

Section 201

The Build-up

1st Battalion - May to September 1915

The 1st Battalion had spent a long time in and out of trenches and had suffered considerable losses. Continued from section 191

Richbourg 16th to 19th May 1915

Having just captured a number of German trenches in a very successful attack, the Battalion set about turning the trenches around to be defensive. They were relieved by the 1st Kings Liverpools on the 16th and retired about 20:00 to the old British front line trenches and the billets behind them.

The next day they were ordered up to support the 2nd S Staffordshires who were to attack the Ferme du Bois. They spent about six hours in the trenches being subjected to heavy German shelling, although not being seriously harmed. At 19:30 however operations were called off and they returned to their previous nights billets.

They were now regarded as being in Divisional reserve and stayed put until 17:00 on the 19th when they were told the whole Brigade was being pulled out.

Private H Morgan was wounded on May 19th. He was repatriated to a hospital in Birmingham and had an arm amputated. He was formerly employed on the Royal Farm at Windsor.

Allouagne 20th - 30th May 1915

At 18:30 on the 19th they began the withdrawal from Richbourg and went back to Montmorency Barracks in Bethune where they were joined by the 23rd Reinforcement of 128 men.

The next day they marched off to Allouagne, leaving Bethune at 09:30 and arriving at 13:30. For the next two days they were resting and settling in and getting washed.

The 24th reinforcement arrived on the 22nd with 107 men. That day Maj Gen Horne arrived with Brig Fanshawe to speak to the Battalion:-

Major Hill, Officers, NCO's and Men of the 1st Royal Berkshire Regt. You have had a very hard time for the past 10 days. The preparations for the attack which took place on Saturday night were very trying, and necessitated hard

night work with a great amount of fatigue. Your courageous rush across the ground to the German trenches was such as to make me feel perfectly confident that the gallantry, determination, and noble sacrifices will always be maintained.

The reputation of the Royal Berkshire Regiment for its hardihood and gallantry is well known throughout the whole war, and I tell you that in no other regiment in the 2nd Division do I place more confidence than in yours, which acts so thoroughly and courageously at all times.

The attack on Saturday was excellently planned and excellently carried out, with such results that the consolidation of the ground gained left no doubt as to your ability to hold the trenches. This was maintained next day under heavy artillery and rifle fire, and you prevented all attempts of the Germans to drive you out.

We shall await still further victories from the Royal Berkshire Regiment which has acquitted itself so nobly in the past. The Army and Corps Commanders have told me to express their sincere appreciation of your work, and I myself feel very proud to be associated with you and to command the 2nd Division.

The next few days were rather pleasant with magnificent weather and plenty of training.

There was a brief interruption on the 27th when orders were received for the Brigade to take over a line from the French but this was quickly rescinded.

The last day at Allouagne was the 30th. The day was marked by a visit from the Bishop of Khartoun who held a service at the morning parade.

The 25th reinforcement of 118 men arrived.

The Battalion was sad to learn that Briadier General Fanshawe was giving up command of the 6th Brigade as he had been given a Division.

Fred Hiscock

Fred Hiscock was a 29 year old farm labourer from the village of Headley on the Berks/Hants border. He enlisted as a regular in April 1915 and went to the 3rd Battalion for initial training.

He was given embarkation leave before he left for France and it gave him the opportunity to see his new daughter. He was by no means yet a fully trained soldier and he did not go immediately to the 1st Battalion when he arrived in France via Southampton, rather he joined the no 3 Company Entrenching Battalion where he was to learn the art of trench digging.

One of his first acts however was to visit a fellow Royal

Berkshire man called Jack Lawrence in prison but his letter home gives no clue as to why Jack was doing time. He eventually joined C Company and would have been surrounded by old hands who knew the form.

Les Brebis

30th May to 2nd June 1915

Starting at 17:00 on the 30th the Battalion proceeded to Les Brebis, south of Mazingarbe. They made a stop at some woods just north of Houchin and reached billets at Les Brebis at 02:00. It was a long march and only two men fell out, both sick.

