

Section 114

Training in England

The 2nd/4th Battalion

Summary

The Territorials had their own separate recruiting system and competed vigorously with the service battalions for recruits. The 4th Battalion had its own recruiting centre in St Mary Butts in Reading and of course they started off with eight companies, almost all of whom volunteered for overseas service. It was not surprising therefore that the 1st/4th Battalion was soon up to complement and that a second battalion, the 2nd/4th had to be formed in September 1914. Thereafter most of the recruits for the 4th went to this new battalion. It was at first known as the 4th (Reserve) TA Bn

The 2nd/4th was raised by Col Lionel Hanbury who had been CO of the 1st Volunteer Battalion. He set up the first camp at his own Farm at Hitcham in Bickinghamshire. Technically it was a 'second line' unit made up of those former Territorials who had not signed the agreement to serve overseas and who hence were not allowed to serve in a 'first line' unit as a result of an order issued 31st August. Thus the training for the 2nd/4th was based upon the needs of home defence. Further recruits who had signed for overseas service were allocated to the 3rd/4th for training as reinforcements for the 1st/4th

Initially the 2nd/4th was based in Maidenhead, moving to Northampton on 1st Feb 1915 for further initial training as a battalion. On 3rd April 1915 they moved to Chelmsford in Essex to form the 61st Division, as part of 184 Brigade. Temporarily they were renamed the 83rd Provisional Battalion as Kitchener was still not sure what to do with the Territorials despite having begun to move them to France in March 1915.

At Chelmsford a start was made on training in divisional tactics, which revolved around Trench Warfare. As trench digging was practiced in the Ongar area the Battalion moved temporarily to the villages of Fyfield, Kelvedon and Epping. On 21st June they moved to Southminster and on to Burnham on Crouch where much time was spent guarding the estuaries and watching out for Zeppelins on their approach to London. After a short (three week) spell back in Southminster the Division moved north to the Newcastle area, so early on Jan 11th 1916 the Battalion entrained for Gateshead. They stayed there for about ten weeks and on March 25th returned to Essex, this time to Mersea Island.

The Military Service Act which introduced conscription in late 1915 also abolished the distinction between 1st

and 2nd line Territorial forces. All men were now liable for overseas service and their training switched to the new role while they continued guarding the coasts of Eastern England in their old role.

The 1st/4th had been in France for about a year and had been replenished by drafts from the 3rd/4th now stationed at Ludgershall on Salisbury Plain. The 2nd/4th were sent to join their colleagues at Ludgershall before embarkation for France on 30th August 1916.

Private S Ambrose kept a diary of his time with the 2nd/4th which he wrote up after the war. The section which covers his time in England before going overseas is reproduced below.

Hitcham Farm

September to November 1914

The Battalion was accommodated at first at Col Hanbury's own farm at Hitcham near Maidenhead. This was used to provide billets for the men and a training ground. The Home Farm and buildings were transformed into excellent quarters, with men sleeping in lofts and sheds which were floored and closed in. A cook-house was erected and water laid on. The men fed in a recovered shed and a canteen was organised. The village Reading Room was placed at their disposal.

The War Office was unable to supply anything at this time, and all camp equipment had to be improvised, bought locally, or borrowed. The public were very generous in providing blankets; and palliasses were made by the village women out of canvas supplied. The men were, however, well fed, the quarters were good, and they much regretted when they had to leave Hitcham. The only officers at the commencement were the C.O., Captain Bartram who was appointed Adjutant, Lieutenants W. Whittaker and R. Holland

The men were recruited all over Berkshire, and, after being sworn in at Reading were sent in batches to Hitcham. The officers were quartered under canvas with a mess in the stables. The training was carried on under great difficulties, as there were no regular instructors, and nearly all the officers had only recently joined. Uniform for the men was provided by the County Association as soon as possible, but at this time both clothing and boots were difficult to procure. Sergt.-Major Butler was now sent from the 1/4th Battalion and proved to be of the greatest assistance, and was not only respected and obeyed but also loved by all the officers

and men.

Maidenhead

November 1914 - 1st February 1915

Early in November the battalion moved to Maidenhead, where fourteen empty houses, a theatre, skating rink, and the drill-hall were all secured for their accommodation. This system worked very well, as about fifty men were billeted in each house and were well under control. They were nearly all clothed in khaki and light equipment, and three hundred rifles were secured for their instruction.

Private Ambrose tells his story:-

I enlisted at St Mary Butts in Reading on Nov 10th 1914 and was posted to the 2nd/4th Battalion, Royal Berks stationed at Maidenhead. I joined them with twelve others. We were billeted in the Hippodrome which held nearly 400, it as nearly full when we arrived so we had to sleep on the stage. We were given a knife and fork and spoon and a plate, also two blankets and had to sleep on the boards. We didnt have a lot of sleep and in the morning our hips were very sore.

