

Section 115

Training in England

The 5th Battalion August 1914 to May 1915

Shorncliffe

The 5th was the first of the Kitchener Battalions and was raised almost immediately war was declared in August 1914. [RM 22/8/14]

Private H Harding recounts its early days in England.

We left the depot on 15th August and took over barracks at Shorncliffe recently vacated by the Warwicks. We bedded comfortably until, with increasing numbers arriving daily, we were reduced to sleeping on the floor minus sheets.

Col Foley noted later:

The initial difficulties to contend with were:-

- 1 The lack of clothing, arms and equipment - these had to be bought locally
- 2 The lack of knives, forks and plates - dishes and washing up material had to be bought locally.
- 3 The lack of towels and soap and a shortage of bedding and blankets.
- 4 The lack of Non-commissioned officers.

The keenness and enthusiasm of the men was perfectly wonderful. No hours were too long for them: they were a most intelligent lot of men, drawn from all grades of society - from an artist to a valet. We had one platoon of butlers and footmen. The footman was often promoted before the butler and the butlers seemed perfectly contented to be commanded by the footmen. Another platoon was almost exclusively composed of a peer's gardeners or men on his estate.

The battalion had been fortunate in that six of its officers were regulars, although two of these had retired only months before. The officer strength had to be made up from men who had served in Officers Training Corps at various public schools. Alec Gold was one such. He and his brother Pat arrived at Shorncliffe the day before Lord Kitchener's inspection.

On the 20th September Lord Kitchener himself came to inspect the troops. He expressed himself as well pleased with its appearance and steadiness. Partly this was because any man who had not yet been properly kitted out or who was regarded as not yet up to standard was hidden from his sight. Alec Gold was one of this and told not to move out of the officers mess. He continued in his memoirs:-

Afterwards we were sent for to the Orderly Room where we were told by the CO (Lt Col Foley) to go home and equip ourselves properly and not to come back until we were properly dressed. (our ready-made uniforms did not fit very well). Nevertheless he gave us a kind reception, a

short talk on the Regiment and sent us home. In due course we reported back for duty, fully equipped.

Our Colonel, 2nd in command, Adjutant, Company Commanders, Quartermaster, RSM and all senior NCOs were regulars, recalled from Reserve or the Depot. All the junior officers had had military training, either in the militia or the OTC and were mostly Public School men. Unfortunately none of the other ranks had had any training at all and didn't know one end of a rifle from the other.

Col Foley was well aware of this lack of training, but first he had to do something about the lack of junior NCOs.

The method adopted in the battalion was for the Company Commander to pick out likely looking men and appoint them as lance corporals. All these were examined by the Commanding Officer and approved or rejected. All these lance corporals were then formed into squads with a regular NCO in charge. The whole came under the care and sole charge of the Regimental Sergeant Major and were under his instructions for weeks before joining their companies. From these lance corporals were picked all the NCOs for the Battalion and it says well for the company commanders' discretion that in very few cases was the judgement wrong.

There were four companies each of four platoons and with HQ and the Transport section the battalion had a strength of nearly 1200 men. All officers down to Company Commander were equipped with a horse. Alec Gold continued with his memoirs:-

Pat and I were posted to B coy, nos 7 and 8 platoons, each of about 60 men. I was one of the few without a regular Platoon Sergeant but had a splendid ex-miner, Sgt Wilkins and an ex-footman, Sgt Wait who insisted on referring to us as "Mr Pat" and "Master Alec". I felt this slightly weakened my authority. We had to start from scratch with squad and musketry drill.

Our camp consisted of wooden huts for the officers, a large one for the mess which must have dated from the Peninsular War, but most of the men were in tents.

Luckily the weather was glorious so there was little sickness. We all had to have two inoculations against typhus and were given 24 hours off-duty after the first, but nothing after the second. In my case the first had no effect but the second did and after a 20 mile route march I had a high temperature and staggered into camp practically delirious.

As all the senior officers were regulars, the mess was run on pre-war lines and we were charged 7/6d a day. As our pay was 5/3d a day (the men got 1/-) this was impossible without an allowance from father, but later this pay was increased and made retrospective. Early on I had quite a shock when I was sent to the bank to collect the cash for the Company's pay. On making up the pacets we were

£4-15s short. The bank had given me one bag of 5/- in coppers instead of £5 in silver. I went back and told the bank manager what I thought of him. He must have known when he balanced his cash for he meekly paid up the difference.

In spite of the hard work we were a happy crowd and were soon friends with the others. Pat and I, as well as the entire company, worshipped our company commander, George Hopton, who in spite of the difference in ages encouraged us to call him George when off-parade.

