

Section 182

From India to France

2nd Battalion August to November 1914

Goodbye to India

When war broke out the 2nd Battalion were serving in India. The Regimental headquarters were at Jhansi but G and H coys were at Now Gong. On the 20th August they were all ordered to return to Jhansi to prepare to return to England. The Battalion gradually assembled at the rest camp near the station and were inspected by General Townshend who was Commander in Chief of the forces in India.

On the 14th September they were ready to entrain. The massed bands of the Indian Volunteer forces gave them a great send off playing the national anthems of all the allies as they boarded at Jhansi. That day they went only as far as Deolali, which is about half way to Bombay. At Deolali they spent a week in training and it was here that the four-company system was put into full operation, although it had been used for practice purposes since April. Finally on the 20th September they set off for Bombay docks, where the SS Dongala was waiting for them.

Sgt Hanks recalled the voyage while he was a drill instructor with the 3rd Battalion about a year later.

It was just a nice Indian Summer evening at Nowgong in EI [East India]. Of course the news had reached us of the awfull war that had started in France and of which England had joined. About 5.30 pm a telegram came for the Officer Commanding the Detachment, on learning of the contents of the message we were ordered to pack up and proceed to Jhansi which was our headquarters, about 64 miles away of which 21 miles had to be covered by march route to the railway station of Harpalpur where we entrained for Jhansi. We were informed by our officer that the Regiment had been ordered to England but were only going home on the relief scale making no mention of the War but of course we guessed we should all go. Well we reached Jhansi and were placed under canvas where we remained until the other detachments had joined and the Regiment was complete, then we entrained and proceeded to Bombay for embarkation. We broke our journey for about a week at a place named Devoli and then entrained again for Bombay where we embarked on SS Dongola on the 14th September 1914. But we did not sail until the 20th of September 1914. [TX00997A]

Voyage to England

The start of the voyage was marred by the Dongala hitting a rock as it left harbour. However despite leaking

they carried on and the soldiers were employed to pump the water out as went along. The Dongala was to be part of a convoy so it had to wait outside Bombay harbour for a week whilst the other boats went in and loaded. Eventually on the 27th September they set sail from Bombay in company with 11 other boats and soon they were joined by a second group of boats from Karachi and when a third group joined, the convoy consisted of 52 troopships escorted by 12 gunboats.

Sgt Hanks:-

We had to wait for other transports to be filled up. When all was ready we sailed in 3 squadrons, SS Dongala leading the centre squadron of course we were escorted by battleships. The voyage was very pleasant with the exeption of two deaths; one little baby and our big drummer which we buried at sea. [TX00997B]

At Aden a stop was made to pick up some artillery. In the Red Sea rumours abounded that the German battleships Goeben and Breslau were waiting for them so some of the gun boats went on ahead to check that all was clear. In actual fact the two battleships were still confined to the Mediterranean and it was the armed merchantman Emden which posed the threat in the Indian Ocean. While in the Red Sea one of the Indian stokers on the Dongala threw himself into the sea, however he was picked up by one of the other boats.

At Port Suez the convoy had to queue up to enter the canal one by one. It took 18 hours to traverse the canal and at Port Said there was a stop for coaling. It took another 6 days to cross the Mediterranean. Approaching Gibraltar there was a further scare about a German armed merchantman and the convoy was halted for some time. Further concern was caused by an approaching mail boat which did not give the correct signals and had to be investigated by the gun boats.

When they finally arrived in Gibraltar the armed merchantman was there to greet them, having been captured by Royal Navy submarines.

They arrived at Gibraltar at around 0830 and had a two day layover during which time they were allowed to go ashore, but only as far as the pier where the band of the Royal Berks played waltz music. During the performance a local woman fell off the pier into the sea and immediately several of the Royal Berks leapt in to save her. While at Gibraltar they were berthed alongside the SS Somali carrying the 2nd Rifle Brigade, a battalion with which the 2nd Royal Berks were to have a long

and close relationship.

