

## Section 205

# The Build Up

### The 5th Battalion - June to Sept 1915

#### Introduction

The 5th Battalion spent the summer of 1915 mainly around the Armentieres area. It was a very hot summer and conditions by and large were very pleasant apart from the occasional fighting and the shock that hit everyone when one of their number was killed or injured.

A feature of the 5th however was the number of men whose letters were preserved or who managed to write up their experiences later. Thus we have an incredible amount of detail of which the star must be the letters from the three Gold brothers which give a continuing picture of life in both B and D companies.

The story they tell of the 5th during these months, when the horrors of war had not yet been brought home to people, still makes gripping reading and here we can only pick out a few highlights. But the comradeship

and sense of mission still comes through strongly and we may take the 5th's experiences as fairly typical of all the Kitchener battalions.

#### The Crossing to France

30th May 1915

Some of the 5th were at Aldershot when the order came for the 12th Division to move to France. On their last day in England, Sunday May 30th, the King and Queen attended church and representatives of all the regiments marched past afterwards. The Norfolks were the first to go. They left in the afternoon and Pat Gold made a comic bouquet which was presented to them as they left and which they carried to the station.

Alec Gold recalled

On Saturday May 29th 1915 came orders for the move to France on the Sunday evening. We entrained in two special trains about 5 pm, the horses and transport having gone before by a different route. We embarked at Folkestone that night and had a calm crossing to Boulogne, escorted by a destroyer. Cecil sent an ordinary telegram home reporting



Map of the Armentieres Sector Summer 1915

our safe arrival - such was security in those days.

The Berkshires paraded at 1800 hours and were soon on a train for Folkestone where the rest of the battalion were in billets. At the quay they were hustled aboard and the boat sailed as soon as the last man boarded. Lt Cecil Gold recounted in a letter to his parents

"Our crossing was perfect, as smooth as anything and no one was ill at all. I danced a hornpipe on the upper deck, but could not stay below. ... We arrived at about one o'clock in the morning"

They were met on the other side by men with megaphones bawling out instructions even before the boat reached Boulogne. By three o'clock they were asleep at a rest camp.

First impressions were very favourable and they had a good reception from the locals. Cecil recalled

"The men do nothing but talk French all day to the many children who haunt our camp, but '*Francais*' and '*Bon Jour*' are the only things they know. All the French children say to you as you go along '*Good Luck*' and '*Hullo Jock*'. They are topping."

## Settling In 31st May 1915

The battalion arrived in Boulogne early in the morning of 31st May and at midnight, after a good rest, were taken by train and marching to Armentieres for training in trench warfare. They were only a few miles from the front line and could hear the rumble of heavy guns as they arrived at about 0600 on June 1st.

Alec Gold recalled

We were billeted for some days in villages round about where we practised our French on the locals till eventually a train arrived containing our transport and horses and we made acquaintance of the famous French trains of wagons for '*40 hommes or 8 chevaux*'. We were deposited at St Omer, whence we were to march to Armentieres.

Now the battalion was in hard training after so many months but the weather was stifling hot in June, the paved roads very hard to the feet and dusty and in addition to their full kit the men were carrying 120 rounds of ball ammunition - no mean load. No wonder that many men straggled and fell out and I'm afraid that when we passed General Plumer at a cross-roads he wasn't much impressed by the New Army. George Hopton insisted on my riding his horse for the last few miles as my chest was beginning to go wheezy and we staggered into billets at a village called Nieppe outside Armentieres, worn out and the stragglers gradually drifted in.

We spent the night in a typical French or Belgian farmhouse with a pile of manure in the yard outside the door. Next morning I awoke hardly able to breathe so after the battalion had set off for Armentieres I followed in a motor ambulance.

At this time Armentieres had been little damaged and many of the inhabitants were still there and we billeted in comfortable houses. I recall a charming restaurant where, after morning parade, we breakfasted on omelettes and lager beer.