When they inspected the billets in the light of day they found the French had left them in a most unsanitary condition. However under the leadership of the MO, Capt S D Large, matters were soon taken in hand.

Brigadier General A C Daly took over command of 6th Brigade.

They made the most of the glorious weather to get well rested and reequipped.

Back to the Trenches at Grenay

2nd to 6th June 1915

On the 2nd June it was back to the trenches, this time at Grenay in a sector known as W1. They relieved the 1st KRRC starting at 20:45 when B Coy took over the right section. A Coy took over the left section with D in immediate support and C in local reserve. The relief was completed at midnight.

Next day they were able to take stock of their new situation. The trenches had previously been occupied by the French who liked firing through loopholes, whereas it was Royal Berkshire practice to fire over the parapet and thus bring many more rifles to bear.

For several days they were heavily shelled but more damage was done to the rows of houses in the village than to the trenches. It was a mining village and most of the miners had remained and continued to work the mine.

The 26th reinforcement of 70 men with Lt D E Ward and 2/Lt N C Clifford-Smith on the 5th.

They were relieved by the 142 Bde, London Division at 22:30 on the 6th and went to temporary billets at Noeux les Mines

Verquieneul

7th to 11th June 1915

After cleaning up at Noeux les Mines they set out for Verquieneul at 22:30 on the 7th.

The billets were bad and very crowded, the village was being shared with a good number of French artillerymen.

Capt L W Bird was transferred from 2nd Bn and took over B Coy.

Most of the time was spent in training although on the final day, two working parties of 100 men each were found.

Vermelles

11th to 15th June 1915

They moved at 21:30 on the 11th and marched to Vermelles. The so-called billets there were little more than rough shelters amid the rubble of the village. The place was filthy and it seemed that refuse had not been dealt with for several months.

Their main duties were working parties under the RE and reconnoitering the trenches they were next due to occupy.

8 more reinforcements under 2Lt E K Colbourne arrived on the 13th.

The 2nd HLI arrived at 22:30 on the 15th and the Battalion marched back to billets at Verquin.

Verquin

15th to 19th June 1915

The billets at Verquin were filthy and a great deal of work had to be done to get them to a reasonable standard. This was mostly completed on the morning of the 16th and in the afternoon the whole Battalion was turned out to clear roads from 17:00 to 20:00

The next two days were dominated by route marches, although with the lovely weather these were a great relief from the normal jobs of tidying up. On the 17th the march lasted from 11:15 to 14:00 and the next day from 09:00 to 17:00 with dinners served in the field at Bois des Dames.

Cuinchy Trenches

19th to 23 June 1915

The Battalion left their billets at 10:00 on the 19th and marched to take over about 500 yards of trenches in front of Cuinchy. The line ran from the railway embankment in the north to Ridley Walk in the south. The Northamptonshires who had been there only two days had warned the R Berks that the trenches were very dirty - and so they proved.

German sniper activity was very annoying and continuous. It appeared they had not been properly responded to and the Royal Berks set to to remedy the situation establishing their sniper posts. The result was by the 21st sniper activity had been greatly reduced.

About 22:00 on the 21st billowing clouds of a white heavy gas were seen emerging from from one of the mines. It was feared that the Germans had gassed the

miners and a frantic search was mounted. They sprayed the gas with Vermorel which soon dispersed it. Then a rescue party was sent down to find the miners were fine as the gas had not penetrated their working area. The next day however the Germans blew in the mine and two miners suffered broken limbs. Eight men were buried but rescued unhurt. Much of the credit for the rescue work went to Capt Maurice Radford who was awarded an immediate DSO. 7893 Acting Sgt R H Hart went down the pit time and time again to bring the men out, although he was badly affected by poison gas. He was awarded the DCM for his courage.