The meals we had there were much smaller than we were used to at home. Breakfast being one sausage and a piece of bread. Dinner was supposed to be stew and tea, bread and jam.

We had to be on parade at 7 o'clock for Physical drill. At 8.45 was had squad drill, also at 2.30 till 4 pm. The evenings were our own when we first enlisted, but later we used to have lectures for an hour. [TX00607A]

Some drafts of men who were not passed fit for general service, and some who did not volunteer for service abroad, were sent from the 1/4th Battalion at Chelmsford, and in exchange some two hundred were sent from Maidenhead to fill up the 4th Battalion. Training was by this time going ahead, and a good deal of route-marching, musketry and drill was got through. By December 1914 the battalion numbered nearly one thousand.

At this period severe floods took place at Maidenhead and the lower part of the town was inundated. The skating-rink had to be abandoned, and all communication east of the town was cut off. Pte Ambrose recalled:-

We had not been at the Hippodrome more than three weeks, the weather being so bad that everywhere near the river was flooded so we all had to move into empty houses where we slept eight in a room. [TX00607B]

Private Ambrose soon got used to the routine:-

On Sundays we had Church parade. There being three churches we went to a different one on each Sunday. After Church Parade we had billet inspection by the Colonel. That being over we all used to hire bicycles and ride home, a distance of twenty three miles, arriving in time for dinner, which seemed a change to get a good dinner again. Returning in the evening we had to be in by 10 o'clock.

We drilled in Kidwells Park and on the race course at Squad Drill for about six weeks. After this we did route

marching and field operations which was not quite so monotonous as the first few weeks. Many days were spent near Burnham and on the golf links, often getting wet through. The longest route marches we did were from Maidenhead to Windsor through Eton onto the London Road at Taplow station and back into Maidenhead. We did this twice, once on new boots. Another more pleasant march was over Maidenhead Thicket to the Thames valley at Taplow and back through Cookham.

We also had night operations: four men were sent to a farm as German spies and we had to surround the farm and, at a given time, they had to try to escape, sometimes succeeding. On one occasion they were seen leaving the farm much earlier than the given time. When asked the reason by the Colonel next day, they said anyone would leave when chased by four large dogs. We also did night marching, learning to march quietly.

One of the parts of training a soldier likes is the musketry course. This part we did at Bourne End or Cock Marsh, driving there in the morning and often remaining till dark. The best time we had was the dinner hour as we went to the Quarry Hotel to dinner. [TX00607C]

A good drum and bugle band was formed which was much appreciated by the men. On Christmas Day a very good dinner was provided by the townspeople and, as leave was only allowed to a small percentage, it was thoroughly enjoyed. Private Ambrose missed this as he was lucky enough to get leave.

My first Christmas in the Army I was lucky enough to get home for a few days therefore I had a good time, and the boys who stayed in billets also had a good time. The people were all very good to us, giving concerts and free refreshments and some making us welcome in their own homes. [TX00607D]

The dinner was described in the local paper as 'a sumptuous repast' and included:- 630 lbs of roastbeef, 60 lbs cold ham, 3cwt potatoes, 14 doz cabbages, 1 bushel sprouts, 320 lbs plum pudding, 1800 mince pies also fruit, beer and minerals, cigarettes and tobacco. 50 local ladies acted as waitresses and afterwards Col Hanbury and Sgt Major Butler addressed the diners. Shortly after Christmas the Thames rose sharply and the Battalion HQ at the Hippodrome was flooded out. [BC 8/1/15]

The first war duty performed by the battalion was having to find a guard for prisoners-of-war at Holyport. When the first guard arrived at about 10 p.m., the camp was in a very unprepared state, and any determined prisoner could easily have escaped. There were thirteen prisoners already there, the first Germans who had arrived. This camp afterwards became one of the Officers' Prisoners-of-War Camps.

Eventually it was time to move on, but not before helping out with recruiting:-

Just before we left Maidenhead, two hundred and fifty of us went on a recruiting march through the streets of Reading, going by train. We had tea in the Corn Exchange. We were able to spend a couple of hours in Reading after tea, returning late in the evening by train. We spent about two months at Maidenhead. The week we were joined by the other battalions in the South Midland Division and inspected by Lord Salisbury in Kidwells Park, after which we left for Northampton.

[TX00607E]

Northampton

1st February 1915 - 3rd April 1915

Early in February 1915 the battalion was ordered to Northampton to join the division (2nd South Midland) which was now formed under the Marquess of Salisbury; Colonel Ludlow, C.B., commanding the brigade to which the 2/4th Royal Berkshire were posted.

