

## Section 113

# Training in England

### The 1st/4th Battalion

*Much of the text for the account of the 1st/4th Battalion is taken directly from Capt CRMF Cruttwell's book 'The War Service of the 1/4 Royal Berkshire Regiment (TF)' but in this section we see the battalion mainly through the eyes of Lt Poulton Palmer*

### The Outbreak of War 2nd and 3rd August 1914

Late in the afternoon of August 2nd, 1914, the 4th Royal Berks Regiment joined the remainder of the South Midland Infantry Brigade for their annual camp on a hill above Marlow. War had broken out on the previous day between Germany and Russia, and few expected that the 15 days' training would run its normal course. It was not, therefore, a complete surprise when in the twilight of the next morning the battalion re-entered the same trains which had brought them, and returned to Reading. According to standing orders the Territorials should have reported to their depot and disbanded, but in the circumstances this seemed a rather silly thing to do and after the declaration most of the men hung around their depot at St Mary Butts and were rewarded at 19:20 by a telegram from the War Office telling them to mobilise instead of disband. Messages were sent to all parts of the County by police and motor cycles to recall the few men who had returned home and those who had not been at the camp.

Under the command of Colonel O Pearce-Seracold they marched in full order through Reading on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> to be present when the Lord Lieutenant made the declaration of war from the steps of the town hall. This declaration did three things:-

It mobilised the Reserve

It put the Territorial Army into the Reserve

It declared a state of war

By 14:00 they were ready to move to their war station at Portsmouth to defend the country from invasion across the south coast. They set off by train with 800 men and 28 Officers, leaving two officers and 65 men behind for other duties. At Portsmouth three days were spent in digging in at Portsdown Hill but on the 9<sup>th</sup> this was seen as somewhat futile and instead they were ordered to reform the South Midland Brigade near Swindon.

Lt R W Poulton Palmer described his experiences in a letter to his brother in law dated 4th August:-

Aug 4 1914 16 Portland Place, Reading

We left Reading at 3.45 pm Sunday [Aug 2] and got to Marlow, 12 miles away at 7.0 owing to an engine being off the line. We then walked 2 miles to camp in the pouring rain: we got to bed about 12.0 and were awakened at 2.30 am, breakfasted at 3.30, left at 4.15 and got to Reading at 6.30. were shut in the drill hall till 9.0 and then dismissed to our homes!! Such a bathos. Now to-day all is excitement. We have been preparing for mobilization all day at headquarters, and we are quite ready when it comes. We have gpt billets for the men in houses in the town. We go for 2 days to Cosham on mobilization and then to Swindon. But I think we go straight to Swindon. There I expect we train hard, but I know no more. All my 35 lbs of kit is ready. Now I must stop and go down to a drill. [TX01435]

### Mobilisation

#### Portsmouth - 4th to 9th August 1914

At last, at 7.20 p.m. on the next day, August 4th, the order for mobilisation was received, and conveyed throughout the county that night. by the police and eager parties of volunteers. The plan of mobilisation had been closely studied in all its details, and worked with complete smoothness. By 2 p.m. on the 5th the assemblage at Reading was complete, and after a laborious day spent in medical inspection, drawing of equipment and of ammunition, 28 officers and 800 other ranks entrained in the evening for their war station at Portsmouth, while 2 officers and 65 other ranks remained at Reading to receive the transport from the remount depot. At Portsmouth three days were spent mainly in digging, until a new move on the 9th brought the whole of the South Midland Division together at Swindon.

Lt Poulton Palmer writing to his brother about 7th August:-

We were mobilized by wires on Tuesday night at 8.0 pm and arrived here on Wednesday 930 strong out of 1000 - 50 being left at Reading - at 11 pm. I got to bed at 2 am as I was transport officer and had to see all the stores in. Since then I have been transport officer which has meant daily journeys into the Recreation Ground at Portsmouth to draw bread, meat, fuel and fodder.

We are billeted here on the houses roundabout - us and the Bucks - so it's a good crowd. I share a bed with the quartermaster.