Sgt Hanks:-

We stopped at Gibraltar for two days where we had a little mishap, two officers ladies fell in the sea and were nearly drowned, but 4 of our men jumped in the sea and rescued them. [TX00997C]

Next morning they were off once more and the Bay of Biscay soon claimed its victims. However the rough seas lasted only a day and thereafter the sea was very calm and the sea sickness could be forgotten. The Dongala at last made it to Liverpool, docking on the morning of October 23rd.

The 8th Division Assembles

The 8th Division was to be formed from the regular units mostly withdrawn from all over the Empire. On the 19th September Division HQ was set up at the Polygon Hotel in Southampton and Hursley Park, near Winchester was acquired to house the troops.

Brigadier General A Lowry-Cole was appointed to command 25th Brigade which was to contain the 2nd Royal Berks, together with the 2nd Rifle Brigade, the 2nd Lincolnshires, the 1st Irish Rifles and the 13th London Regiment (Kensington Rifles). Capt J G Gill of the Leinster Regiment was appointed Brigade Major.

One of the first contingents to arrive was a detachment from the 3rd Royal Berks from Portsmouth This consisted of two officers and 179 ORs and was intended to bring the 2nd Bn up to full strength. They arrived on October 13th. Ten days later on the 23rd the 2nd Battalion arrived from Liverpool with 23 officers and 983 ORs together with the 2nd Rifle Brigade who had travelled with them from India.

England

At 1100 the Battalion were allowed to disembark and receive the cheers of the people waiting on the quayside They spent most of the rest of the day unloading stores and equipment from the Dongala and loading them onto waiting trains. The men set out at 20:30 leaving the goods trains to follow behind. Winchester was reached at 0400 the next morning and there was a five and a half mile march to Hursley Park where they arrived just in time for breakfast at 06:00.

Sgt Hanks:-

Nothing more happened until we landed at Liverpool on the 22nd of October 1914. On landing we learned we were going to proceed to Winchester where we would be granted 48 hours leave and then proceed to France. We reached Winchester on the morning of the 23rd. We were placed straight under canvas, served out with home service clothing and proceeded on our 48 hours leave on Saturday the 24th. [TX0997D]

The next day most of the men were given a 48 hour pass

and most took the opportunity of travelling home to see their families. When they returned to the camp the first item on the agenda was a long route march starting at 08:30. Many of the men were still either drunk or suffering a severe hangover from the previous nights festivities, added to which it was pouring with rain, most of them had mislaid their puttees and had no capes so they were all soon soaked to the skin and thoroughly miserable.

Sgt Hanks:-

I reached Oxford about 5.45 pm the same date. I enjoyed myself very much but of course there was not much time to waste.

On Monday the 26th I became engaged to my present wife. We had our photo taken together and then I left with my chum (which since have been killed in action in France) Sgt Brettell and returned to Winchester where we did a few days training [TX00997E]

To France

At 07:00 on the 14th November they received the order "Suspend all training, prepare to move, Mobilization completed" The Battalion were the first to depart and marched to Southampton on 4th November and boarded the Kingstonian for the crossing to Le Havre. They reached Le Havre in France on the 5th November with 30 officers and 978 other ranks. The officers had been brought up to strength by the attachment of four 2nd Lts from the Royal Sussex Regiment. The rest of the Brigade followed next day on the SS Cestrian.

Sgt Hanks:-

.... and then by march route to Southampton for embarkation to France. Well we embarked on SS Kingstonian on the night of the 4th November 1914 and landed in France at Harve [sic] on the morning of the 5th. Here we stopped for a few days and then entrained again for an unknown destination. [TX00997F]

They had just missed the first battle of Ypres but were soon in action. The rapid transition from the heat in India to the damp and cold of the Western front was to have a greater effect than the enemy with many succumbing to frost bite and other complaints.

Sources

Personal account by Pte H Garlick

Personal account by Sgt E L Hanks

The Royal Berkshire Regiment by F Loraine Petre

8th Division War Diary

25th Brigade War Diary

2nd Battalion War Diary

continued in section 184