They left Maidenhead on Monday 1st Feb in two special trains departing at 09:45 and 11:00 travelling via Reading, Didcot and Oxford. They were given a great send off by wives, mothers and girl friends. On arrival at Northampton they formed up and marched to the Victoria Scool which was to be their HQ. They greatly impressed the citizens of Northampton by their smart appearance and especially by the bugle band. They left behind several men in hospital and a small fatigue party to clear up. They were now about 940 strong, of whom some 400 had joined at Maidenhead.

The men were billeted in Northampton, and found good quarters with the bootmakers who form the bulk of population there.

An excellent disused school was secured as Battalion Headquarters. The training was now progressive and well arranged. Musketry was fired on both miniature and full-sized ranges. Japanese rifles were issued to the division, pending issue of British service rifles. They were very good weapons and were afterwards sent to Russia.

Pte Ambrose had pleasant memories of Northampton.

We left Maidenhead early in the morning of February 1st 1915 and proceeded to Northampton by train. We were billeted in private houses in Cyril Street. This being a large town, there were plenty of places of interest to pass our spare time. Boots are made at this place, being one of the principal boot manufacturing towns of England. There was factories in almost every street; some large and some small. Numerous theatres and picture palaces passed away several evenings. All Saints church was the largest of the churches, having several entrances reached by steps running part of the way round and huge pillars with carving on. St Sepulchres is the oldest church, also a very large one. The Town Hall is also a very large and fine building.

One of the pleasantest places in the town is Abington Park, possessing a fine lake and walks. Our parades were about the same here. We did our first trench digging about two mile from the town. The weather was very rainy and snow stopped us from doing very much sometimes. On one or two occasions the trenches were filled up and by the time we had cleared it out it was time to go back to billets. Night marches were longer and other operations also. On one occasion we had a night alarm, all being called out just before twelve, some turning out in slippers and having to march twelve mile. I happened to be lucky as my pal had got the measles, so I was not allowed out night or day a few days. He was taken away and I had to have my clothes fumigated and moved to another billet.

Northampton was where I did my first guard at the Battalion Headquarters in Victoria Road Schools. We had many other guards on the railway where our stores came in and General Headquarters. Fatigue parties had to be found at the ASC stores loading rations.

Many hours were spent in Overtone Park, about five miles march. This estate was the property of Lady Wantage of Berkshire. Very pleasant evenings were spent at the Town Hall; concerts were arranged by the CETS and YMCA. We all lived very well in billets as we paid the landlady a little extra for puddings and vegetables. Yorkshire Puddings being a great favourite with the people. Nearly every household had them daily and on Sundays children and parents used to be seen going with them to the bakers to have them baked.

Our stay had to come to an end. We were there about two months. Having orders to move again we left at five in the morning on the third of April 1915. [TX00607F]

Chelmsford

3rd April - 12th June 1915

In April the Division moved to Chelmsford to take the place of the 1st South Midland ision, which had left for the Front. Here again the men were billeted and were rationed by the A.S.C.

We arrived at Chelmsford, Essex in pouring rain and it took nearly an hour to find billets. Chelmsford is a small town considering it has a large cathedral and several churches. The Town Hall is very small. Many pleasant evenings were spent in the recreation grounds. The lake and flower beds were nicely kept and a band helped to make it more pleasant. The large Marconi works are in the centre of the town. The wireless poles are some of the largest, being 450 feet they can be seen for many miles. There is also a small wireless station at Springfield for instruction purposes. At Springfield there is an aerodrome. Airmen often giving us an exhibition of flying.

At Cromptons factories ball bearings are chiefly made, from smallest, for bicycles, to the largest for cranes and naval guns. Another large factory was Cromptons where searchlights are made. Chelmsford is on the main line from London to Colchester, Ipswich and Norwich and all towns on the east coast A nice evening walk was to Gally Wood Common, also to Witham. [TX00607G]

During the sojourn at Chelmsford, the battalion was sent to Epping to dig trenches for the defence of London. Pte Ambrose:-

We weren't at Chelmsford a few days before we were ordered to Ongar for trench digging. That meant a twelve mile march as there is no railway connection. We arrived on April 12th 1915. Different battalions stayed at Ongar and the adjoining villages for a fortnight to dig permanent trenches. [TX00607H]

Col Hanbury recalled:-

They were also used to piquet roads in Essex, as spies in motor-cars were now on the road, and were using signals for aeroplanes.

Pte Ambrose surprising had a more realistic view of the situation.

We had fresh experiences here as there were two air raids and we had to blockade the roads by putting waggons or anything we could lay hands on. At the

crossings a sentry was posted, while others were there to stop cars and search them and turn out their lights as it was thought that cars with bright lights were travelling from the coast to London to guide the Zeppelins.