We are part of Section No III Portsmouth defences: ie on the land side to protect the town from an attack from say Hayling Island. We are also protecting the Naval Wireless Station and some ordnance places. There is an anti-airship gun here which is quite interesting. They seem awfully frightened about airships. We leave here on Sunday for Swindon, I think, where we shall probably be in a standing camp for some weeks, getting together. I expect we shall get pretty sick of things.

It is an interesting life, but not too exciting, as I am chiefly concerned with getting stores all the time. [TX01436]

## **Volunteering for Overseas Service Swindon 9th to 16th August 1914**

Poulton Palmer wrote to his sister Hilda describing the set up at Swindon:-

Aug. 12, Swindon.

We have a head-quarters here at an Elementary School and are billeted round. We get up at about 6.15 a.m. and have breakfast, and then parade about 9.0 a.m. for about five hours and do drilling. I usually go riding in the evening which is great fun. Then we have mess and get to bed early. That is a rough outline. [TX01438A]

He later wrote that the six days they spent there was taken up mainly with route marches to get the feet hardened.

Here on the 14th the battalion was invited by telegram from the War Office to volunteer immediately for foreign service. At this date the formation of the new service units had scarcely begun, and few realised how widely the common burden of responsibility would be shouldered in the next few weeks.

Poulton Palmer describes how this was done in a letter to his brother:-

Aug. 13, Swindon.

In answer to your wire I have volunteered for foreign service with the Battalion.

Kitchener wants 100,000 men, and he has written to ask if Territorial units will volunteer complete to go out as units.

The Divisional General wanted his Division out. Now a Division, besides guns, &c., has 12 Battalions of infantry - 12,000 men. The Colonel paraded us, made a perfectly unbiassed speech, saying nobody would be thought worse of for refusing, and gave us 5 minutes. Result-211 men and 14 officers.

'Disappointment - as 75 % is required to take us as a unit. In the meantime the Colonel gets news that all the other Battalions have volunteered almost complete, and so we are again paraded. Great Speech-" If you refuse to go you can never hold [up] your head[s] among the Oxfords, the Gloucesters, the Warwicks, again. Follow your Colonel and his Company Commanders." Result-over 70 %, so if we do not lose any, and many are not medically unfit, we shall go. But I can't tell yet whether we shall go as a unit, so I don't think it's any use wiring mother; as anyhow I suppose they'll come home the shortest way. I don't know what you think. But I feel at present that I shall certainly volunteer any way, even if

we don't go as a Battalion. But I am not sure of this so keep quiet about it. But anybody with a military training is bound to turn up and offer himself.' [TX01438B]

At this point the 2nd/4th Royal Berks was formed of men who did volunteer or who were deemed unfit for foreign service, Thereafter the two battalions' fortunes diverged. The process evidently had not been completed as on Sept 3rd when at Chelmsford a further separation took place - Poulton Palmer wrote

Yesterday we had the final division of the Battalion into those who have volunteered to serve abroad and those who have not. We have about 700 out of the 1,000 going abroad, and we shall be 1,000 shortly, as we get about 50 recruits from Reading every day. But we need a lot of training yet, and I don't expect we shall go for another 6 weeks or 2 months. [TX01440]

## **Dunstable 16th -20th August 1914**

On August 16th, the division entrained for Leighton Buzzard, and the battalion spent four days in billets at Dunstable, 8 miles away, before setting out on the 20th on a 70-mile trek to its final destination at Chelmsford.

Poulton Palmer describes the journey and the process of obtaining billets:-

Then on the following Sunday [Aug. 16] we went by train to Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire, via Oxford and Bletchley. We marched from there to Dunstable. There we stayed 5 days, and were suddenly shifted by route marching to Chelmsford. [TX01440B]

## **Journey to Chelmsford 24th-28th August 1914**

In spite of the heat, the dusty roads and the small opportunities afforded since mobilisation for practice in marching, the journey was successfully accomplished in four days. The inhabitants of Stevenage, Hoddesdon, Waltham Abbey and Fyfield, where they were billeted in succession, to whom the passage of troops was still a pleasing novelty, and the provision of billets more than a business transaction, received them with every kindness.

