

Section 151

The Other Battalions

The 3rd Battalion

Mobilizing the Reserve August 1914

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

8th August 1914 to 12th November 1917

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. However just before he relinquished command, on Feb 5th he presided at a medal ceremony reported in the Berkshire Chronicle:-

ROYAL BERKS HONOURS - 18 MEDALS PRESENTED

On Sunday Morning [4th Feb] medals were presented to 18 non-commissioned officers and men of the 3rd Royal Berks, stationed at Victoria Barracks, Portsmouth.

On return from church the battalion, under the command of Lieut Colonel F G Barker was drwn up on three sides of a square, the regimental band and drums, together with the medallists, a list of whom is given below, occupying the enclosed space.

Major-General F C Heath Caldwell CB, commanding the Portsmouth Garrison who had kindly consented to present the medals arrived about 10.30 am accompanied by staff majors Baker-Carr and Rusbridge.

He opened the proceedings by addressing the battalion in the following words. "I have a very pleasant duty to perform this morning; that is to give no less than fifteen medals for gallantry in the field and two good conduct medals. Now this of course reflects great credit upon those gallant men who have gained these distinctions, also great credit and honour upon the Royal Berkshire Regiment. I congratulate the officers and men for their valuable work done and also for the bravery of these men. There must be many men before me who have done equally good work and I congratulate them too. It is

merely the fortune of war that these men have gained these honours at the front, and it may equally be the fortune of others here to do as well."

The medals were then presented, the Major General shaking hands with each recipient after pinning the medal on his breast and speaking a few words of congratulation.

At the conclusion the band played "God Save the King"

Before dismissing the parade Colonel Barker spoke a few words, mainly to the recruits, 300 in number who had joined since the commencement of the year, encouraging them to work hard to make themselves fit and inspiring them to emulate the deeds of men who had gone before them and so bring further credit and honour upon the regiment of which he and thousands of others were so proud.

The honours presented were as follows:-

Distinguished Service Medal and Russian Medal of St George 2nd Class:-

no 9624 CSM E Ward

Distinguished Conduct Medals:-

No 7582 Sergt B C Shea, 8139 Pte W H Wilson, 9421 Pte T Giles, 5443 CSM R Embling, 9872 Pte L Birmingham, 16562 Pte J Jones

Long Service and Good Conduct Medals:-

No 5265 CSM W Woodley, 9238 Lance Corpl J Tansley

Military Medals:-

No 6278 Pte J Powsey, 6323 CSM F Vokins, 7046 Sergt S Smith, 7401 Corpl C Webb, 10291 Sergt E Woodley, 14328 Pte W Ayres, 12047 Lance-Sergt J Harrison, 12197 Pte E Edwards, 14349 Sergt J Brown, 16362 Lance Corpl C Ruff [TX00823]

Harold Howse's Recollections 16th August to 24th October 1915

Harold Howse was a young South African who came to England to fight the Germans. His letters home were edited by W M Macmillan. He was posted to the 3rd Royal Berks in August 1916.

It is not till 16th August that Howse is able to write:---

"I am now an officer in the 3rd Royal Berkshire 'Reg't., and am stationed at Portsmouth... At present everything is topsy-turvy. The barracks are huge, and an absolute maze of unmeaning buildings. When I have found my way about this place a little I shall write a longer letter. Indeed, this is not a letter at all, but simply gives a reason for not writing one." :

Gradually he settled down to new duties, at the Victoria Barracks, overlooking Southsea Common, and only about three hundred yards from the sea itself. Once more it is a rise in the scale of the life military.

"I have been allowed two rooms, and a servant who does everything for me, and of course I live quite swankily compared to my former state as a cadet. The Officers' Mess is a gorgeous place, and a very comfortable home for the time being. At present I am the least among the Apostles, being the Junior Sub., and feeling very much like a new boy at a large public school. I take the bottom place in everything. That will, I hope,

not be for long. I am now entitled to receive salutes, and it made me feel quite shaky being saluted with great ceremony by the Guards at Buckingham Palace when I was passing there just before coming down here."