The Berkshire Chronicle gave its account of the gassing incidents on November 12th:-

On June 21st when the [1st] Battalion was at Quinchy where they had been, with the exception of the attack at Festubert, since the spring - occurred one of those dramatic incidents which illustrate the unquenchable devotion to their comrades, even to the risking of life itself, which animates the British soldier of all ranks. It appears that on the night of June 21st the Germans pumped gas into a mine in which four of our men were on a listening post. Here was a terrible predicament alike for the four men and for their comrades who knew of their danger. However under the direction of Captain Maurice Clive Radford who displayed great gallantry and resource, the efforts of two non-commissioned officers and two men who bravely went down the mine were successful in getting the men out. It was a risky job but it was safely accomplished. One of those non-commissioned officers was Acting Sergeant R H Hart who, as the official record states, displayed "conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty"

But this was not all. At about 4.15 am the next morning following their gas attack the Germans exploded a mine in front of our own entombing a sergeant and about eight of our men. Here was another situation demanding the highest bravery on the part of the gallant comrades of the apparently doomed men in the mine. To go down the mine was to run a most dangerous risk, for the fumes were terrible. But as is always the case, British pluck did not fail. Captain Radford with Second Lieutenant Eric Krabbe Colbourne organised a small party and these gallant fellows went down repeatedly among the fumes. Although the rescuers suffered considerably they bravely persisted in their task till the whole of their entombed comrades were rescued. The brave deed was warmly commended in the Battalion and both Captain Radford and Lieutenant Colbourne received the DSO for "conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty" While Acting Sergeant Hart who displayed the greatest courage was badly affected by the poison gas was awarded the DCM. [TX01554A]

As well as the sniping there was a lot of mining activity going on - indeed it was the mining that triggered the gassing related above, LCpl Styles commented in a letter home:-

"Our people have been having the best of the mine warfare - the Germans have exploded only two when ours have sent up about half a dozen. Its grand to see them going up but I like to be at a distance for you can get a much finer view and its not half as dangerous" [TX01554B]

Pte H G Whitehead of Maidenhead had a narrow escape:-

"We had a narrow escape the other day. We were holding

the first line about fifty yards or less from the Germans when they blew up a mine just in front of us. It was meant for our platoon but they had not dug it far enough so we got away by being buried instead of being blown up in the air. If the mine had been another five yards we should have been among the angels now. It is not a very pleasant feeling to have this sort of thing so close. Where we are now we are having some good sport - shooting at each other and hissing at one another. Then we put a rapid fire into the Germans. Would you believe it, they shouted out that they knew that they had the Berks in front of them and that we were going to get relieved! I can tell you they do know our regiment - at a cost too." [TX01554C]

Private Allen, one of the stretcher bearers was taken unaware by one of the explosions:-

"I and three others were lying in a dug out which began to say to and fro like a ship. Later on we were told that a German mine had been struck. [TX01554F]

2nd Lt A B Turner joined the Battalion on the 22nd and was posted to B Coy.

Sgt Richard Humphrey Hart [7893] was killed by a sniper on the 23rd just before they left the trenches. Cpl Savory of Reading reported to the Berkshire Chronicle that he:

was one of the best sergeants the battalion had and was a very brave man. All Honour to his memory!. [TX01557]

Cambrin

23rd to 25th June 1915

They were relieved by the 1st Kings Liverpools on the 23rd and retired to supporting trenches and billets at Cambrin.

They heard that another of the British mines was exploded by the Germans on the 24th - one of the Royal Berks who was on duty there was buried and another shot. [10260 Pte Charles Proctor of Reading]

26th June 1915

The CO, Lt Col Hill went over to see the 2nd and 5th Battalions in the morning.

On the 26th they were subjected to German shelling. The shells were falling heavily around the officers mess and the officers were in the process of retiring to the cellars when a shell burst close to them. Lt Col Charles Glencairn Hill DSO CMG and Lt Clifford Whittington Green were killed instantly and 2nd Lt Eric Krabbe Colborne died of wounds the next day. The officers' waiter was also killed. Pte G Johnson, who was in charge of the officers mess was severely injured

Cpl W J Savory of Reading gave the following description in the Berkshire Chronicle of 19/11/15:-

About 10.30 o'clock in the evening on Saturday June 25th, Lt Col Hill and Second Lts C W Green and E K Colbourne were in the battalion headquarters. This comprised an old building which had been damaged to a great extent by shells. The Germans attempted to shell the place but only two missiles went near it. Unfortunately one passed in

through the open door and falling on the top of the staircase leading to the cellars, exploded and killed Lt Col Hill and the officers waiter, Private Shoebury outright, whilst 2Lt Green and 2Lt Colbourne were seriously injured. Both the last two named were, with every speed conveyed to the hospital but succumbed to their injuries the next morning.. Col Hill, on noticing that the building was being shelled, called to the others to get down to the cellars for protection but the words were hardly out of his mouth before he was killed.