Poulton Palmer describes the journey and how billeting was done:-

That was 63 miles, which we did in five days, stopping the nights at Stevenage, Hoddesdon, Waltham Abbey, and Fyfield. We lost about 100 with sore feet, but they came on, and are well again now. Billeting is an amusing game. I was billeting officer at Waltham Abbey. I went on there by motorbike the day before they were due to arrive, and interviewed the police and said I wanted billets for 950 men and 30 officers. Then I went to the Surveyor's office and got a map of the town, and saw how the streets ran. Then I went down the streets and found the number of houses in each street, and fitted in the eight Companies with 2 men per house. Then I found houses for the Colonel, and officers, and the head-

quarters and orderly room. They were" Billets with subsistence" i. e. you pay the householders 3/4½d. A day for each man, 9d. for bed, 1/7½d. for dinner, 9d. for breakfast and 3d. for supper; and they have to feed the men. [TX01440B]

## Chelmsford

### 28th August 1914 to 30th March 1915

Thus Chelmsford became the adopted home and theatre of training for the battalion, except for the period September 24th-October 16th, which was spent in three adjacent villages, Broomfield and Great and Little Waltham. The relations between the town and the soldiers were excellent throughout, and many warm friendships were made; while in the surrounding country the landowners and farmers made the troops free of their land, thereby greatly assisting the field training, which was carried on uninterruptedly through a fine autumn and a wet winter.

Poulton Palmer was billeted together with Capt Blandy on a Mr and Mrs Gripper at Redcot near Chelmsford and built up a near family relationship with them.

A lot of time was spent in digging trenches - Poulton Palmer commented:-

Nov. 15. Chelmsford.

"Teddie and Frida are here and we have been round looking at the London defences. Jolly fine trenches they are, and very well concealed, provided the enemy have not aeroplanes. If they have, they will show up in a moment. We are shooting this week, and the noise on the range makes one deaf. [TX01441]

He commented to his father on the way they were constructed: His father wrote-

I remember his explaining to me at Chelmsford, drawing a diagram on the road with his stick, the proper method of trench formation in a dangerous zone - how the first night a long wavy trench, 2 ft. wide and 3 ft. 9 deep, should be dug with a parapet of 9 inches only, the rest of the earth being scattered behind. Then on the first day T-shaped excavations were to be driven from the front wall of this trench. The heads of these T's, each holding three men, then become the actual firing trenches, each head being protected by big traverses formed by heaping the excavated earth between it and the head on either side. Then, later, shelters are built in the stem of each T, the wavy trench is widened, latrines dug in its back wall, and communication trenches made, stretching to the rear. [TX01446]

Poulton Palmer wrote:-

This job is pretty dull. And now that they are afraid of invasion, our chances of doing anything real sensibly diminish. They certainly seem very scared. All week-end leave is stopped - i. e. all leave. Anybody who leaves the mess for a meal has to put where he is to be found on a slate; all our kit is ready packed or arranged to be put together in a moment. All the arrangements for an alarm are made, and we shall be in the special train complete in 2 hours from the time message is sent to us of an alarm. I have seen some of the trenches that have been dug out

near Maldon, on the Blackwater. They seem quite fine ones, with underground rest rooms, lavatories &c. !!

I ran 2nd in a Battalion cross.country run of 3¼ miles yesterday: 250 ran.

We are still training, and doing a good deal of shooting on the range. We also have 4 aeroplanes permanently attached to us. And we are getting much more completely equipped. [TX01442]

In September the permanent sergeant-instructors were taken away for duty with the New Armies. One of them had been attached to each company in peace time, but fortunately they were allowed to retain their regular adjutant, Captain G. M. Sharpe, and the R.S.M. (afterwards Lieut. Hanney, M.C.).

They had expected to go to France very quickly but Kitchener had no time for the territorials and did not think they were fit to go overseas. He did send a few London battalions in November but the Royal Berks were stuck in England. Poulton Palmer wrote very gloomily on November 18th after a close friend was killed-

why, oh why all this ghastly waste of youth?

