

## Section 221

# Interlude I - Loos to the Somme

## The 1st Battalion - October 1915 to June 1916

*After Loos the 1st Battalion needed space to recuperate. They had been at Vermelles since their temporary transfer to 2nd Brigade. Continued from section 211*

### Le Quesnoy

**29th September to 1st October 1915**

The 1st Battalion left Vermelles at 21:30 on September 29th for billets at Le Quesnoy. They passed the shrine at Hulluch and marched through Annequin and Beuvry.

2Lt A B Turner died of his wounds on the 30th, before news of his VC came through.

Refitting began on October 1st as far as was possible. Parties of men were sent to Bethune to get a bath but after three parties had departed the first reported back that there was no water so the exercise had to be cancelled.

The rest was short lived. At 18:15 on the 1st it was back to duty.

### Vermelles

**1st to 3rd October 1915**

They arrived at Vermelles at 20:30 but were put into support with the 2nd South Staffs with whom they shared headquarters,

During daytime on the 2nd they formed a fatigue party of 275 men to clean up Hulluch Alley and, when an attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt by other units had been called off at 22:30 they were able to deploy 350 men to work under 11th Coy RE to consolidate the line.

At 10:00 on the 3rd the 1st Brigade of Guards arrived to take over.

### Bethune

**3rd to 17th October 1915**

At 11.30 on the 3rd they moved to Bethune to Montmorency Barracks which they shared with the 1st Kings (Liverpools). Here news came through of the award of the DCM to Acting Sgt D Walters and Lance Cpl A Brooks, both of B Coy.

Training began at 09:30 after wake up at 07:30 and breakfast at 07:45. Capt Isaac was appointed Brigade Major of 2nd Brigade. The diarist ruefully noted that

above them at Brigade, Division, Corps and Army there was not a single member of the regiment on the staff.

For the next few days training continued, with emphasis on bombing. 29 NCOs were confirmed as Sergeants on the 5th and on the 6th the GOC sent for Pte Morton, aged only 16 to compliment him on having stayed with the Battalion when by rights he should not even have been in the army.

New officers trickled in to replenish the losses and there was the opportunity to hold a court martial on the 7th. The next day the Brigadier remitted the punishment levied on 8777 Pte William Sparrow of Salford and 9792 Pte Phillip Combley of Caversham in recognition of their recent gallantry.

There was a bit of a scare on the 8th when the Guards Division came under attack and the 1st Battalion were bundled out of the barracks to bivouac near Beuvry. However they were not needed and were able to return to barracks - probably a good thing as many of the men were in town when the alarm went.

Another Court Martial was held on the 9th and Lt E B Methven was detailed to go to the HQ of 1st Kings to participate in the Board.

Major General Horne was present at the church parade in the theatre on the 10th.

Major J C May DSO of the 1st East Surrey's arrived on the 11th to take over command of the Battalion from Capt Frizell who took over the job of acting Adjutant from Lt E L Jerwood. He inspected the four companies individually next morning following the Sergeant Majors' Parades at 07:00

On the 11th they went off on a short route march in the late morning. Col Foley and Major Bayley from the 5th Battalion came over for lunch.

More officers joined on the 12th, Lt S V P Western from the 9th Bn was posted to B Coy, 2/Lt M P Pugh from the 8th went to C Coy and 2Lt A P Dobson, also from the 8th went to D Coy.

Training continued with the occasional route march and inspection until the 16th when the barracks were cleared for fumigation and they had to bivouac in a nearby field. The next day they moved to fresh billets at Gonnehein.

## Gonnehein

**17th to 21st October 1915**

The new billets were quite scattered, although comfortable.

Major J C May was promoted to temporary Lt Colonel, on the 18th, backdated to the 11th.

A small reinforcement of 12 O Rs arrived on the 20th.

Training continued. The trenches around Gonnehein were particularly useful for practising bombing with live bombs. Also the opportunity was taken to boost leadership training for platoon and section commanders.

## Bethune

**21st to 24th October 1915**

6th Brigade took over the line again on the 21st, with the 5th Kings Liverpools and 2nd South Staffs in the front line, 1st Kings Liverpools and 1st Herts in close support at Annequin and the 1st KRRC and 1st R Berks in Brigade Reserve at Beuvry and Bethune respectively.

The 1st Battalion moved from Gonneheim at 10:00 on the 21st and moved into Fuillard Barracks at Bethune. C Coy were sent to take over Corps duties at Choques for a month. This consisted of guard duties, looking after control posts and a variety of fatigues.