Private Johnson was the only one of the five present who escaped. He ran for the open but he was blown several yards by the shell. He was terribly mangled and at the time of writing is still in Netley Hospital making fair progress. It is suspected that the disclosure of the situation of the building was the work of a spy.

Capt Lawrence Wilfred Bird took over the command.

A message was received from General Horne:-

"Have heard with deepest regret of death of Lieut Col Hill. I sympathise sincerely with 6th Brigade and 1st Royal Berkshire Regt in their great loss. Please convey my condolences to the Battalion."

27th June 1915

Lt Col Hill was buried in a pretty little churchyard on the Monday morning following. Several members of the Battalion attended the funeral but it was impossible for all to pay their last respects as they were, at the time of the ceremony engaged in the firing line, holding the brickworks at Cuinchy, which by the way, were the scene of some desperate fighting.

On the same day Lt Green and 2Lt Colbourne were buried in the military cemetery at Chocques.

Writing a few days after the shelling of the HQ, Lance Corporal Styles wrote:-

We shall miss them very much for they were all proper English gentlemen. The last few days it has been raining a bit, otherwise we are having it pretty easy as compared with Richebourg, only a couple of mines going up and the usual complement of Jack Johnsons.

They went back to the trenches that morning.

Cuinchy

27th June to 1st July 1915

They relieved the 1st Kings between 09:00 and 13:00 on the 27th and in the afternoon exploded one of their mines at 16:45. The Germans retaliated with one of theirs at 20:00 and a great deal of artillery shelling.

An unnamed private recalled the shelling when they were safely back in billets in Bethune:-

"Well we are now right away from the firing line having moved yesterday but we moved quicker than expected as we were shelled out of our billets. Oh Early yesterday morning it was terrible the worst I have had so far. Our guns which were all around us bombarded the Germans during the whole of the night and at 6 am the Germans started on us and kept on until 10 o'clock. It was terrible. Hundreds of Jack Johnsons and heavy shrapnel shells

dropped around us smashing houses and our billets but luckily we were in our dug outs. The artillery men suffered a lot the shells dropping right on them, killing and wounding many. We helped to get them out and also rescued some cows and horses from a farmhouse set on fire by a shell. We had a job as the cattle were so frightened and in the end we had to take to our heels and run. We hid in a wood until the shelling was over. [TX01554D

Beuvry

1st to 5th July 1915

The brigade came out of the line on the 1st and they marched to billets at Beuvry

On the 3rd Lt Col Seracold and some of his officers and men from the 1st/4th Battalion came over to visit. They had only recently arrived in France. An improvised set of sports competitions were arranged.

On the 5th they were relieved in support by the 3rd Colstream Guards.

Bethune

5th to 13th July 1915

They marched back to billets at Bethune starting at 16:00 and found billets at the tobacco factory and orphanage there.

They received supplies of muslin on the 6th. This was to protect food from flies.

There was a further visit from the 1st/4th Battalion when Major Clarke and Capt Sharpe came over on the 6th.

Lord Kitchener came over on the 8th and 6th Brigade left the barracks at 09:30 to line the Bethune to Locon road. They eventually got back at 12:45 after a rather tiring wait.

Lt Lovell RAMC left for duties at Boulogne and Lt Murphy RAMC took over as Battalion Medical Officer on the 8th.

A fresh draft of 50 men arrived on the 9th.

The swimming bath at Bethune was proving popular. They were able to swim there on many occasions. The Battalion formed a water polo team and on the 10th beat the 7th Kings 2-0 and the 5th Kings 2-1 however on the 12th they lost 0-1 to the South Staffords.