My platoon was a typical cross-section of the battalion. A third Berkshiremen, mostly country bred, a third from Birmingham and a third Cockneys. Of the latter I had an entire section who I swear were under 18 and must have given false ages on enlistment. It is no exaggeration to say that at first the three groups could not understand one word of what the others said. Perhaps dialects were more pronounced then but they might have been talking a foreign language as far as most of them knew. Later, when we got our first field telephones, this caused endless difficulties. I had a very nice quiet boy. Peterkin, as a batman, but Pat's, Pte Bayliss, was a real cockney and vey funny though a bit cheeky.

For the next two months the battalion practised and trained without let up. There was squad and platoon drill, lots of night work and plenty of route marches. There was training in musketry at the Hythe Ranges and entrenching was practised around the camp and at Beachborough. Equipment was still slow in arriving but when the weather turned cold it was the shortage of blankets that nearly led to a mutiny. - As Alec Gold recalls:-

Equipment gradually came along, uniforms, rifles, transport and horses, though when the weather began to turn colder, there was still a shortage of blankets for the troops. One day when I arrived on early morning parade my entire platoon was missing! Captain Rickman, the company 2nd in command, came with me to their hut where we found they had gone on strike because they had been cold in the night. Rickman fairly blistered their ears with a few well chosen words and they sheepishly trooped onto parade before the adjutant spotted our absence. At the first halt on the route march I gave them a talking to and told them that if they had a grievance to come and tell me and never to let me down like that again. They never did. I think this was a valuable lesson to me in labour relations.

Folkestone

A weeks leave began for most men on 7th December and at the end of this period they were moved to a new hutment camp at St Martin's Plain. This was as yet unfinished and built on poor ground and the conditions brought on a bout of sickness among the men. Finally the medical authorities intervened and recommended that the battalion should be moved into billets. This was accepted and on the 2nd January 1915 they all moved to Folkestone, mainly taking over seaside hotels. As Alec Gold recalled:

As the weather worsened the mud got deeper in the camp and eventually the battalion moved to Folkestone, the men being billeted in schools, and boarding house and the officers in the Pavillion Hotel.

Pte Harding also remembered the mud.

We then moved to St Martin's Plain until mud over the tops of our boots made soldiering impossible. So we occupied various hotels in Folkestone. The Palm Court (no orchestra) became our canteen, room devoid of all furniture became our billets.

Battalion training began on 1st February and the battalion was allocated to 35th Brigade under Brig Gen Van Straubenzee. The first Brigade field day was 5th Feb. 35th Brigade was part of 12th Division under Major General Spens and as well as the 5th Royal Berks there were the 7th Norfolks, the 7th Suffolks and the 9th Essex. These four battalions were to share many months of comradeship. Alec Gold recalled some incidents at the time:

Up till then all officers wore Sam Browne belts with swords on all parades. These were a nuisance as the sword hilt wore holes in the left sleeve and side pocket. However experience in France had revealed that officers were too conspicuous so our swords were discarded, badges of rank transferred to our shoulder straps and we carried packs like the men. Packs were very uncomfortable stretching from shoulder to waists and in addition to pulling on the shoulders, they pressed on one's lungs and impeded breathing. I always thought them badly designed and when full with spare shirt and boots and greatcoat, plus entrenching tool, water bottle, rifle and bayonet and ball ammunition, the load was very heavy.

One day in Folkestone we suddenly found we had a band of fifes and drums. This had been kept secret and though at first their repertoire was limited, they were a great help on the march and when they played the regimental march *The Dashing White Sergeant*, at the end of a tiring day, one could not but be thrilled and uplifted.

We fired our musketry course on the ranges at Hythe and also learnt bridge building over the canal.

The disadvantage of Folkestone was that nearly every day started with a march up the hill to the *Valiant Sailor* on the Dover road, a most exhausting performance immediately after breakfast.

Pte Harding also remembered the training:-

The rifle with courses of target practice at Hythe Ranges and plenty of full-pack marching, plus square bashing, certainly got us very fit. Our officers from Colonel to Captain and NCOs from Sergeants upwards were all regular army reservists steeped in tradition. Expertise with the rifle, footslogging and 'not to reason why' and two water cooled machine guns per battalion, we certainly proved more than a match for the better equipped German infantry'

Before they left Folkestone the officers were photographed before the Pavilion Hotel. As Alec Gold recalled, the picture was a poignant reminder for those who survived the war.

A photograph of the officers taken outside the Pavilion Hotel at this time shows that of the 32 officers who went to France with the battalion in May 1915, 14 had been killed by July 1916, 8 wounded, some seriously and five, including myself, invalided home. In 1962 only three survive, Pat and myself and Dennis Cotterill who lives in New Zealand.

