly for duties such as guarding railway installations or munitions factories.

Eventually the Home Service Garrison Battalions were merged into the Royal Defence Corps and that of the Royal Berks became the 14th Bn Royal Defence Corps

1st Volunteer Battalion

The Volunteer Forces were reorganised in July 1916 and the battalion became known as the 1st Battalion, Berkshire Volunteer Regiment.

The Reading companies were merged into one Company known as 1 Coy, 1st Battalion

A Coy became 1 platoon

B Coy became 4 Platoon

C Coy became 5 platoon

D Coy became 8 Platoon

The Earley and District Volunteer Defence Force which had formed G Coy was reclassified as No 6 Platoon, No 2 Coy under its commander Col J Kellie.

The 2nd Volunteer Battalion

The Depot Companies

After the Derby Act had been passed men were required to register for National Service and, provided they were not classified unfit or were aliens they were offered the choice of joining up immediately, waiting until called up or appealing to a tribunal. The first call up began in March 1916 and the county regiments were faced with huge numbers of men for whom they had no role. Those that were fit for service were further classified into General Service, Labour and Home Service.

Those that had been classified for Labour were organised into Depot Companies when they arrived at Brock Barracks in Reading. These were allocated as follows:-

1st was the depot company responsible for dealing with recruits and maintaining the depot.

2nd was for clerks and managers who had administrative experience. They were despatched to central army units all over the country as administrators.

3rd was an agricultural company which was based at Lyndhurst.