Once more it is parades from about 7 in the morning till 4 in the afternoon, when they are free to wander at will in Portsmouth or Southsea, where, however, he knows no one, For,

"I have unfortunately been separated from Attewell, who has been sent to the 5th Royal Fusiliers at Dover. Such is the fate of him who buildeth his hopes upon the whim of the War office. However, I hope to get leave some time for a week-end at Great Shefford Farm. They have really been awfully good to me there ... We are also not so far from Bournemouth, and I shall try to get down some Saturday or Sunday when I have settled down a bit more. It is, however, rather difficult to obtain leave here, I believe."

In fact, on 2nd September, he did succeed, after a tortuous journey, in spending less than twenty-four hours of Attewell's "final leave " at the farm in Berkshire. He is delighted as ever with the village churches.

"At Lambourne are some queer old tombstones, the inscription on one of which is not without its touch of humour:-

In the morning I went forth well,

Brought home my death, took by a smell,

Therefore in health and life prepare

To meet our Lord and Saviour dear.

I also saw the organ at which Sir George Martin played, and one of the pedals which he wore away. It is said that in his young days people thought him mad, because he used to ride by cart, a sort of 'bus thing, into Newbury; then a three hour drive, he used to take a dummy piano with him, and practice scales..... He also used to walk about with corks between his fingers."

Now he is a loyal son of his new regiment. It is, he writes,

"the old 59th, [sic] and 66th Foot, and dates back to about 1739. It fought in the American War, Peninsula, as Marines with Nelson at Copenhagen., at Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman, in China, from which it gets its badge of a Chinese Dragon, at Maiwand, 'The Last Eleven,' and in the Boer War. So it has a long record, and one to be proud of."

Presently, however, comes another change

"Some seven miles east of Portsmouth a long inlet of the sea contains an island about five miles square, called Hayling Island, which in pre-war times struggled rather unsuccessfully with Southsea as a seaside resort. There is a small village, with an. hotel, and a few bathing boxes scattered along a fine sea beach. The hotel faces the sea, at a distance of about a hundred yards from it. Out to sea one can observe the long wooded shores of the Isle of Wight

Now, on the outbreak of war the War Office, noticing the charm of the island, and also the comparative difficulty of getting off when once on it, said :-' Let us have a school

of musketry on this island, where we can send officers and train them for special work in the knowledge and use of the rifle. See how well they can concentrate on their work, for there are no concerts and no gay young women on the island.' And they agreed, and established the school, and on Monday last the 3rd Royal Berks. was asked to select an officer to attend the school on the island. They chose your loving son, and - here I am."

Once more he finds his quarters good, and the company of about one hundred officers congenial. In the hotel for the first time in his experience of the Army he sleeps between sheets. The companions in his room are a master from Winchester, an old Oxonian with whom he makes friends, and a younger man from Repton, and for the rest he has sea bathing and a good deal of interest in the ships passing to and fro between France and Southampton. Sometimes it is an old friend of the Union-Castle Line, and then his thoughts turn homeward. "He wonders if Aubrey has enlisted yet.

"I wrote last mail to persuade him to come over here. He would not like it in the ranks, and would have a much better time than in German East., and be in better company." At the same time, he had much better wait till the end of the year, and concentrate as much as possible on his degree."

In the end Aubrey gained his degree without having to take the full year's course, and did enlist for service in Central Africa. Then there is this :-

"The days are beginning to close in again now, and the autumn is setting in. Leaves are slowly forming a carpet on the roads, and before long we shall have another winter upon us. I think of you all just now, with the African spring and summer before you, and I hope and trust that before the water freezes again in the spouting on the outhouse, I shall be with you once more."

Writing on September 10th :-

"I ran up to London for the weekend. Four of us Old Rhodians met there - Tredgold, Goldwater, Heimann, and I - and we dined together to celebrate the Rhodes, Reunion day, September 12th. It was quite a jolly little company - of exiles from home, and we, spoke largely of old times and college people - some of these now 'outsoared the shadow of our night.'