D Coy were in billets in a very pretty little village about 8 Km from Armentieres. Cecil Gold was with the school mistress and next day went to see the school which had

only three little girls. He spoke to them in French and threatened them jokingly with the cane, finishing up by giving them three weeks holiday to loud cheers. B Coy were in another village about a mile away. Most of the men were accommodated in a brewery and when they left after 3 days their hosts laid on a party. The villagers erected a triumphal arch inscribed '*Good luck to the Allies*'

D Coy were three days on the march to their permanent billets. On the 7th June they were off at 0300 and marched until 0730 when they had breakfast by the roadside and laid up until 1700. Then they marched until 2000 when they arrived at their destination near Ploegstert Cecil Gold was battalion billeting officer and had gone on ahead of the main contingent.

Private Harding recounts the battalion's first few days in France.

We landed in France on the 1st June 1915. On the 6th with the temperature in the middle eighties and full packs, we proceeded to Armentieres - 24 miles. The Blue Blind factory's concrete floor was a welcome bed for our weary limbs. We were in and out of the line at Plug Street, Hampshire Tee and Hants Farm, on the whole a quiet period. Having lost four officers and six other ranks killed it was a quiet time for us stretcher bearers too - the 'drums' were given those duties under the MO, Lt Stacey. [ref 17]

In correspondence with Miss Nadine Noble dated 16th July, Capt Rickman of the 5th Royal Berks described the Battalion's introduction to the line near Armentieres.

"We took it very easy on our way up country and billeted in a town about six miles off the trenches for about a week before going into them, for the first time about a month ago. Then we were only in for instruction and did two tours of 24 hours each. During this time we bivouacked in a wood, luckily the weather was fine. We then returned to our town where we stayed for a fortnight, chiefly growing fat though we did get a little tennis on gravelly or rather sandy courts; the rackets are atrocious. We had very good billets the last time in the town in the house of M L'Abbe Droulers which boasted a bathroom.

From there we came up to the support trenches and billeted in a farm for six days. Whilst there our guns had what they called a 'hate' ie fired rapidly for about half an hour to which the Huns replied. Then we came up to the trenches and have been there now six days. They are overrun with rats, some of them huge beasts.

Alec Gold had a more frightening introduction to the front:

After a short stay we were to take over the front line in and around Ploegsteert Wood, but as I was still on light duty I went with the Field Ambulance to a small house not far behind the line. In a few days I rejoined and found B Coy in trenches in front of Plugstreet Wood with a Canadian division on our left. On my very first day while walking with Pat along a communication trench parallel with the front I heard a hiss and a thud and on looking down saw the rod of a rifle grenade sticking out of the ground right between my feet. Luckily the ground was soft for had it exploded I should have been blown to pieces. Pat said my face was dead white which did not surprise me.

## Organisation

When the battalion went to France the Company commanders were:- "A" Major Bayley, "B" Captain Hopton, "C" Captain Healey and "D" Captain Arbuthnot.

## Trench Warfare

14th June to 26th July 1915

The battalion had arrived at Armentieres on the 6th June. On June 14th they moved up the trenches in the Ploegsteert sector with a regular battalion to learn the ropes. With the 63rd and 64th RFA they were attached to 27th Division. From the 7th June until the 23rd they were shown the practical side of trench warfare.

On the 23rd the 12th Division were adjudged ready to take their place in the line and they began by taking over the trenches north east of Armentieres towards Ploegsteert Wood. From the 46th Division. 36th and 37th Brigades took over the trenches and 35th Brigade took over the reserve trench known as GHQ Line. As a Canadian Division took over to their left, the 12th relieved the 27th Division and shuffled right. Over the summer of 1915 they were in and out of the trenches gaining experience and suffering the occasional loss, mainly from snipers.

Alec Gold recalled the scene:

The front line ran somewhat irregularly where the British advance from the wood had been checked in November 1914 and much work had to be done in linking up disconnected parts and improving the trenches and barbed wire. This part of the front was comparatively quiet and apart from desultory shelling and snipers plus bursts of machine gun fire at night there was no fighting.

Unfortunately we were very short of shells and our gunners were strictly rationed so if we did ask for retaliation to German shelling we didn't get much help.