Aldershot

On the 23rd Feb after it was decreed that the division should concentrate on Aldershot, the 5th set out on a long route march via Ashford, Maidstone, Croydon, Leatherhead and Woking, arriving at Aldershot on the 1st March. The weather was bitterly cold and the first part of the march was in snow. At Aldershot they were accommodated at Malplaquet Barracks with the 7th Norfolks. Alec Gold recalled the march:

In February 1915 the battalion was ordered to move by road to Aldershot. The distance was just 100 miles and there were to be five stops; Ashford (16 miles), Maidstone (19 miles), Sevenoaks (17 miles), Redhill (17 miles) Woking (20 miles) and Aldershot (12 miles). Pat and I were detailed as billeting officers, leap frogging each other, I to do Ashford, Sevenoaks and Woking and Pat Maidstone and Redhill. I protested to the Colonel as I wanted to march with my platoon, but without avail.

At Ashford, with the help of the police, I found schools and halls for the men but had to call on private houses to find rooms for the officers. Some householders were indignant and refused accommodation (I had no powers of compulsion), some demanded payment but the majority were most co-operative. At Sevenoaks I had learnt the routine and found it easier.

While at Folkestone we had borrowed father's car (The Chalmers) and loaded it with our baggage and driven by one of Cecil's platoon it accompanied the battalion. Father and mother came down to Redhill to watch the battalion march in and Pat and I stood with them. To our horror, at the rear came the Chalmers, ignominiously towed behind a transport wagon, having broken a spring.

At Woking I trailed up and down Maybury Road where one particular widow with a pretty daughter was most charming, so I put that house down for Cecil and three others. When I had seen everybody in I called back there and the lady insisted on giving me a late lunch of roast chicken as I looked tired. She told Cecil later she would have offered me a glass of Port only I looked too young!. As soon as they could Cecil and the others went up to London and only returned on the last train so my forethought in picking the pretty girl was wasted.

On arrival at Aldershot we went to Malplaquet Barracks in the Marlborough lines with a regular mess and a large gang of subalterns in what had been, in peace time, the COs house where we slept on camp beds.

For the next few months training at various levels continued and for a period of Brigade training they moved to billets in Wokingham or under canvas at Eversleigh. During this period they were again inspected by Lord Kitchener. Alec Gold recalled:

By this time we were fairly well seasoned and route marches and field exercises took place almost every day. Other Divisions of K1 (Kitchener's Army) were assembling there and on one exercise seven divisions took part. Luckily I was on a machine gun course so I missed this but was told it was a boring day as little happened. I imagine it was mainly an exercise for the staff.

King George V also reviewed us on Hartford Bridge Flats, a long and tiring day of waiting about, but, in the end thrilling.

Next day we were ordered into camp under canvas at

Eversley. I as a reserve machine gun officer, was in charge of the machine gun section which entailed riding a horse. The next day I was removed to hospital with bronchitis where I spent 2 or 3 days and so missed the camp.

Up until they were ready to embark for France they continued with Brigade and Divisional training, now under the command of Major General F Wing who had taken over from Spens.

The first of the New Army divisions to be sent to France was the 9th Highland. At last the turn of the 12th Division came and they began their move on the 29th May 1915. The move had been practised for so long that when it came few believed it was genuine. However by the 1st June all units of the Division were in France.

Order of Battle

At this point it is worth recording the formation of the 12th Division:-

12th Division - Maj Gen FDV Wing

35th Brigade

7th Norfolks

7th Suffolks

9th Essex

5th Royal Berks

62nd RFA

69th Field Coy RE

116th Coy RASC

36th Field Ambulance RAMC

36th Brigade

8th Royal Fusiliers

9th Royal Fusiliers

7th Royal Sussex

11th Middlesex

63rd RFA

70th Field Coy RE

117th Field Coy RASC

37th Field Ambulance RAMC

37th Brigade

6th Royal West Surreys

6th East Kents (Bufs)

7th East Surreys

6th Royal West Kents

64th RFA

87th Field Coy RE

118th Field Coy RASC

38th Field Ambulance RAMC

12th Div Signalling Coy RE

65th RFA

119th Coy RASC

5th Northants (pioneers)

A Squadron King Edwards Horse

9th Motor MG Battery

23rd Sanitary Section

23rd Mobile Veteruinary Section RAVC

Sources

Memoires of Pte H Harding

Memoires of Lt Alec Gold

Petre pp 205-208

History of 12th Division (Scott and Brumwell 1923)