As well as water polo there were plenty of other opportunities for recreation, including a sports day with the 1st/4th Bn on the 11th.

Givenchy

13th to 15th July 1915

The rest came to an abrupt end on the 13th when they went back to trenches at Windy Corner just NW of Givenchy.

The Germans blew a mine on the 15th and created a

crater about 25 yards from the Royal Berkshires line which they promptly occupied. The battalion tried to dislodge them without success. They tried again next day with support from the 47th Howitzer Battery and no 1 Siege Battery but again without success. The Germans responded with Fizz-bangs

They were relieved by the 1st Kings Royal Rifle Corps at 16:00 on the 16th.

Le Quesnoy **16th to 20th July 1915**

Their new billets were at Le Quesnoy but there was little rest as working parties were demanded: 40 men every six hours and two mining parties of an NCO and 12 men every 8 hours. On the 18th 25 men were sent to join 176th Field Coy RE to help dig mines.

Writing on July 19th one Reading private commented on the weather:-

"We are having very unsettled weather again and we are in the trenches. We got wet through going in and there was another wet night last night. It makes everything in a mess" [TX01554E]

Another stated definitely that there was a foot of water in the trenches. There was considerable danger from the explosion of German mines.

Givenchy **20th to 25th July 1915**

It was almost a relief to be back in the front line trenches at Windy corner again on the 20th. But still the digging continued. They were building new communications and bombing trenches, new dugouts and strengthening the fire step.

Pte F C Barber of Reading was most impressed by the trenches but pointed out they had their problems:-

"The trenches are a marvel. You can easily lose your way. Can you realise walking for miles through trenches nearly six feet in depth? I and another went to draw rations one day and lost our way but we kept on until we got into the open and saw some more trenches in front. They were tenanted by Germans and we found it a bit lively for a few minutes when they spotted us. I can tell you it did not take us long to find our way back again." [TX01554G]

All through this spell of duty there was the constant fear of snipers and regular poundings by Fizzbangs and 4.2 inch shells.

Despite the privations the men seemed to keep fit - one wrote:-

"It is wonderful how healthy our men are. I have heard of no case of any serious illness in our battalion for nearly three months. [TX01554H]

Le Quesnoy **25th to 29th July 1915**

They were relieved by the 1st KRRC at 06:00 on the 25th and went back to Le Quesnoy to resume the round-the-clock working parties. The next day the demand for working parties increased again.

Major Hunt and Lt Hanbury Sparrow, the CO and Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion came over on the 25th.

While at Le Quesnoy men were able to swim in the La Basse Canal - it made a change from PE before breakfast which was the alternative for non-swimmers.

A Zeppelin was observed going west from Ypres at 22:30 on the 26th. The next day two more were seen at 20:23, both being heavily shelled.

They were relieved by the 3rd Coldstreams at 17:00 on the 29th and marched to new billets at Point Tournant and Croix de Fer. They were so crowded and dirty that they moved on to Montmorency Barracks at 19:00.

Bethune **29th July to 7th August**

The usual routine of drills, parades and inspections began again. On occasions they had to find guards and picquets.

They were all able to get a bath on the 31st. Later that day a photographer turned up to photograph the officers and their mess staff.

The big social event was a horse show on the 3rd. The previous two days were spent in planning and building courses and fences. The Battalion transport section were enthusiastic competitors under Lt Boshell. They won lots of prizes:-

- 1st - Heavy draught horses
- 3rd - Light draught horses
- 1st and 2nd - Pack Horses
- 1st - Heavy draft horses (pair) turnout
- 1st - Light draft horses (pair) turnout

In addition the adjutant's horse Bess, ridden by Capt Isaac won the bending race. After the competitions the officers were 'At Home' for tea and about 200 turned up.

Lt S D Large took over from Capt Talbot as Medical Officer.

The 4th was the First anniversary of the war. The officers held a dinner for Brig-Gen Daly and other officers of 6th Brigade staff in the evening.

Their next turn of duty was to take over the 2nd line defences. Several officers went out to reconnoitre on the 4th and on the 5th the whole Battalion marched out, led by its drums, to Le Preol to practice taking over the line.