We tarry on here expecting and hoping to be allowed to do our bit, But while there is a chance of a raid, I don't think we shall go abroad. But we are all ready, and my Company is having voluntary French classes, and in view of recent fighting a lot of bayonet fighting instruction. [TX01450]

About the close of the year the double-company system was adopted, under which the two headquarter companies became A Company, under the command of Major Hedges, while Captain Battcock commanded B Company, composed of the men from Wallingford, Wantage and Newbury, Captain Lewis C Company, from Windsor and Maidenhead, and Captain Thorne D Company, from Abingdon and Wokingham.

## Christmas 1914

Christmas was spent at Chelmsford. The battalion gathered by companies at a school and each company had its own classroom. The fare was provided by the citizens of Reading and Col Seracold visited each of the companies in turn to address and greet the men. Afterwards they returned to their billets where most were entertained to a second dinner by their hosts.

E Company's dinner menu recorded their origins in Newbury, Aldermaston, Hungerford and Reading. The menu contained Turkeys, Sausages, Plum Puddings, Mince Pies, Cheese and Dessert. It listed the 3 Officers, 7 Sergeants, 16 Corporals and 141 Privates who were present.

While guarding the Marconi Wireless station they were able to listen in to the German propaganda broadcasts. On Christmas day they said:-

" Germany sends Christmas greeting to all nations of

the world, except England, France, Russia, Japan, &c."

On Boxing day a six a side football competition had to be cancelled because of the inclement weather but the Broadwood Camp concert was held at the Corn Exchange in the evening. [BC 1/1/15]

## Into 1915

Shortly after Christmas there was an influenza epidemic among the 1st/4th at Chelmsford. The medics seemed somewhat insensitive as the cure was listed as 'Medicine and duty' [BC 15/1/15]

Many memories remained of the laborious days and nights spent throughout the seven months period between mobilization and embarkation; of company training in Highlands, fights on Galleywood Common, route marches up the long slope of Danbury Hill, journeys to Boreham Range in the darkness of a winter dawn, returning after dusk with a day's firing behind, and long hours spent in guarding the Marconi station in rain, snow and mist. All ranks were very keen and eager, especially before illness, the monotony of routine and disappointment at receiving no orders for overseas, produced some inevitable reaction. Colonel Serocold has indeed expressed his opinion that the battalion, while under his command, was never better trained than at the end of November, 1914.

Rumours abounded. They had all volunteered for France but they were being held to their Territorial obligations in defending the United Kingdom. Writing on January 5th Poulton Palmer remarked:-

Everything here is much the same. Various rumours fly round.

- (1) We shall not go abroad for a long time, because of invasion scares.
- (2) We go to Egypt at the end of the month.
- (3) We go to France at the end of the month.

But I expect they are all lies.

We do Brigade training to-morrow, i. e. 4 Battalions against each other. We have breakfast at 7.15, so it's an early start. [TX01443]

On the 17th he wrote:-

About going - nobody knows anything. The rumour is we are leaving Chelmsford this month: for some other place in England. But my impression is it's no good believing anything, and so don't you believe anything. Anyway we have just had a bicycle shed put up outside our mess which will cost £4. Of course that may mean we shall move! [TX01444]

After company and battalion training the Brigade got together and exercised as a unit in early January - Poulton Palmer:-

We are trying to do Brigade training in it. This means manoeuvring over the country with 4,000 men. We had an attack on Friday and I spent half an hour lying in a furrow of a ploughed field which was full of water. Brown

looked very gloomy when he saw what he had to clean! [TX01443]

At night a number of men had to stay on duty in case an invasion was launched suddenly. Poulton Palmer wrote on Feb 21st:-

I am having a quiet Sunday here, as I am Subaltern of the day, and have to stay in the area. I have to inspect the Rations at 12.0, post the quartermaster's guard at 5.0 p.m. Then I am helping another officer by taking-'part of his Inlymg Picquet Job from 5.0 p.m. to 9 p.m. Then I collect the Reports of those present at 10 p.m., and turn out the quartermaster's guard at 11 p.m. to see if they are awake.