The guards on the trenches were doubled, it being my luck to be on that which was much the best, as we had a loft in the barn to sleep in during the hours off sentry. The men on the roads having no shelter and the weather was very cold and frosty. A lot of wood is used on the sides of the trenches to keep them from falling in. This had to be cut from a wood at a small village called Fifefield, about four and a half miles from Ongar. I went there several days. Other companies of the Battalion stayed at the other villages, Kelvedon and Epping.

Our time being up we marched back to Chelmsford on April 26th 1915. The weather had changed, it was very hot. We were all pleased to get back, going into the same billets as we had left. [TX00607J]

At Chelmsford a scratch transport section was formed under Lieutenant Davis. Some horses and pack-ponies were sent from the Remount Depot. But for Pte Ambrose life was very much routine again.

It was the same drills as before. A little change in night operations: we had to pass messages from one to the other being extended a few paces apart. Also we went out to study the stars to know how to find our way. A great many hours were spent in Highlands Park at Widford, two miles from the town.

I had several teeth extracted, for which I was granted a weeks sick leave. While being at home I had German measles, therefore my leave was extended another fortnight. While home on leave, some of the lads were transferred to a new Company (E Company) being B Company when I left. I was transferred to this Company when I returned, so I had to go to another billet. We had to march to Boreham Range to do marking at the Butts while the other companies were firing, leaving billets about three in the morning and returning at four in the afternoon. [TX00607K]

In May 1915 the C.O. was ordered to proceed to France to take command the 1/7th Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and the battalion was handed to Major Wheeler, the second-in-command.

We stayed at Chelmsford about a fortnight as E Company we were afterwards made the 83rd Provisional Battalion. [TX00607L]

Southminster, Paglesham and Maldon 12th June - 1915

We proceeded to Southminster, Essex on June 12th 1915. This was quite a small village on the marshes. We had an easy time there for just over a week. In the evenings we searched the ditches on the marshes for moorhens eggs. The church is one of the oldest in Essex.

After a short stay we marched to Paglesham, a small village on the opposite side of the River Crouch, having to cross it by Creeksea Ferry. There was hardly room to billet fifty of us at the east end, the remainder of the Company being at Church End. I should have said, we arrived there on June 21st 1915. The people were as nice to us as any we met before or since. We enjoyed ourselves very well here. We had a lot of spare time.

A guard had to be found about twice a week on the River

Crouch. Winkles were very plentiful, also oysters were very plentiful, but being out of season we did not get any of them. The oyster trade is a big business as there are a lot of stages in the life of an oyster. Old oyster shells are dropped into the bed of the river and the eggs are laid on them. When the eggs are hatched the young oysters fix onto the shells. The shells are then dredged from the river and the young oysters separated and put back into the water again. The beds have to be dredged often to keep other shellfish out as some of them kill the young fish and they have to be taken out and cleaned. These operations have to be done seven or eight years as it takes an oyster seven or eight years for them to be fit for market. They are dredged and sorted into three sizes and then put into bags of different numbers from dozens to hundreds.

Many hours were spent in an old boat, two of the lads rowing and the other dipping water out as it was rather leaky. The weather being warm, most of the boys could swim, making good use of the chance. The river being fairly narrow they used to swim to the other side at high tide.

Labour being short in the district some of us went pea picking which was not an easy job to pick a sack as they were rather small. We had 9d a sack. During an air raid, probably the one that happened while we were at Ongar. a bomb had been dropped in the field adjoining the pea field, this being grasslands called '*The Sultans*'. It did no damage other than a large hole twelve yards across and forty yards round. This grass lands called *the Sultans* was land that had been covered by the sea at high tide but had been stopped by a sea wall being built.

We had to march five miles to get our pay, to the Company Headquarters at Stambidge. The *Plough and Sail* at East End and the *Punch Bowl* at Church End was where most of the boys spent their evenings.

The targets could be seen from here which were fired at from Shoeburyness; they were towed along by ships. The concussion from the report used to shake the windows although we were eight miles away. After a fortnight's stay here we marched to Rocford and took train to Maldon, a town on the mouth of the river Blackwater. We did no guards here but a few drills, once getting soaked in a thunderstorm. We had a route march or two, one as far as Osea Island, only reached at low tide. One or two hours were spent at the Picture Palace here and a good YMCA. Maldon possessed a promenade but there was no water, only at high tide. Concerts were given by a pierrot party in the afternoon and evenings.

I had two billets during our time here. One a pork butcher who sold about one pig and some dripping in a week, and the other a painter and wheelwright. [TX00607M]

Burnham on Crouch

Our next destination was Burnham on Crouch, a large village on the river Crouch, being a good place for yachting. There were three yachting clubs, The Burnham, Corinthian and Victorian. There were several hotels, Warners Hotel billeted soldiers but was no great favourite with our boys. We all made good use of the boats and also the fishing. Large boats came here from Maldon, London and Colchester for gravel, hay and corn bringing manure in exchange.

