

Section 118

Training in England

The 8th Battalion September 1914 to July 1915

Formation

The 8th Battalion were the fourth of the service battalions to be raised at the Barracks in Reading. They were formed towards the end of September 1914. It was a very mixed battalion with men from Berkshire supplemented by large drafts from Birmingham and London plus a substantial number from South Wales as the county regiments for these areas were not capable of handling the large number of volunteers that were coming forward.

Col W C Walton of the Indian Army took over command at the Codford Training Centre in early October. He had only one other officer with any experience, ie Captain C F N Bartlett and he was appointed Adjutant.

The Battalion was assigned to 26th Division as Army troops but in training they tagged along with the 7th Battalion in 78th Brigade.

Reading

November 1914 to May 1915

They returned to billets in Reading in November and were based at the White Hart Hotel with many men billeted at McIlroys, a large department store located just opposite where now Broad St Mall is on Oxford Road and also in houses along the Oxford Road.

It was a long time before they received any equipment and while at Codford this made them very uncomfortable as they had no boards for their tents so the ground inside the tents was often flooded owing to the incessant rain.

When they got back to Reading they were able to use miniature rifles at the firing range and dummy rifles for drill and owing to the cooperation of local landowners and farmers they were able to practice field manoeuvres and trench digging in the countryside around Reading.

Reading Council gave them free use of swimming baths on certain days of the week and they had the use of St Giles Church for services on Sunday.

Christmas 1914 was spent in Reading and they were given a Christmas dinner at Vincents Garage where they received messages from the mayor and other notables. They also exchanged messages with the 7th Battalion whose festivities were taking place at the Corn Exchange [B&W p60]

Several of the men had had some basic training in the Officers Training Corps and these received their commissions together with a few other likely candidates. Everyone was very enthusiastic and they made good progress with their training aided by a few elderly NCOs brought back from retirement.

Captain Bartlett was quickly promoted to Major on the 21st November and appointed second in command. His job as Adjutant was taken by Lt T G Peacock.

While in Reading the Battalion band was greatly in demand to lead recruiting parades.

During their time in England the 8th managed to lose their first officer. He was 2/Lt Harold Cohen of Reading who had been in the OTC at Reading School and was managing his father's business in Antwerp when war broke out. He returned home to enlist with the 4th and was commissioned into the 8th. He was injured and died in the Reading War Hospital from blood poisoning and double pneumonia [RM 22/1/16]

Sutton Veney

May to July 1915

As they left Reading on 7th May for Sutton Veney, Col Walton thanked the people of Reading for their support and said they would take away many pleasant memories. He was grateful to the Mayor for having made civic facilities available and to local firms and landowners who had placed land at their disposal for training. [RM 22/1/16]

At Sutton Veney near Warminster they moved into huts.

While they were at Sutton Veney the Sergeants were challenged to a sports day by Sergeants of the 8th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry who were sharing the facilities. The Berks swept the board winning the cricket match by 48 runs and winning at whist, cribbage and shove ha'penny. [RM 17/7/15]

It was at Sutton Veney that they eventually received their equipment and were able to practice with real service rifles. For the first time also they were able to train in larger scale manoeuvres with 26th Division.

However they were not destined to serve with 26th Division. This Division which was part of the Third New Army did not leave for France until 10th September 1915 and were soon afterwards transferred to Macedonia. Instead the 8th Battalion were designated to

replace one of the Guards Battalions in 1st Brigade, 1st Division as the Guards were forming their own Division. Their new orders arrived at the end of July. They must have earned the confidence of the War Office to merit such a posting, and this was reflected in the letter received by Col Walton from Maj General C M Kennedy, commanding 26th Division.

My Dear Walton.

Just a line to wish you and your battalion God-speed and every good fortune.. I am exceedingly sorry that your fine battalion is not part of my Division and that I shall not have the privilege of commanding them on service. I thank you for the splendid way you have worked ever since you have been attached to the 26th Division and I wish you and your officers and men every good thing possible. I feel confident that you will render a good account of yourselves and am proud of having had you under my command. God bless you all!

C M Kennedy

They left Sutton Veney on the 7th August 1915.

After arriving in France a report back stated that when they were in England they had grumbled about all the stiff training and hard work but now they were at the front they realised it had all served them well [RM 22/1/16]

Bibliography

Petre Vol II pp 318-319

Reading newspapers

Kitchener's Army by Ray Westlake

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