Each night working parties had to strengthen the wire and patrols sent out to protect them. I must admit that on my first night the idea of climbing out of the trench into the unknown with the Germans less than 1900 yards away rather appalled me, but encouraged by my platoon sergeant I made the effort and soon got used to it.

At Plugstreet we were to remain until the end of September, seven days in the line and seven in Battalion reserve, except that as reserve machine gun officer I sometimes did 21 days in the line at a stretch.

It was not long before casualties began to occur and it gave me a shock when one of my platoon fell dead from a stray bullet close by me, well inside Plugstreet Wood. It was slightly uncanny as there was no visible wound.

According to the official record Pte Lovett (10602) of "B" Coy was the first reported wounded on July 6th followed by Ptes J Mercer (11075) who was the first killed in action and E Sturgess (10302) who was wounded. They were both of "D" Coy and hit while in a working party near Hunters Farm on the 7th. However personal correspondence indicates other casualties had occurred.

The big guns bombarded each other from about 1800 and rifle fire was incessant through the night. The German's fired about 12 shells to every British one using shrapnel on the town. However day time was quiet and the men were able to bathe in the canal occasionally. There was often a tacit agreement between the sides to restrain the bombardments so as to show willing but to respect each other. Thus often the firing was random and shells fell where they did little harm. Sniping was always a problem to both sides but on the whole they kept their heads down and did not shoot at working parties when they did appear. Every so often they would have a 'hate' ie a furious exchange of fire, often staged one suspects for visiting senior officers or timed so as not to interfere too much with domestic arrangements.

Pte Frank Hermon wrote home on the 15th June - an edited version of his letter appeared in the Berkshire Chronicle on 2nd July:-

The battalion were in the firing line the other day but we could not see the Germans, because of the long grass between their trenches and those of the enemy. They kept firing at us and we fired back now and again. People in England would not believe that the trenches were little homes, and so comfortable but said Private Hermon - if they put their heads above the trenches they (the enemy) would fire at them very soon. There were some guns, about 900 yards behind the battalion and they continued to fire while he was writing.

Cecil Gold of B Coy wrote on June 15th

'We are working fairly hard this week - we dig trenches every day and learn all about them from officers of other regiments. The modern trench is quite different from what we have been taught, it is made entirely of sandbags filled with earth and no attempt is made at concealment, but you are as safe in them as it is possible to be. Last night I had to take about 100 men to dig digouts in the support trenches and we were there from 1 til 1.30 am. We were only 700 yards from the German trenches but we were behind our firing line and the Huns could not of course see us. Firing was continuous and flares went up all the time - it was just like Henley - rockets and roman candles bursting all around but it struck us that most people were firing at nothing'

On the 18th June he was able to write

'I have just come out of the trenches where I have been for the past 24 hours. We had a pretty quiet time and were not shelled although there was plenty of rifle fire. .... Trench life is very boring .... but by a kind of mutual consent the German's and us don't fire much at working parties nor do they shell the road up which our rations go'

The next day he wrote

'I have had a good look at the German trench through a periscope. It was about 250 yards away and they have rows and rows of reserve trenches - very strong. They have all sorts of jokes here. One night we tried to deceive them by one man walking up and down with his bayonet above the parapet while Officers and NCOs shouted dud orders in the hope that the Hun would think reinforcements were coming. The Huns were up to it of course and roared with laughter and applauded vigorously. Everything here seems on the basis of tit-for-tat. We blow up a mine, next the Huns do. We bombard them they reply and so if we do nothing we get no trouble from them. Our fellows and theirs fire hardly at all during the day but we all blaze away at night at nothing at all

and no one is hit. I fired away five rounds into the dark to try a rifle'

Pte Frank Seymour wrote home on the 19th June:-

I have had two turns in the trenches and it is quite a treat in them. We were in an easy place. We went in on Monday at 3 o'clock and came out on Tuesday night at 12 o'clock. We had no casualties in our Regiment but the Oxford and Bucks, who were with us had one wounded and the Essex who came out with us had three killed, so we were lucky. We went in the trenches again on Friday afternoon and came out on Saturday at 6 o'clock, where we had a Sergeant Major [Cox] in B' Company wounded.