Back at Bethune they all had a bath. Next day some of

the men had a clean change of underclothing.

The 26th reinforcement arrived on the 6th with 25 men under 2Lt J L Green.

On the 7th they left Montmorency Barracks at noon and marched to Beuvry where the transport section set up their depot. The rest of the men marched on with 50 yards between pairs of platoons, one either side of the road. They reached Annequin at 13:30 and went into reserve billets.

Annequin

7th to 11th August 1915

The period in Brigade Reserve passed quite quietly. Most of the time the Battalion was called upon for working parties. Some training was possible and there were Zeppelins to spot.

Six promotions to acting corporal were made on the 9th

Cuinchy

11th to 15th August 1915

They relieved the 2nd S Staffs at 13:00 on the 11th. The Battalion were all in the village with B Coy on the right, D Coy in the centre and A Coy on the left. A Coy were in support. When they arrived they found some trench mortars near the brickstacks and these were put into action immediately. Around 19:00 the Germans responded modestly.

On the 11th August a detonator was dropped accidentally in the trenches at the Brickstacks as A Coy were being issued with their bombs; the explosion wounded five men.

On the 12th the Germans tried to put up a flag to commemorate the fall of Warsaw and this became a prime target for the Trench Mortars. The highlight of the day however was the shooting of a German carrier pigeon which was duly sent up to Brigade HQ.

On the 13th 2nd Lt Lacy who was the mining officer and three others were killed by the explosion of a German mine at 23:00.

The trench mortars were proving very useful. 2Lt Stokes returned from his course at St Venant on the 13th and took charge of three batteries of four 95mm mortars. On the 14th they fired off 44 rounds with little response from the enemy.

The Brigade Major was in the trenches when a sniper hit a periscope causing a sliver of metal to hit him. He was not badly injured. The sniper was spotted and killed at 19:00. The Divisional staff brought two civilians around at 14:30 but all they seemed to be interested in was collecting souvenirs.

They were relieved by the 2nd S Staffs at 13:00 on the 15th

Annequin

15th to 19th August 1915

Instead of all retiring to billets after relief D Coy were sent to Cuinchy Supporting Point as permanent garrison while A Coy went to Braddell Point Redoubt. The rest of the battalion went into billets at Annequin.

The next few days were spent on working parties and training.

On the 18th the Germans fired 68 Coalboxes over the billets - aiming at a heavy battery to the rear. They missed and succeeded in making several large holes in a nearby stubble field.

There was some German aerial activity with bombs being dropped on Bethune. The Battalion diarist noted wryly:

Our aeroplanes do not show that keenness to drive off the enemy planes, a feature so apparent at the beginning of the war.

There was great sadness on the 19th when the 4th Guards Brigade left the 2nd Division to form their own Guards Division. Their loss was felt keenly.

Cuinchy

19th to 24th August 1915

It was back to the trenches again on the 19th. At 14:50 they relieved the 2nd S Staffs. At 19:15 a German Aviatik aircraft flew over the lines and was driven back to La Bassee by concentrated machine gun and artillery fire. One of the bullets fired at it fell back to earth and wounded one man.

At 20:30 A Coy fired on a German working party who responded with foul language but it was evident that some hits had been made by the groans. Later on a patrol went out to find the Germans singing to a piano on the other side of the canal.

The first day was capped with an unfortunate mix up. 2/Lt Clifford Smith commanding B Coy went out along a sap at 23:15 without properly warning the sentries. As a result they were spotted and bombs thrown at them. 2/Lt Clifford Smith was badly injured and his orderly, 7763 Pte Fred Blackall of Westhill was shot through the heart. Lt Eager took over B Coy.

The Germans were active with minenwerfers on the 20th. Two were fired at 08:00 against the centre company. At 17:00 eight were fired in the same area. One fell on a group of men from A Coy killing the CO Capt Weston, 7034 CSM John Harrison, 9281 Sgt William Hawkes of Gloucester, 15790 Pte Harry Bosley of Reading and 16020 Pte Frank Dibbs.