The Inlying Picquet is an Officer, a Sergeant and 22 men, who live in a house from 5 p.m. till 8.0 the next morning, to be available in case there is a surprise, and so they are quite ready to do anything that is required at a moment's notice. [TX01444]

A few days later, on Feb. 25, Ronald was at Bisley for a three weeks' course of Machine Gun Instruction, or, as he said in a letter, 'to learn the 150 parts of a Machine Gun'. Three note-books contain his exact and careful notes. The course ended on March 16 when Ronald qualified as a 'First Class Instructor'. He wrote:-

I am on a machine gun course of 16 days living in a 5 hut. It's great fun and very hard work. Lectures and drill 9-1, and 2-4, and exams and notes to write up. I am hard at it, as I want a distinguished certificate. So I've got a stove and am quite warm. The work is very interesting.

An old doctor friend of Poulton Palmer's had written to give him advice on French water. Palmer replied:-

As you imagine I have little time, as we are off about tea-time to-morrow. The transport has already gone, and we are busting around paying billets, inspecting houses, &c.

Thanks for notes on water, &c. I'll take care, but of course we aren't allowed to drink any but what comes from the water carts which are carefully filtered. [TX01457]

## Departure for France

### 28th March 1915

Pte J Wheatley (2677) began his diary on this date. He was part of no 1 Gun Team in the Machine Gun section. It would appear he was given more notice of the move than Capt Cruttwell.

Packed up ready to move from Chelmsford. Had farewell tea with Mrs Richell.

Left at midnight, for station. We had a good send off from Widford, people on the paths, shouting and giving us cigarettes. One or two broken hearts left behind in the village.

Arrived station and loaded up our gun limbers on trucks, leave early in morning.

Wonder if I will ever see Chelmsford again. What hopes. What a memorial day!

### 29th March 1915

Arrived Southampton about 8 o'clock. Hung about all day and embarked about 7 o'clock at night on the SS Huanchaco. Enjoyed trip across. Lovely night and a good moon.

Everybody excited at the prospect of being in France in the morning. I have always wished to see the "Gay City" and "Sunny France".

Walt even more excited than myself. What luck we are both on the same gun team, it will be alright together, and Nor as well.

*Continued in section 203*

### 30th March 1915

Capt Cruttwell's Company left a day later.

At last, however, on the evening of March 30th, 1915, amidst many expressions of goodwill and regret from the townsfolk, who thronged the streets, the battalion entrained for France, and left Folkestone in the S.E.R. packet boat Onward at 11 p.m.

Lt Poulton Palmer gives his recollections of the journey:-

Tuesday, 30th March.

We paraded in Moulsham Street, Chelmsford, at 6 p.m. and amid great enthusiasm from the populace, entrained for the unknown port. We said good-bye to the Grippers, who had been so kind to us during our stay, and were soon off. The train ran to Liverpool Street, and then backed out again to cross under the Thames to New Cross. This confirmed our suspicions of Dover or Folkestone. The latter it was. We found ourselves boarding the 'Onward' the ordinary traffic steamer-Folkestone to Boulogne. [Left Folkestone 11 p.m.] I believe I crossed in it for the French match this time last year. The embarkation was very well done, the men being quiet and orderly, and our time of embarkation only just second to the Bucks who easily beat the record for the port which has seen 55,000 troops cross over. It was an eerie crossing, a full moon, a smooth sea, and a torpedo boat zigzagging about in front of us-troops all over the ship, very quiet and orderly.

At Boulogne we disembarked, and I found the Port Commandant was old Col, Eastwood of the Oxford O. T. C. We formed up and marched up the hill to a camp [the Blue Base] placed about two miles above the town, in a beautiful situation, and splendid view. Here we fitted the men and got in ourselves and spent a very cold night [under canvas with only one blanket per man. They awoke to driving snow]

At long last they had reached France.

## Sources

The War Service of the 1st/4th Battalion (CRMF Cruttwell) pp1-3

Dinner menu of E Coy (Xmas 1914)

Diary of Pte Wheatley (pp2-3)

Berkshire Chronicle 1/1/1915

Life of Ronald Poulton by his father (London 1919)