What we have to be careful of, is German snipers. They get in all kinds of places, taking pot shots all day and night, and one has got a hard job finding out where they are. But they do not get much success for their cunning. Occasionally they send a few shrapnell shells over to our trenches. Of course our artillery does the same, and they are very hot! I mean they seldom miss the enemy's trenches.

I think our airmen are extra plucky. You ought to see the Germans shell them, when they cross over the German Lines. They fire as many as 70 to 80 shells at them, but they do not often

hit them. We have been in the trenches with the 4th Berks, who are lying around where we are at present.

Sergeant LW Perris of 17 Awbrey Terrace, Reading writing home reported that the 5th had occupied the trenches of the 1st/4th Berks and

'the Huns send a shell over every now and then just to remind us that there's a war on'

He also noted a Company Sergeant Major had been injured by one of them.

There were a few casualties. On June 20th Pat Gold wrote

'The only casualty we had was dear little sergeant major Cox, a little man with a black moustache. He was hit about 2.30 am one day but it is a cushy wound through his biceps and wont take long to mend. In fact he should be back in Reading by now.'

On occasions the mutual respect broke down On June 22nd Cecil Gold wrote sorrowfully:

'All the German snipers have names as you get to know whereabouts they are. There was one German called Rudolf in their trenches, at least our chaps called him that, as they often saw him and would call out for Rudolf. Well one day he did something wrong and the Germans made him get out in front of their parapet by day - as soon as our men saw it was Rudolf they ceased fire but our platoon did not spot and shot him - everyone was very upset.'

After a spell back in billets D Coy moved up into close support on July 5th.

A few days later on the 11th July a shell burst about 10 yards from "C" Coy HQ and Capt PB Wace, 2/Lt HC Horsford, 2/Lt Cummings, Sgt Gliver and Pte Hogbourne were wounded. Pte Harvey (9530) who was wounded accidentally died on the 12th. The first officer casualty was 2/Lt AN Scott injured by a stray bullet also on the 11th. [War Diary and RM 24/7/15]

On the 14th July they launched their own bombardment when Lt PH Gold fired 12 rifle grenades at the German

trenches. Two of them landed spot on target.

Captain Rickman wrote:

The trenches are from 80 to 200 yards apart here. I have not seen a Hun yet but I sometime amuse myself by potting at their periscopes, the only sign of life you ever see. It does seem absurd to be within 200 yards of people and never see any sign of life except when some greedy Hun, in his hurry to cook his food, lets his fire smoke. This they did the other day so we chucked a rifle grenade at them to which they replied with vigour, so I think some damage must have been done.

## Captain Hopton 27th July 1915

On 27th July 1915 at about 2300 Capt G W Hopton was shot by a sniper through the stomach and Lieut AR Treherne through the throat as they were cutting barbed wire outside trench 115. Lt Treherne, the regimental intelligence officer was killed instantly but Capt Hopton was removed from the trenches with his wound not considered serious but he died almost immediately afterwards.

Alec Gold was one of those deeply affected

One dreadful night at the end of July George Hopton and another of our subalterns, Trehearn, were both shot when out on a wiring party. Trehearn died almost at once but George Hopton was brought in. Although he was in great pain we hoped it was not mortal but he died on the way to the dressing station. This was a terrible blow to us all as he had led us from the beginning and I don't think there was a man in the company not in tears., I know I was.

One of his men, Pte E A Webb wrote a tribute to him when he said

We lost the Captain of our Company early this morning together with a 2nd Lieutenant. Not one of our chaps but would sooner it had been one of us. We shall never get another Captain to equal him. Even one of our officers had tears in his eyes. He was shot through the stomach, the other was shot through the throat. At first they thought the Captain's wound was not serious but he died just after they got him out of the trenches.