At Bethune the routine established at Gonnehein was continued. This was evidently boring for the men and Pte Sparrow wrote to the Chronicle on October 25th asking for a football:-

Sir

Would you kindly insert my appeal in your paper for a football for the Company below. We are now resting after severe trials in the trenches and time hangs heavily. The weather is getting bitter cold just now and a football would be gratefully received by all. We could arrange a few games of soccer to while away the hours.

Yours faithfully

Private W R SPARROW

C Company

1st Royal Berks Regiment British Expeditionary Force  
October 22nd 1915 [TX01536]

On the 23rd the whole battalion bathed at the 6th Field Ambulance, they went along in groups of 150. In the afternoon the medical officer did an inspection of smoke helmets.

## Beuvry

**24th - 27th October 1915**

Rotation of units of 6th Brigade took place on the 24th. The 1st KRRC moved into Front line to be replaced by 1st Royal Berks in close support at Beuvry and the 2nd S Staffs came out of front line to take over from A, B and D Coys in reserve. They moved to Beuvry by road starting at 14:30, B and D Coys were billeted in schools

and A Coy in the Mairie.

The next day the CO with a few of his officers went up to look at the line at Cuinchy held by the 1st Herts as this was a sector they had no experience of. Further officers were sent up on the 26th.

## Cuinchy

**27th to 30th October 1915.**

On the 27th Brigade rotation brought the 1st Royal Berks into the front line to relieve the 1st Herts. B Coy took over at 09:15, D Coy at 09:25 and A Coy moved its platoons up to Annequin from 09:35. Headquarters were at Woburn Abbey. As they were a company short 3 platoons of the 5th Kings Liverpools stood in close support at Braddels Point.

They were not very impressed by the new trenches. - The sand bags were rotting and the trenches were prone to collapsing suddenly. Most of time was spent in repairing trenches as there was little or no enemy activity. Sandbags were replaced in the recesses to protect 25 'jackets' brought up by a fatigue party on the 28th. Further fatigue parties were loaned to the Royal Engineers for digging in Tunnel St. By the 30th when they were relieved they were able to report great progress with several new saps constructed and all trenches passable. Considering the weather conditions this was regarded as a very creditable performance.

At 06:30 on the 28th while digging in Quarry Trench a 'cylinder' was discovered. This was a gas cylinder which had been buried by a minenwerfer on the 26th. There was great concern in case the gas should escape but it seemed to have oozed out while buried.

The enemy facing them appeared to be a Saxon Regiment but apart from the odd sniper their activity was minimal. However there were occasional artillery exchanges. The pattern was that, if the Germans sent over a Minenwerfer, the Company Commander had to telephone 56th Howitzer Battery and the 9th and 70th RFA batteries with the codeword 'Minnie' All three batteries replied at once and were then guided to target by the Company. If on the other hand the Germans sent over one of the big Trench Mortar Shells (200 pounders) the code word was 'heavies' and went only to the 56th Battery. However Battalion HQ would also inform 81st Siege Battery who would add their response.

Trench stores were in a state of confusion when they arrived. As they settled in and dug they found large quantities unaccounted for. In one dug out alone in Park Lane they unearthed 61 boxes of Small Arms Ammunition and 968 bombs which had not been listed. So when relief came they were very careful to hand over to the 5th Kings Liverpools a complete inventory of trench stores.

## Harley Street

**30th October to 6th November 1915**

Relief came at 09:15 on the 30th and was completed by midday. They moved to immediate support with Battalion HQ at Harley St near Cunchy, A Coy at Pontfixe north, B Coy at Pontfixe south and D Coy split between Cunchy and Cambrin Support points.

A Coy were lucky as there were excellent baths at the girls school in Harley St. B And D Coys got their baths on the 1st. The armourer sergeant of B Coy set to and made up either beds or palliases for every man in his company. General Horne came for a billet inspection on the 4th.

As it turned out life in support was little different from the front line. Most days fatigue parties were found to either dig or repair trenches or work under the supervision of the Engineers. Even the orderlies and stretcher bearers were roped in to sandbag the soup kitchen at battalion HQ. As well as the normal feeding arrangements, Brigade set up a soup kitchen to feed men who were assigned to working parties on the 3rd.

On the 1st two men were slightly wounded when ten 6 inch HE shells exploded over Pont Fixe and as a result General Daly set up a hot line to 81st Siege Battery to alert them when the bridge was being shelled. This happened again at 15:00 on the 3rd and again on the 5th.