As well as the thrown mines the Germans exploded an underground mine at 10:15 against one of the British saps and another at 16:20 in front of C Coy. It was

difficult to see the purpose of these but when mining experts were called in they surmised the Germans were intent on blowing up the right of the centre company. The British response was to blow up one of their own and be ready to occupy the new crater as soon as possible. So a small party of two bombers and two riflemen were put on standby. At 21:05 the 250 lb charge was detonated, but the violence of the resulting explosion took everyone by surprise. A large part (about 20 yards) of the British parapet was demolished and several men were buried with one being killed [16434 Pte Sam Lole of West Bromwich]. Apparently the Germans had just laid their charge of 800 lbs and the British detonation has forestalled them. The result however was not bad. Several craters were united into one large one and the trenches were quickly repaired.

The next day (21st) a new system was introduced to counter the minenwerfers. Telephone lines were run from each of the companies to the artillery and as soon as one was spotted the codeword 'Minnie' was flashed down the line and the sentry blew a whistle to warn the men to take cover. The artillery were able to respond within 30 secs of one being spotted wobbling across the German lines. Nine of them came over at 17:45 but no damage was done.

Minenwerfers came over at 03:00, 05:00 and 08:15 on the 22nd but the new system allowed the artillery to quickly silence them. The artillery were also called up to fire on a hostile working party at 20:20 - more bad language in response.

The Germans put up notices announcing the fall of Novo Georgevitch on the 22nd. The next day the British announced the great naval victory at Riga.

At 01:00 on the 22nd two defensive mines were blown. An hour later a patrol went out to reconnoitre the large crater created on the 20th, especially looking for signs of German mining but none were found. The new craters were explored again on the 23rd at 02:00 and this time sounds of the enemy digging a sap in front of their parapet could be heard. At 15:30 2/Lt Tyson and his mortars scored direct hits on the German working parties and no further work was observed.

Overnight between the 23rd and 24th officers and NCOs of the Royal Welch Fusiliers came up to look over the trenches which they were due to take over. Next day starting at 15:00 the Fusiliers relieved the Royal Berks who were able to return to Montmorency Barracks at Bethune.

Bethune

25th to 28th August 1915

Back at Bethune the Battalion was expected to find guards and man defence and control posts.

On the 27th Brigade held a meeting for COs, Adjutants

and 2i/cs of the several battalions to brief them on the forthcoming attack at Loos. That evening the officers had Gen Horne and other staff officers for dinner with the Divisional band playing in the garden.

Fontes

28th August to 4th September 1915

The battalion was being moved into position as a reserve for the forthcoming battle. They marched 12 miles to Fontes, 3 miles west of Lillers at 13:30 on the 28th. When they arrived at their new billets at 19:00 they found them 'not very good'

While preparing for the forthcoming Battle of Loos the troops pre-occupations were mostly about fags and money. In a letter home dated 30th August Fred Hiscock writes:

I have seen a lot of my old mates out here, we have come back for a rest, and then go up for another turn. I was just shifting from the Entrenching Battalion when I received your letter.

He went on to explain that he couldn't write from the trenches apart from the field card and green envelope system.

They give you one of them a month. Send plenty of fags they are scarce out here. You cannot buy them, they give us two packets a week, do not send any tobacco as we've got plenty of that, matches are scarce and money, do not send any money as you can't change it.

While at Fontes they were able to relax and get some rest and recreation. There was a football match against 19th Field Ambulance on the 30th which they lost 0-1 and a Company competition on the 31st. The sergeants held a whist drive in their mess in Fontes School on the 1st. On the 2nd there was a Brigade boxing tournament with L/c Ives winning the lightweight event and Pte Mannooh the featherweight.

As well as resting there was the usual PE and training although the incessant rain did not help. On the 2nd the Company Commanders were briefed on the battle to come and strong objections were raised to the prospect of the British using poison gas.

The feeling was not in favour of Englishmen adopting this form of warfare.