Another of his men Pte W Knight of Ashampstead wrote

'He was a proper soldier and a gentleman'

## Pests and Escapades 28th July to 24th September 1915

In another letter dated 14th September 1915 Capt Rickman wrote

'A few days ago our guns had a shoot and I saw pieces of trench and barbed wire entanglement being blown sky high. Thinking it was the end of my trench I hurried down to see the damage, only to find it was fragments of the Hun trench a little bit further on. One loses all sense of direction in a trench, they curl about so. To rats and flies you can now add another pest - wasps. They are most persistent and follow the breakfast marmalade right up to your mouth. I nearly bit the head off an over bold one the other day.

At night in the trenches we send up flares, these sometimes light on the enemy parapet and it was, till the Hun got too fly, a favourite form of sport - having previously warned the men

to let these off and then fire at the Huns as they jumped up to put them out.

An incident with a German flag resulted in the Gold family acquiring a family heirloom. As Alec recounted:

We had a wonderful Divisional General in General Wing who frequently visited the trenches and knew us all by name, Pat and I by our Christian names. One morning when he came round we showed him through a periscope a flag put up by the Germans during that night between the lines. It was green and white, reputed to be the Saxon colours. The General remarked it would make a good trophy so Pat determined to get it.

We suspected a booby trap so Pat and I and a sergeant crawled towards it that night and tried to lasso it with a noose on a pole, without success. Finally Pat decided to go it alone, leaving me and the sergeant to cover his retreat. After what seemed like hours I saw a figure crawling towards us from a different direction. I couldn't identify Pat and I remembered only afterward that he had pulled a balaclava helmet over his head, so I covered him with my revolver and nearly fired. When he whispered I was within an ace of shooting my own brother! He had got the flag which we proudly reported to the General. It doesn't perhaps sound very much but with both sides patrolling the narrow no-mans-land and snipers bullets about, the incident certainly made me sweat.

One of the activities involved digging mine-shafts with a view to blowing up the enemy defences: Alec Gold:

A favourite pastime of the Sappers, particularly the Canadians on our left, was to dig mine shafts with an idea of blowing up the redoubt opposite us. This was very unpopular with the infantry and we imagined we could hear the Germans countermining. To soothe our fears the Sappers would send a man down the shaft to listen. Later on a Sapper officer told me the man was deaf, but that it helped to re-assure the infantry.

There was often a sort of grim humour in the interchanges between the two sides as Pte Harding noted in a letter home dated 6th August 1915

We are having another spell in the trenches now, and the Germans, who are only 100 yards away, have stuck up a big notice 'Warsaw Fallen' Our chaps have been potting at it but the artillery have solved the problem by putting a couple of shells into it. The Prussian Guards were in the Trenches but I think the Saxons must be in now, as they are fairly quiet and a bit playful. Dotted all over the wood are little Cemeteries, grim reminders of what desperate fighting there must have been to take the wood.

## Preparations for Gas

An officer named Stewart from D Company volunteered to be experimented on for gas. He was trying out the respirators that were issued to the men and he proved conclusively that they were of no use. He somewhat overstayed his time close to the gas nozzle and suffered as a consequence. However a new respirator helmet seemed to work OK and was issued as a replacement.

## Food and Supplies

Food was excellent and plentiful. As well as the standard government issue ration each Company had two large boxes of food from Fortnum and Mason and

could buy fresh produce from the locals. All agreed that the government issue tinned jam was the best in the world.

The food was very good - at least for the officers - it came in parcels from Fortnum and Mason. Alec Gold recorded the standing order they placed for their mess.

Prior to embarkation for France we were uncertain as to the quality of the rations we were likely to get. B and D Companies placed orders with Fortnum and Mason for weekly hampers to supplement. These eventually proved unnecessary and were discontinued at the end of June 1915. The weekly order for B Coy was:-

2 boxes of soup squares (12) @6/6d	13/-
6 tins milk @6d	3/-
6 tins butter @1/2d	7/-
2 tins sardines @1/9d	3/6
3 tins sausages @1/6	4/6
2 tins baked beans @10.5d	1/9
1 tin quaker oats	1/3
3 tins preserved fruit @1/6	4/6
1 bottle Worcester Sauce	10d
2 boxes C size Prana sparklets	5/-
1 tin matches	9d
2 Lbs candles @2/1d	4/2
1 bottle mustard pickles	10d
Then every other week	
3 tins marmalade @8d	2/-
1 tin coffee	1/9
1 toilet paper	1/-
plus postage	13/-
TOTAL	£2-14-10