Another man was killed [6519 Pte Wm Robins of Chertsey] and one wounded on the 3rd when working.

## Bethune

**6th to 13th November 1915**

The 6th Brigade was relieved by the 19th Brigade on the 6th and moved back to Divisional Reserve at Gonneheim. The 1st Royal Berks were relieved by the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers at noon and marched back to billets at Rue d'Aire in Bethune. Here they learnt that 10330 acting CSM W Brant had been awarded the Croix de Guerre.

The pattern of being in reserve was soon established. On the 8th everyone was able to get a bath at the girls school, there was clearing up to do, training, lectures, Church parades on Sunday, short leave for some of the officers and a route march to Choques on the 11th.

The Battalion were scheduled to take over some more unfamiliar territory so on the 12th the CO and other officers went to inspect sector Y4 near Sailly la Bourse.

Their billets were evacuated and handed over to 2nd Scottish Rifles at 14:15 on the 13th, the whole Battalion then marching to Sailly la Bourse.

## Sailly la Bourse

**14th to 17th November 1915**

6th Brigade were relieving 36th Brigade at Sailly and the 1st Royal Berks relieved the 8th Royal Fusiliers in subsection Y4 as scheduled at 13:00 on the 14th. A Coy were in the front line to the right on Saville Row with D in the centre and B in the left at the junction of Northampton and mud trenches. As before a Company from the 5th Kings Liverpools substituted for C Coy in support. 6th Buffs of 37th Brigade were on the right and 1st KRRC on the left.

The mud in the new trenches was appalling. In some places it was well above the knee. As the line was part of the former Hohenzollern redoubt, recently captured from the Germans, there was no defensive wire and the enemy were little more than 60 yards away so both sides spent the night of the 14th throwing bombs at each other.

The next day they tried to clean up the trenches but at 16:00 a heavy German bombardment from field guns, medium howitzers and minenwerfers fell upon the Battalion. As most of the shells were falling on the support trenches men were moved up to the front line. Soon the British artillery was responding but at 17:45 the Germans threw up a green flare and the bombardment ceased. Amazingly only 5 men were slightly wounded.

During the night of the 15th/16th a small party of 3 or 4 Germans approached the no 3 Bombing Post on the Hogs Back but were driven back by the British bombers who killed one and wounded another.

By the 16th Mud trench had been floored with duck boards and most of the bombardment damage repaired. The opportunity was also taken to bury the dead and salvage stores which were promptly listed as being part of the Royal Berks inventory.

Relief came on the 17th when the 5th Kings Liverpools took over. The work done had paid dividends as the men's feet were in pretty good condition as they withdrew. Partly this was ascribed to the new thigh length gum boots and the use of anti-frost grease as the weather had been very cold and wet.

## Bethune

**17th to 20th November 1915**

On the 17th they marched back to Montmorency Barracks at Bethune. The next day was spent drying out and bathing at the girls school.

On the 19th each company went on a route march at 09:30 after a period of PT. The rest of the time was spent in drill and inspection of rifles by the Armourer sergeants.

## **Fouquereil and Annequin Fosse**

**21st to 23rd November 1915**

The stay in Bethune was short. On the 20th they set out for Fouquereil marching for three quarters of an hour from 11:00. The new billets were good but scattered, with D Coy over 3/4 mile away from Battalion HQ.

The next day they moved on again to Annequin Fosse. The billets here were very indifferent and in the evening C Coy returned from their attachment to I Corps HQ.

The move from Bethune signalled a change in the order of Battle. Temporarily they became part of 12th Division but they reverted to 2nd Division on the 23rd as they were needed to man the line. Two officers were sent to 35th Brigade HQ but were returned almost immediately. It was not until December 16th that their new command structure took effect.

## **The Line at Annequin Fosse**

**23rd to 26th November 1915**

In the morning of the 23rd the Battalion moved up by Cambrin Church and Maison Rouge Alley and took over subsection Z1 from the 5th Scottish Rifles and one company of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. From left to right the companies were deployed C A D B. For a change they took over trenches in relatively good condition but some work was needed to repair parapets and build dug-outs. More floor boards were laid and two new traverses built.

The enemy snipers, machine gunners and artillery were fairly active during their period in the front line and were responded to robustly. At 18:00 on the 23rd the sounds of heavy transport moving up could be heard and it was feared an attack was imminent. A small party were seen climbing out of their trenches around 22:00 on the 24th and the Royal Berks put up a flare and fired on them. They were not seen again.