They left Fontes at 14:45 on the 3rd and marched via St Hilaire, Bourecq, Lillers, Cantrainne, L'Eclème and La Valee to some very overcrowded billets at Gonneheim which was reached at 18:45

Annequin

4th to 24th September 1915

At 07:45 on the 4th, two of the machine guns left to take up their positions in the support line at Cuinchy. The main part of the Battalion followed at 12:10 marching from Gonneheim to Annequin via Choques,

Bethune and Bauvry. They were led by the drums as far as Beuvry where the transport section made their base. There was quite a hold up due to another battalion misinterpreting Brigade orders before they could do the final stretch to the billets at Annequin whence they arrived at 17:00. Two sections of C Coy were immediately detailed to garrison Tourbieres Redoubt. A reinforcement of 13 men reported back after being sick or wounded.

It was back to digging on the Monday (6th) New communication trenches were being constructed and cables were being buried. The new 'smoke' helmets were inspected by the MO on the 6th

Fred Hiscock wrote further on the 7th September

But we are still happy, we had a close call the first day I was in the trenches out here. I was only with the Trenching Battalion two days we were in Belgium. The worst thing is the blowing up of the mines - you cannot dodge them, you can the shells a bit. It is getting cold at night here now. I have only had one five franc since I have been out here so we don't get much to spend. We have five days in the fire trench and then four in reserve. We do not get much rest, shall be glad to get back home again, but there is something to be done before that time comes

Cuinchy

8th to 12th September 1915

The battalion relieved the 2nd S Staffs at 10:00 on the 8th. Several men disobeyed orders and went out to get fruit from an orchard. They were spotted by the Germans who sent a few Phizz-bangs over.

There was great consternation on the 10th when they found a batch of Mills bombs were defective. They did a full check and found that all Battye and Mills Bombs plus around 70,000 rounds of small arms ammunition were defective and had to be withdrawn. It was identified as a shipment from America

During the next three days there was quite a lot of artillery and mortar exchanges. The codeword 'Minnie' was used on several occasions to the 50th and 56th batteries. Snipers were also active on the 11th

Annequin

12th to 16th September 1915

They swapped again with the 2nd S Staffs at 10:00 on the 12th and, as usual were immediately called upon to supply men for digging and garrison duty.

Some shells fell at Beuvry on the 14th causing the transport section to scatter the horses for their safety.

In a letter to his wife dated 14th September Fred explained about the Battalion moving from place to place.

On this move we are guarding the stores just behind the line, eleven of us. We are looking after ourselves this time. We had a good cook up last night with what we had

pinched. We went and got some spuds, dug them up with the bayonet, but had to wait until it was dark or we might get sniped at by a German. Well we got enough for breakfast and dinner. We had cooked spuds and pig for breakfast and we got some beef for dinner

He went on to explain that the lice were as big as pigs.

It would appear that Fred and his fellow Royal Berkshire men were starting to adapt to the rigours of trench life. His letters become sparse as the Battalion got ready for the biggest battle of its life. In the last letter he ever wrote from Cuinchy to his wife he says

I am in my dug-out and the shells are falling thick and fast on the German trenches. It is simply horrid you cannot think how it shakes you. I was out on a listening post last night about ten yards from the Germans"

He goes on to state his longing to come home and while the generals were making their final preparations, the likes of Fred were simply surviving and preparing for their small part in the battle to come.

Cuinchy

17th to 25th September 1915

It was back to the front line at 09:30 on the 17th to make the final preparations for the coming battle. On the 18th the first consignments of gas cylinders arrived and these had to be carried up and fixed in emplacements in the parapet. This activity caused the communication trenches to be closed for six hours.

On the 19th they swapped again with the 2nd S Staffs and marched off to Beuvry for hot baths and a change of clothing, half of the battalion going on to Bethune for this. They were back in the front line trenches the next day (20th) but leaving most of their kit behind. This time they were in fighting order and everyone carried two bombs.

The next day the bombardment began and continued for 5 days. The Battle of Loos was about to begin.

Sources

Petre pp 21-22

War Diaries 1st Battalion

These for Remembrance

Berkshire Chronicle 11/6/15, 18/6/15, 13/8/15, 12/11/1915, 19/11/15

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