We had more guards than at most places, having three at Burnham Battalion Headquarters and a look out for aircraft at the Burnham Yacht Club from 5pm to 5am. The

third being at the Coast Guard Station. Twelve men went on this guard, three did sentry and the others patrolled the sea wall for three miles and met the man from another post. This was not a pleasant job at night, some of us often falling down the side. We often passed some of the time in looking for oysters or mussels. There were four sailors on this Coast Guard, they often used to keep us smiling, telling us some of the yarns of their days at sea. We learnt semaphore and Morse signalling between guards.

We had a post at Holiwell Point on the mouth of the river. We used to go to a farm called Coney Hall for a week, a mile and a half from the point and then go to the point every other day for guards. We sleep in a barn at this farm. We thought it rather draughty in those days but should have thought it a palace to the old French barns. We had to go to sleep as soon as it was dark as they would allow no lights so this meant a long night as it got dark at Seven. The marshes had plenty of game on them, affording us a good chase sometimes but not a good dinner as the hares always gave us the slip.

When we came here the second time we had canvas to sleep under which was fine and healthy in the warm weather but the last time being late in the year it was wet and frosty. The farm was the only house near. Burnham being the nearest village we usually took a good stack of things with us and we could not get anything out there. We had three bell tents at the point which were well visited by rats. There were no people here except the farm hands and these had been there all their life. We could get a good view of the North Sea from the point. Opposite this point was Foulness Point. Foulness Island is an island in the mouth of the Thames. Battleships were continually going in and out of the Thames and often a large fleet was anchored a few miles out. The shore was all mud when the tide was low. Some of us getting in up to our knees more than once. There was a block house and mine hut halfway between the point and Burnham. I was never on this guard. Patrols were sent out from each of these places to meet each other. The mine patrol hut meeting the one from Burnham. We had to see that no one landed after sunset or proceeded up the river after that time. We were all glad to get back to Burnham again to a good meal and beds. We only had the floor and blankets while on these guards, but we often sleep in the open when the weather was fine. We spent three weeks in Burnham and one week on the posts.

The next post further on the coast was Tillingham Marshes, at an old disused Coast Guard Station. This was six houses. They were all empty except one. We occupied two while we were there. They were very breezy as there was no glass in the windows. The sea was a long way from the wall here, only reaching the wall during the highest tides which were during the new and full moons. *Sultans* stretched for over a mile, which were covered with weeds and rubbish. Many things were washed up there to these sort of places: bails of tobacco, chests of tea and barrels of oil, raw rubber and we never wanted for firewood. This all came from ships that had been torpedoed. Ducks and other sea birds were very plentiful on these *Sultans* but we never succeeded in getting any.

The house that was inhabited had a family who did a trade in winkles and cockles, getting them at low tide. It was a job to see any of them for dirt, especially Angelina the eldest daughter. These children had never been to school as they were so far away from any village.

We couldn't get a cart up this place, our rations being left

at a farm two mile away. We had a good walk to fetch them. All the fields were surrounded by ditches with planks to go across. We often lost some of them before we got back as it was usually dark. One of our chaps [fell] in one of the ditches and [as] they are rather deep, he had to go to bed till his clothes were dry as we only took one suit of clothes. We had a job to recover his rifle from the water being rather [dirty] and thick with mud. We returned to Burnham after a week at that place, an eight mile march. We went on a different billet each time on returning from these posts. I had four billets.

Tents and sheets and all sorts of canvas things were made at a small factory. They made thousands of canvas buckets, letting them out to peoples house to have the handles sewn on. We used to do some of these in our spare time having 1/3d a dozen. We did about two dozen in a days spare time. I also spent some hours gardening at Ostend, a small village out of Burnham. My wife spent a few weeks there in the same billet. We had just gone to bed one night when our landlord knocked on our bedroom door and told us a Zeppelin was coming. We dressed as quickly as possible in the dark as we were allowed no lights and went down to the door as saw the Zepp exactly overhead. We had the wind up at first and it being overhead. We were glad when it was over out of sight as we knew we should be safe, of course the children were in bed and thought about them. The engines made a terrific noise and you could distinctly see the shape as it blotted out the stars. It was a glorious night, nearly all the people in the village were out in the roads, some only partly dressed.

This was the first time they got to London. We waited nearly a couple of hours for its return, but it went another way back, so we went to bed once more.

When they came a few nights after we could not see it but it could be heard twenty minutes before it got overhead. It was fired at by men of the RNAS who travel about with guns on cars and searchlights. They usually came about eleven, but the third time they were very early, one coming over about eight-thirty. This one passed over very quickly and could hardly be seen. Although it passed over no bombs were dropped but the explosions could be heard a long distance off.

