

Section 208

Build Up

The 8th Battalion

The Move to France

At the end of July 1915 orders were received for the 8th Battalion to embark for France on the 7th August. Officers going with the battalion to France included Col Walton, Commanding Officer, Major CFN Bartlett, second in command and Major RW Brakspear as a Company Commander.

The Battalion embarked at Southampton on the 7th August bound for Le Havre. They reached St Omer on the 10th August and marched to billets in Arques. On the 16th August they were in billets in Bethune and on the following day they moved into trenches near Noyelles lez Vermelles for initiation into trench warfare. They were now with 2nd Brigade, 1st Division, IV Corps. Other battalions in the brigade were the 1st Cameron Highlanders and the 1st Black Watch, together with the 10th Gloucesters. The Berkshire and the Gloucesters had taken the place of two Guards battalions which had gone to the newly formed Guards Division. The fighting strength of the 8th Royal Berks was 27 officers and 765 other ranks.

Preparing for Loos

In preparation for their first blooding at Loos they were moved into the Ames area on the 31st August - and straight into trouble: not with the Germans but with their own high command. They were inspected by Ma Gen RCB Haking CB, the commander of the 1st Division, who made comment that much of the clothing was dirty. The reason given was cookhouse fatigues with no change of clothing. The Major General accepted this and at the end of the inspection stated that he thought them "*A fine lot*".

They continued to practise the attack, digging trenches, conducting bombing courses and sending men on machine gun courses. In view of the use of gas in the coming battle the Battalion, together with all the other units involved, had to master the smoke hood. This was the fore-runner of today's gas mask and the war diary indicates the thought that went into it. It states

The smoke helmets are going to be troublesome in the attack. I am arranging to have them pinned down to the coat behind with a safety pin and have some elastic let in to draw them around the throat as there would not be time to let them down in a charge to the trench and tuck them into the coat

The smoke hoods referred to did give protection from

gas, but the designers forgot that even British soldiers have to breathe fresh air to survive.

Training for the 8th Battalion was hard; the Brigade command believed in leading from the front and it was clear that there was to be no hanging around. They were to advance with the 10th Gloucesters on one side and the 2nd Gordons on the other.