Cecil Gold was in charge of the mess for D Company and on June 2nd after the CO came for tea the dinner menu was:-

Mulligatawny soup (made from cubes)  
Sardines  
Bully beef, potatoes and salad,  
Pineapple chunks  
Cheese  
Coffee

There was a pre-occupation with drink. Wine was cheap at 2 franc per bottle and the officers consumed enormous quantities, preferring however to get it shipped in from home rather than buying the local wine. Champagne was ordered by the caseload and consumed as soon as it arrived. Whiskey was also sent from home in large quantities and rum was popular to fortify coffee. The men drank mainly beer. British beer was preferred but French beer would be drunk if nothing else was available. The French beer was described as like coloured water and the men treated it with utter contempt. Cecil Gold commented on July 5th

'The French charge enormous prices for everything, I suppose it is because they are broke, but the beer is rotten. I

went out to get water for the Mess with one of my platoon today, he was complaining of the French beer, so I casually asked ' *Spokes, how much French beer would it take to make you drunk?*' answer: *'Well Sir, you d'ardly credit it but I should say about nine and a half gallons!'*

Cecil Gold later discovered a source of Bass in Bailleul so supplies were assured. The water supply was contaminated and could only be used when laced with disinfectant. Supplies of bottled Perrier water were obtained but one suspects that only the officers got to drink this.

## Accommodation

### *Billets*

On June 6th they moved to within 4 miles of the line to what were described as 'permanent billets' Cecil Gold as billeting officer had a whole house to himself with a large feather bed and a bathroom adjoining. The other officers of D Coy were in a house next door. They messed in a house with an elderly couple in their 60s who had had to endure German occupation a few months before when the husband had been taken hostage. Cecil's brothers Alec and Pat were sharing a room in a village a few miles away with B Coy.

Over the next few months they were in and out of their billets as the Companies were rotated between the trenches, support and divisional reserve.

### *Trenches*

About a quarter of the time was spent in the trenches. Each company tried to improve upon the state the previous company had left it in and when they knew they were likely to come back again soon everyone had an incentive to leave it in a reasonable state.

In September Cecil Gold described their accommodation in the trenches in a letter to his father

'I will try to describe our present trench to you. It is about 200 yards to 250 yards long and is not dug down at all. It is simply a long barricade of sandbags piled about 7 feet high and very thick and of course there is a wooden step all along on which the men stand to fire. The trench itself is about 2 feet 6 inches to 3 feet wide and behind are either back cover of sandbags or men's dugouts with their back cover. Behind that again is a corderoy path along which we walk - in most places these have got back cover - but not in all. Behind is the wood. Our officers mess is about 12 feet long by 8 feet with wooden benches on either side and a fixed table in the middle - it was put up by the Engineers and is well made. It is quite close to the parapet. Behind is our kitchen which is 8 feet long by 6 - with a little stove and oven in it. ... We have a bell from our mess to the kitchen which consists of a rope which we pull - it works well. My dugout is the Hotel Cecil which I named. It is let into the parapet and has a back cover of earth all round behind it. It is about 3 ft 6 in high by 6 ft long and consists of a wooden bed - very narrow with a mattress of rabbit wire - once in bed it is not easy to get out again as the dugout is supported by a stay in the middle which gets in the way. .... When we first went in the place was in a rotten state of defence and we lost rather heavily for trench was - but now owing to the enormous

amount of work we have put in the place is much better and several times the battalion have not had a single casualty while in the trenches'

Capt Rickman's comments were not so positive:

The trenches were once occupied by the Huns and all round this place there must have been pretty thick fighting last November. We keep coming across souvenirs, not nice ones. The other night the rats evidently thought they needed some new communication trenches and when I got up in the morning found a heap of earth on my back - pretty thick when even the rats try to bury you alive.

### *Facilities*

The Brigade HQ was at Pont de Nieppe and it was here that the Divisional laundry and baths were established. An institute and canteen were set up at nearby Nieppe.