Burnham possessed a town crier who sold cakes and things when he had nothing to shout about. He used to ring a bell about a sale or something lost or advertising some cheap stores. One of his most unusual being "*Oyes! Oyes! this is to give notice so-and-so has some cheap goods, sugar 4d a pound, cheese 10d a pound butter 1/4d a pound. Buy early and you will not be disappointed. God Save the King!*"

When he shouted near our billet, one of our corporals used to shout some of it out at the same time for a joke. So we played a joke with him when he went on leave. We paid the Town Crier the usual fee of 1/- to shout outside Warners Hotel where the corporal was billeted. We gave him the tip when the corporal was back and he shouted, the corporal joining in from his bedroom window; but he soon stopped when he heard his name mentioned. He shouted "*Oyes! Oyes! this is to give notice that Corporal Cox has returned safely to this town from leave. God save the King!*" The corporal shook his fist at him and said "*You old devil, Who told you to shout that out!*" He only took it as a joke though.

After a long stay at Burnham we went back to Southminster again for a short time. I went into the same billet that I had before. We did a few parades here, having only our Orderly Room guard to do. A great deal of our time we

spent at the CETS hut. This being where I spent my second Christmas. We had a fine tea and concert. Also a fine time at the billet. One thing Southminster is noted for is the coursing meetings when dogs come from all over the country and much betting was done on the winners. These meetings are held three times during the winter season. It is held on the Marshes; beaters drive the hares and the dogs are let loose in pairs. Some give the dogs a good run before being caught. We had all sorts of rumours about moving north before we left Burnham. After three weeks of rumours at Southminster they came true and we left Essex. [TX00607N]

Newcastle on Tyne January-March 1916

Marching to Burnham to join the Battalion on Jan 10th 1916 we stayed in Burnham till midnight, leaving at 1-20 am on the 11th for Gateshead on Tyne, a four hundred miles journey. We were in the train fifteen hours. At that place we had schools for billets. Gateshead is in the county of Durham on the banks of the Tyne, Newcastle being on the opposite bank. One could spend weeks there and still be able to see something fresh.

This was a very dirty place as it is one of the largest mining districts in England. Being dry the first few days of our stay the coal dust blew about so much that we all had bad eyes for a time. After this, it was wet nearly all the time so we did not notice the dirt so much.

Of course the first thing we saw was the station at Newcastle as that is where we got out at. There are many platforms and the crossing there is the largest diamond crossing in the world. And there are numerous sidings for the coal trains and other goods. The station entrance is a smart place extending half way over the wide street held up by pillars. There is room for cars to stand three side by side underneath.

There are many large bridges across the Tyne, five in all. Three of them for people and vehicles and two for the railway. The first bridge we crossed in Redheugh bridge which is a massive piece of work, nearly a quarter of a mile across. Large pieces of iron on each side twelve to fifteen feet high kept together by cross stays on the top. A toll has to be paid, one halfpenny for civilians and one penny for vehicles. This bridge is fifty to sixty feet above the river. Another much larger bridge is the high level bridge, the largest of all. It is built on large pillars from the river, the top being made of four rows of upright squares and girders between the two centre rows for traffic and on the outside for people. The top is completely covered over and the trains from Newcastle to London run over the top. A toll is also paid on this bridge. The third bridge is a huge swing bridge down near the water. When steamers go through all traffic stops and the bridge swings round. It always swings the same way, not forward and back like most swing bridges. The other two are fairly large but for railway only. All are built of iron.

We crossed Redheugh Bridge to Gateshead going some way into the town to Brighton Road Schools. A place we found very pleasant was Saltwell Park which has lovely walks and lawns; also a maze. We did not go into the maze as it was only open in the summer months. The bandstand is in the middle of the lake. In one part of the park you find about a dozen large pens with peacocks, pheasants, doves and owls. One large cage contains some cockatoos. Their nest of the previous summer remained with what would do for a good bundle of firewood.

At Newcastle is a very beautiful place called Jesmond Dene with lakes, rockeries and stepping stones. A place worth visiting is the old Cathedral at Newcastle. We went several times for Church Parade and a friend and I had a good look round, being shown the belfry. Thirteen bells in all. Twelve are rung for the services and the other is the bell which rings at the hours from the clock. This bell weighs five tons eighteen hundredweights. It cannot be rung now as the tower is too old and will not stand the shaking.