On the 24th two companies of the 18th Royal Fusiliers were attached to the Battalion. One took over the left centre from A Coy who relieved D Coy, the other relieved B coy on the right. B and D then marched off to billets in Annequin South.

The Royal Berkshire and Fusiliers were relieved by the 1st KRRC on the 26th.

## **Beuvry**

**26th to 30th November 1915**

The 2 companies of the Fusiliers left the battalion, A & C Coys marched off to Beuvry where they were joined by B & D Coys.

It was still very cold and either wet or frosty. A roll call took place on the 27th and everyone got a bath at Beuvry. Nothing was expected of the men otherwise and

they were left to rest and clean themselves up, although there was a short march on the 29th.

## **Cambrin**

**30th November to 3rd December 1915**

It was back to the trenches on the 30th. They relieved the 1st Kings Liverpools in subsection Z2 deployed from right to left: B C D with A in reserve at Wimpole St.

The trenches were in pretty bad condition, mainly because British artillery had focussed on a mine crater and the German front line and many shells had fallen short. The German retaliation had fallen mainly on the support trenches so there was a lot of work to do.

The rains came on the 1st and the trenches were collapsing so fast they were barely able to keep pace and all new work had to be suspended. Also that day about 25 nine inch howitzer shells fell near A Coy in Wimpole St but caused no damage. The Battalion sniper scored a success when he got his German opposite number who was heard to yell out.

B Coy were relieved by a coy from the 22nd Royal Fusiliers on the 1st.

Both the British and the Germans were pre-occupied with working on their trenches on the 3rd and 4th so things quietened down considerably.

This tour saw only one man killed [11968 Pte Alfred Donnelly - reported on the 4th] and one wounded, but when relief started at 12:30 on the 4th and the 1st KRRC took over, many men had to be literally dug out from the mud before they could get clear into the communication trenches and it took over 2 hours to complete the relief.

## **Beuvry**

**4th to 7th December 1915**

Lt Col May went on leave at this point, his place being taken by Capt Sharpe on the 5th.

Most of the men were by now utterly exhausted and despite the use of the baths it was almost impossible to get clean and dry and get the equipment into good order.

## **Cambrin**

**7th to 10th December 1916**

It was a very weary battalion which returned to the trenches at Cambrin on the 7th. They relieved the 1st Kings Liverpools and were supplemented once more by a company of the 23rd Royal Fusiliers.

This time they were back in Z1 where the trenches were in relatively good condition. On the 8th they got a warped pleasure from seeing the Germans baling water over their parapet.

Work as usual continued repairing old trenches and building new ones. there was the occasional sniping and a salvo of 30 medium howitzer shells on the 8th. Otherwise activity was minimal. More shells fell on the 9th but none exploded.

## **Annequin**

**10th to 12th December 1915**

The Battalion were relieved by the 1st KRRC on the 10th and marched back to Annequin where the Royal Engineers commandeered a working party of 60 men from 18:00 to 22:00.

More working parties were formed on the 11th but they were also able to get a bath and clear up with the weather improving considerably.

## **Bethune**

**12th to 16th December 1915**

On the 12th the Battalion moved back to Montmorency Barracks at Bethune.

Here drill and inspections were interspersed by a chance to rest and get clean.

There was a hint of the changes to come when the CO and Adjutant were called to see the Brigadier of 99th Brigade on the 14th. The changes took effect from midnight of the 15th/16th December when the 1st Royal Berkshire, with 1st King's Royal Rifle Corps and 5th King's Liverpool, were transferred to the 99th Infantry Brigade, but still remained part of the 2nd Division. The re-organisation had been triggered by the arrival of 33rd Division who had arrived in France in early November. 99th Brigade had been swapped for 19th Brigade, the former retaining three of its Regular Battalions and bringing four Kitchener battalions of the Royal Fusiliers, the 17th, 22nd, 23rd and 24th. The 17th and 24th Battalions went to other Brigades in 2nd Division. The 1st Royal Berks Battalion was still very weak in numbers.

## **Cambrin**

**16th to 19th December 1915**

The Battalion were back in the trenches by the afternoon of the 16th. They relieved the 1st Herts in subsection Z2. This time the trenches were in fair condition and moderately dry, however there was always room for improvement.

B Coy on the left were subjected to a grenade and bomb attack but this was silenced by the British artillery. About 22:00 on the 16th the right coy reported the enemy were lighting fires on their parapets.