Ah! those dear days - the time of utter happiness, when the Future seemed as bright as the present, and we lived to the lull. How we all expressed the longing to return once more to visit those scenes, so far removed from this vast slaughter-house of a world, that it is difficult to believe that we are still on the same planet."

On Saturday they go together to see H. B. Irving; in Barrie's play, "The Professor's Love Story," and on Sunday he returns to Hayling Island, "and to work."

"There is a delightful story going the round of the Officer Messes' in England just now - you may not have heard it. It gives a good idea of some War Office methods. The adjutant of a certain battalion in Salonika wrote to Headquarters for leave to go to Cairo to get married, and he also asked for leave for the senior major to go with him to act as best-man. A few days later Headquarters wrote back, refusing the adjutant's leave, but granting the senior major's! History does not relate what the major

did."

On September 22nd the musketry course is over, and this time he has been more successful.

"I have heard the result of my course at Hayling Island. I was rather fortunate, getting a I.D. pass, which, being expounded, is First Class Distinguished. I do not know whether this will mean anything for me or not. 'It may.'"

"Only one incident relieves what is obviously, beginning to be the monotony of life in barracks. On 25th September Portsmouth had an abortive visit from a Zeppelin, which meant that 'Howse was called from bed at midnight and hurried off by motor lorry with fifty men to stand by in case of fire near ammunition stores three miles away....."

"We waited till 3 a.m., when the hooter sounded, signifying 'All clear carry on.' Of course while the Zepp. was about, all trains had stopped running, all traffic was without lights and the street light was shut off. The place was still as death. Then the 'carry on' hooter sounded, and the country-side leapt into life again. Trains appeared from nowhere, motors flashed by on the roads, and we trudged back three miles into barracks, the men singing their latest marching song:- 'What's the use of worrying.' The Zepp. dropped no bombs on Portsmouth - I don't think it quite knew where it was. This is the first time the sausages have been here - it is a long way to come."

But on the whole, the freshness of his first impressions is beginning now to be worn down by the tedium of life in barracks. At no time is he other than deeply conscious of the grim seriousness of the work that lies before him, and only a stern sense of duty carries him through. There is no evidence of his thinking of his duty in a spirit of mere adventure. On the contrary, those who knew him in the days in France speak of his long having a presentiment that he would lay down his life in the cause, and this is confirmed by some of the most striking of his letters.

Yet on his return to the regiment at Portsmouth, he is obviously growing impatient of inaction, and what he must do he would rather have done quickly. This feeling is evident, in spite of the fact that he is as ever careful to think of how it will affect the feelings of the people at home.

Thus on October 1st :-

"I have received orders that I must hold myself in readiness to proceed overseas. Of course that means that I am now ready to go whenever casualties occur in any of the Berkshire battalions serving in France.

That being so, I have applied for six days' leave. There are, of course, disadvantages in going out in the winter, but - there is one point you will be glad to think of - the summer strafe is practically over now., and there will be comparatively little hard fighting during the winter months.

And at any rate. I am glad to be on the point of doing something at last. I have done enough barrack work in this war.

"I shall perhaps let you know more definitely by next mail when I am likely to go out. "Now let the gentle Hun beware. I have no love for the animal, and if you hear of terrific Prussian losses in a month or two - well, you will know the cause. A scion of the noble house of Howse is

on the war-path."

Then come a few days' leave, and on 24th October he writes from Portsmouth:

I am just about to leave for France. I go to Southampton this afternoon and embark to-night for Rouen, where I may remain for some time before proceeding to the trenches. Young officers are usually kept there for a while on some further instruction before going into action.

Dublin

12th November 1917 to 5th September 1919

It 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 specially 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.

Sources

Petre pp 116

Berkshire Chronicle 23/2/1917, 9/2/17

A South African Student and Soldier by W M Macmillan