We were shown the works of the clock which was in a glass case large enough to hold a dozen men. Going onto the top of the tower we had a fairly good view of all Gateshead and Newcastle, but it was rather misty. Inside the cathedral are many large monuments and the pulpit is a masterpiece of carving. Three other churches we visited were St Chad's, St Cuthbert's and St Mary's at Gateshead. A lovely walk is to Sherriffs Hill, one of the highest points round for miles. We had a lovely view of the surrounding county, seeing Durham Cathedral twelve miles away. The Staiths at Gateshead is where ships load with coal, a place is built of wood to enable trains to go over the water to take the coal. The ships come alongside and are loaded with coal by machinery. They were dredging here to deepen the channels for the ships as it is continually getting filled with mud. A short distance from here we could see submarines being repaired, also monitors and a new monitor was being completed on the other side of the river. On the Newcastle side of the river was Armstrongs munitions and shipbuilding factories which stretch for miles. Here are made all kinds of war materials from 18 inch guns for battleships to the smallest parts of rifles, machine guns ammunition and all sorts of iron work. Large guns are made here for battleships. The barrels are made with an inside case of steel onto which is wound many miles of wire very tightly and then an outer casing of steels. The largest are said to take 350 miles of wire. They also make searchlights and everything in the shipping line. The place where warships are built is nearer the mouth of the river, a place called Haworth. We went there for a short route march one Saturday morning and we had the luck to see one of our newest ships, a sister ship to the Queen Elizabeth. She was given by the Malay States and is called *Malaya*. She had twelve fifteen inch guns and twelve others. They were loading her with stores etc when we saw her. We also saw one the week before which was just launched called the *Courageous*, a wonderful ship as it was different to any other and was called a mystery ship by the workmen and there were several more which had not been launched, surrounded by huge cranes for lifting the ironwork. Also many for lifting guns on board and ammunition. Along this part of the river some very large German liners were interned. Other munitions were made at Elswick Works.

Men and ships of all neutral nations could be seen on the quayside unloading goods of every description and large quantities of timber from Norway and Sweden. A large number of horses and cattle are brought in from different parts.

Another place worth seeing is the Great Northern Railway Works where a rough piece of steel is made into an engine spindle in a few hours, polished and put on. A damaged locomotive can be brought in with a broken spindle and be ready for the rails again in a few hours.

Monuments about the town are too numerous to mention. There is one in the busy part of town like the Nelson Column in London. except that it has a large eagle on the top. Newcastle Arcade is very large. It is like a great

many streets covered on top with glass, where almost anything can be bought.

During our stay we were inspected by Viscount French.

The moor is very large and used now by the artillery and Flying Corps. There is a large aerodrome on one side. One or two aeroplanes flew over us and gave a good exhibition in banking and looping the loop, also diving down and nearly touching our heads.

While we were in the north we had to go for three days course with the Japanese rifle. We went to a small village called Pontland, twelve miles from Gateshead. We arrived there by train in the evening and went into huts which were very cold at night as it snowed nearly all the time we were there. There were no shops or anywhere that we could get anything. We got very short rations which did not help matters. We returned in a snow storm on Saturday February 25th 1916. Many pleasant hours were spent at the CETS and the YMCA.

While we were at Gateshead we were all [given] six days leave, supposed to be Xmas leave; but it was the last week in Jan so it was rather late for Christmas. [TX00607P]

Mersea Island

March to July 1916

On March 25th 1916 we moved south again. We were very glad as it was so much nearer to go on leave. We left on Saturday afternoon and had several stops on the way, arriving at Colchester at six o'clock on the morning of Sunday and marched to Mersea Island, a small island at the mouth of the Blackwater, going to East Mersea first. [This is] a part of the island very little inhabited. The house were very small and few. We lived [in] one and slept in the other. We had two guards, one opposite Brightlingsea called the Stone, the most easterly part of the island, where the sea goes round the island. Also a creek runs up to Colchester. The other guard was a mile south of this one looking onto the open sea.

We had two visits by Zeppelins while we were there. A patrol boat was anchored in the mouth of the creek called the *Waleroe*. She used her searchlight on the Zepp and gave her a welcome with her guns, but did not msucceedd in hitting her sufficient to bring her down. Bombs were dropped a few miles off, also another one dropped just out of Colchester.

The church at East Mersea was the smallest we had been in. It had one bell, the others being stolen years ago by smugglers. We did a little work there at a farm filling sacks of chaff and sacks of corn. After a fortnight at East we moved to West Mersea which was better as there were more people and a few shops. We furnished a guard at the mouth of the Blackwater opposite Bradwell Point. I was on that guard when the Company was called out at two o'clock in the morning at the time Lowestoft was bombarded. The Company was kept out till daylight. We had to turn out every morning after that for over a week and stay out until sunrise, but of course we did nothing all day. On one occasion we were called out at eleven o'clock and kept till morning; this was during a Zeppelin raid.

The island could be reached at low tides by a road called the Strood. A guard had to be found there to stop all cars going onto the island and take their registered number and note also how many passengers.