On the 17th and 18th work continued with parties from the 17th Middlesex and 23rd Royal Fusiliers helping

out. The noise of German working was heard from one of the underground listening galleries so on the 19th one of the defensive mines south of Gibbons crater was blown at 06:00 on the 19th. This created a new crater opposite C Coy which was immediately occupied, only to find they were trapped as the only way back was over open ground. The mine also blew in about 60 yards of the British line; but what effect it had on the Germans was not known.

They were relieved by the 23rd Royal Fusiliers at 13:00 and moved to the billets the Fusiliers had just left.

Casualties were one killed [14873 Pte William Lipscombe of Maidemhead] and four wounded.

## **Beuvry**

**19th to 22nd December 1915**

There was very little that could be done during their respite at Beuvry, other than resting, bathing and cleaning up. There was a short route march on the 21st but the weather was very unsettled.

## **Cambrin**

**22nd to 25th December 1915**

The rain had made the trenches in Z2 even worse than before. So when the Battalion swapped duties again with the 23rd Royal Fusiliers again at 11:00 on the 22nd, it was back to work repairing trenches and trying to build a sap out to the new crater from the centre held by C Coy. However because both the front covered by the Royal Berks had been extended and their numbers were severely depleted it was not possible to do much other than clear away the worst.

The reserve Coy and headquarters were under 6 inches of water but a pump soon cleared it away. The pumps were used later in the trenches but the mud made life very difficult. The original design of the front line trenches was shown to be faulty as when the sandbags were laid they did not bed down properly and those on top pushed out the ones below constricting passage extremely awkward, especially for men fully equipped.

On the 23rd the enemy opened up with fizzes and later at 05:00 they began a furious fusillade of rifle and machine gun fire which lasted about 10 minutes. However one gained the impression that they were suffering as much as the British and were just letting off steam as no damage was done.

The army high command were determined to ensure that none of the fraternisation which had characterised Christmas 1914 would be allowed to repeat itself. All the men were warned that any attempt to fraternise, or even call a truce was a court martial offence and that if any Germans showed themselves they were to be fired upon. Again it would seem that the Germans were in the

a similar position and though the 24th was enlivened by an artillery barrage on the German front and second lines, both sides restrained themselves and fired a few bursts of machine gun and sniper fire on Christmas Day.

## **Annequin Fosse**

**25th to 28th December 1915**

Again the Battalion merely exchanged places with the 23rd Royal Fusiliers and retired to their billets at Annequin Fosse at noon to make the best of Christmas, but had to spend most of it cleaning. At least the billets were dry.

A draft of 39 joined on the 25th

The next two days were taken up with fatigues, mainly carrying and working for the Royal Engineers, but as all the work was done in daylight it did not seem as tiring as the night work.

It was time for another Brigade to take over and on the 28th the Royal Berks were relieved by the 18th Royal Fusiliers.

## **Bethune and Bellerive**

**28th to 31st December 1915**

They set out for Bethune at 09:00 on the 28th but as they approached the town they were met by a messenger with orders from the Town Major for them to go instead to Fouquereuil. When they got there they were informed that all the billets were full and Division ordered them back to Bethune where A & B Coys were billeted in the Fuyere Barracks and C & D Coys at Rue d'Aire.

The next day they were moved on again, this time to Bellerive. The billets here were not bad but very scattered, mostly in farms and barns. As there was nowhere big enough to form a single officers mess they formed three smaller ones. They were placed under the care of 33rd Division for the day.

The year ended with the officers and sergeants having their Christmas dinners on the 31st.

## **Bellerive**

**1st to 15th January 1916**

All January 1916 was spent by the 1st Royal Berkshire at Bellerive, on the front near Le Touret.

Starting on January the first the men were kept busy on a programme of training set by the Division. This included both drill and musketry and, on the orders of the Brigadier, included a trial march past every day.

Lt Jerwood the former MG Officer of the Battalion returned to run a series of classes on the use of the Lewis Gun as it was felt vital that as many men as possible should be trained in the use of this weapon.

When the Battalion had left for the front the emphasis had been on fighting efficiency and although there had been bandsmen, most had been preoccupied with other duties. The battalion had requested the services of a proper bandmaster and had asked specifically for Sgt Lester of the 3rd Battalion who had been included in the draft which arrived on January 3rd. He had got down to work immediately and had brought some professional organisation to the drums. In return the CO had excused his drummers from their other duties. The new band was ready for its first parade on the 9th to lead the church parade.