## Passing the time

There was a lot of marching around and the main entertainment was watching the aircraft which were still very much of a novelty to most people. Both German and British planes flew overhead and the gunners of the opposing side would try to shoot them down, usually with little success. On one occasion the British did manage to down a German plane. The pilot was unharmed but as soon as the British approached he turned his machine gun on them and kept firing until he himself was shot.

A private wrote (BC 25/2/15)

While we were on a working party the Germans started shelling us and we had three chaps hit, one rather badly. Although we did not go to the fete on August Bank Holiday we saw plenty of fireworks and we did not get back to the woods before one o'clock in the morning. Up at 5.0 the next morning and on another working party

There were lots of impromptu concerts put on, mainly singing of popular songs but occasionally there was an instrumentalist. On the 11th September a cornet player on the German side entertained the soldiers of both sides for ten minutes and was given a rousing round of applause from the British side when he finished.

The local girls were a favourite with all the men. Many used to visit the brothels in Armentieres but chatting up the locals was much more fun. Very few of the men spoke a word of French and hardly any of the girls spoke English. Several of the soldiers had however seen service in India and so far as they were concerned there were two languages - English and foreign - they got very frustrated when they addressed the girls in Hindustani and got an even blanker response.

Private Gladwin of D Company was a gifted musician and entertained everyone with his melodeon which Cecil Gold had given him. By September it was wearing out and a new one was ordered from home at a cost of about 25-30 shillings. It arrived on the 21st and was used in the interval of a football match between A and D Companies on the 22nd. It was described as really too good for the trenches.

## News from Home

One of the great successes of the war was the very efficient postal service which the army had established. Mail from Great Britain was routed to an enormous sorting office in Regents Park, London manned by men and women seconded from the GPO. There it was sorted into units and grouped by Brigade. Each Brigade's mail was then sent by packet boat to Rouen Le Havre, Boulogne or Calais and then via train to the brigade's railhead. From here lorries came to collect it and distribute it down to battalion and company HQs and then via a mail orderly to the men wherever they might be. It was not unknown for mail to be handed out on the march but mail service was suspended when a battle was in progress. In the reverse direction mail could be written either on Field Service Cards when it was a matter simply of ticking a box or deleting unwanted messages or, more preferred, on a postcard or traditional envelope and writing paper.

All mail went first to the Company censor who was usually one of the subalterns. He deleted any references to location or unit or anything else that was deemed a breach of security, signed it and affixed the Company Censor stamp. Mail was then sent via the orderly to Brigade HQ where there was a Field Post Office. At this point the postmark was applied and the mail sent back to England and into the GPO system.

The officers were mainly employed censoring the men's mail and were highly amused at what they read. One gave his address as '10 Defence d'afficher' But the principal complaint was lack of Woodbines. Another man had written on the same day to three different girls all addressed as '*my dearest*' and all begging for Woodbines. There were other brands available but these were the only things many of the men would smoke willingly. Most of the officers arranged with their families for extra supplies to be sent out and distributed them to their men.

The mail did not just consist of letters and cards. There was an enormous trade in food and supply parcels as well as everything from office equipment to underwear.

Newspapers were supplied a day late but cost 4 sous, a price which 2Lt Cecil Gold described as '*outrageous*'. However many local newspapers provided a bulk delivery of free papers to the men of their local regiments.

The men at the front were eager for news from home and the families at home eager for news that their loved ones were safe.

Alec Gold recalled:

Credit must be given to the Army Field Postal Service. Letters from home reached us in the trenches in 48 hours and once while on the march the post intercepted us. ... The Post orderly had to walk one mile oin the communication trenches, then a further mile above ground, then seven miles by bicycle to the Army Post Office.

Books and magazines were in great demand and would

be read and reread many times. Men were expected to contribute any books they received to the Battalion library. Pictures were cut out and pasted up in the trenches and billets.

Occasionally newspaper correspondents would visit the men and do a feature story on their situation.

## Bibliography

Petre

Letters from the Gold brothers

Reading Mercury

Berkshire Chronicle