We made trenches and machine gun emplacements all

along the coast. We had Lord French round to inspect the coast and trenches. During spare time we found plenty of amusement. Being billeted with a fisherman we could easily get a boat and on Sundays he used to take us for a sail as far as Bradwell Point or up the river. [On] dark evenings he kept us amused with some of his yarns and we also had our share of fish.

We did barb wire entanglements round the island and had our first experience of bomb throwing. The *Cricket ball* bomb which is lit and then thrown from a catapult, and the Mills *Lemon* bomb which thrown by hand. We had several days instruction, the last causing an accident. One of our men had it in his left hand and changed it to his right after the safety pin had been removed causing it to explode in his hand. He had several fingers blown off and pieces in his arm and face. and the officer was wounded. It was lucky no one was killed as there were several more round at the time.

We had our first instructions with gas helmets here, all looking hideous with them on. Most of us did a lot of gardening at this part of the island and some went limpet crushing - a process to get materials for munitions from the limpet shells.

Buses used to run to Colchester, a distance of ten miles, which was handy for us going on leave. [TX00607Q]

Salisbury Plain

The main part of the Battalion had reached Salisbury Plain in the early part of 1916. They were based at Parkhouse Camp and were undergoing their overseas training.

Pte Ambrose did not get to Salisbury Plain until July and joined the 3rd/4th Battalion for his overseas training.

We had a medical examination and a good few of us were classed fit for general service, so we had to join the 3rd/4th Reserve Battalion, forty of us leaving Mersea on the morning of July 7th 1916.. [We] marched to Colchester and took train to Lugershall on Salisbury Plain, arriving at four in the afternoon. [We had to sleep] under canvas, twelve to a tent. The first day we had doctors inspection and inoculation for which we were allowed forty-eight hours off.

The country is very picturesque but not very nice for marching as it is so hilly. I will not say anything about drilling etc as they do not leave many pleasant memories. Our first Sunday, I and a pal walked to Sudbury Hill which used to have an old Roman castle on the top but nothing of it remains now. There are deep excavations round the hill like trenches. They are very deep and roomy; men and horses [can] go along the bottom without being seen.

A good view can be seen of the surrounding country from the top of the hill. Lark Hill can be seen from here, eight miles away and looking in the opposite direction is Salisbury. We walked from Sudbury Hill to Tidworth, a small town, one of the garrison towns and atraining school on the plain. Then we went back to Windmill Hill camp in the evening.

The third week we were at this camp we did our overseas course of firing on Pernham Downs. I succeeded in being a first class shot. This course taking a week, firing on Saturday in gas helmets. Just before going on leave we did night firing when fairy [Very?] lights were sent up to enable us to see the targets. After this we went for four

days leave and had a good time, the weather being splendid.

On our return we were picked for a draft for France, but several were kept back to learn signalling. I being a lucky one.

A long route march we had was through Lugershall, along the Andover road, turning off at Appleshaw and then through Upper Shute, returning across country through woods and moors.

On the last Sunday in this part we walked to a small village called Everly about three and a half miles from camp, going back across the plains by some old burial grounds. These were huge mounds built up twenty feet above the level of the plains. There were about ten of these in an irregular line at short distances apart.

After a course of signalling I went back into the Company and was soon in a draft for France. We were inspected by the General on Thursday 21st September 1916 and proceeded overseas on the 30th September 1916. [TX00607R]

To France

On the 25th May 1916 the 2/4th Battalion left Parkhouse Camp and entrained at Tidworth in the afternoon for Southampton. Its strength, excluding about 60 left behind in hospital or for other reasons, was 35 officers and 850 other ranks, with four Lewis guns.

The officers who embarked at Southampton were:

Lieut.-Colonel M. Wheeler, commanding.

Majors: J. H. Simonds, T. Shields.

Captains: I. M. M. Anderson, R. Whitaker, C. J. D. Cave, E. P. Lucas, F. L. Hadden, A. N. Palmer, J. A. Reeves, G. H. Hawkes.

Lieutenants: O. J. Dowson, R. V. C. Freeth, G. W. Davies, R. G. Imray, R. Holland.

Second-Lieutenants J. H. Skene, C. E. Brooke, E. O. C. Lambart, G. S. R. Webb, H. J. Gale, G. A. Brooke, G. L. Warlock, C. Cecil, G. S. Abbott, D. R. Gibson) A. T. Heathorn, D. A. Hutchings, D. C. Baker, I R. D. H. Bowles, E. C. Aylett.

Adjutant: Lieut. F. W. Dilke. *Quartermaster*: Lieut. W. H. Morris. *Medical Officer*: Lieut. J. Nissen Deacon, R.A.M.C.

Sources

Account of Pte Ambrose chaps 1-8

Berkshire Chronicle 5/2/15