Training increased in complexity taking in offensive and defensive tactics. They were inspected by the Brigadier on January 11th who spoke highly of the Battalion's turn out. The Brigade went for a route march on the 12th led by the guard from Brigade HQ comprising men of the 1st KRRC. The route took them through the outskirts of Bethune along the Rue d'Aire to Chocques and Gonneheim where the units dispersed to their billets. The order of march showed the composition of the Brigade and was:-

- 1st KRRC (Brigade HQ Guard)
- 1st Royal Berks
- 22nd Royal Fusiliers
- 23rd Royal Fusiliers
- 162 Bde RFA
- 5th Field Coy RE
- 15th Trench Mortar Battery
- 167 Bde RFA (Howitzers)
- 6th Field Ambulance

There were regular medical parades and rifle inspections, but by and large all was well and the general condition of the men remained very good. An attack of scabies broke out and 4 or 5 men were sent to hospital on the 15th.

By the 13th training had focussed on the latest reinforcements who were given training in trench warfare including the wearing of the new tube helmets which were giving problems to everyone although it was claimed you soon got used to them.

## **Hingette**

**16th January 1916**

On the 16th the 1st Battalion was put under the orders of 12th Division which included the 5th Battalion and were marched off to Hingette.

On arrival at Hingette the Medical officer held another 'itch' parade and 4 or 5 more men were despatched to hospital.

## **Le Touret**

**17th January 1916**

The next day (17th) they marched on to Le Touret to

take over the billets vacated by the 6th Buffs. Here they were allocated to 37th Bde, 12th Division. In the evening The CO and the four Company Commanders were guided by officers of the 6th Queens to look over the line they were destined to take possession of.

On the 18th they held final training sessions and issued gum boots to all of the men. They soon found out why.

## **Trenches**

### **18th to 22nd January 1916**

That evening they began the process of taking over from the 6th Queens. B Coy started by taking over the reserve trenches the C Coy took over Richmond Trench in the support line and D took the right of the front with A on their left. The front line trench was quite different to anything they had encountered before. The actual trench was flooded and at regular intervals posts had been built to form islands which were each garrisoned by 6 men with an NCO in charge. There were twelve such islands in A Coys sector and seven in D Coy's. A cover trench about 50 yards in the rear was used to shelter the surplus men who exchanged duties in pairs throughout the night with the front line men. The only way to get some rest was to build a row of trench boards to form a sort of shelf above the water. Because of the imbalance in responsibilities, C Coy lent a platoon to A Coy. The trench system had been worked on for some time by the Royal Engineers who had built a revetment and breastworks of sandbags with trench boards laid down for walking around. It was OK so long as you kept on track but that was often not quite as easy as it seemed. The other problem was that the boards were about three feet above the trench bottom so in the ensuing days a man would be exposed from the shoulders upwards if he tried to walk along the tracks which meant movement during daylight hours was severely restricted.

During the night of the 18th the 12th Division artillery provided support while the other battalions of 2nd Division moved in and finally relieved 12th Division who were able to march off to Busnes for some well earned rest.

The Battalions machine guns had all been lent to other units so the emplacements had to be held by Lewis Guns. So they were grateful for all the training they had had.

During the 19th everything seemed quite quiet. The German guns were silent but there was plenty of aerial activity although the German planes did not cross the lines and engage the British ones. When it got dark the Battalion took the opportunity of putting out more wire and adding to the height of the parapets.

On the 20th the 2nd Division's artillery took over from the 12th Division and although Germans were observed on a ridge about 1700 yards away, the artillery were

unable to pick up the target. It was presumed the parties observed were working on a new defensive line. A Coy came under German howitzer fire between 08:00 and 10:00 but it did no damage.

More shelling around noon on the 21st came uncomfortably close to some of the British working parties. The Germans displayed flags but no one could work out what they meant. During the day seven bodies were found by the support company and reburied behind Richmond trench.

The 22nd Royal Fusiliers were detailed to provide working parties to support the Royal Berks and two contingents of 200 men each operated turn and turn about. They made a great deal of difference to the work on the trenches, making about 100 yards of parapet bullet proof and building proper firesteps as enemy snipers were very active.

Around 21:00 on the 22nd three Germans were observed working their way towards island 30 but once they were spotted and fired on they quickly retired.

The Battalion were relieved by the 23rd Royal Fusiliers at 19:00 on the 22nd and retired thankfully to billets at Le Touret. During their tour of duty they had suffered but one casualty, a man who had only joined them on the 21st was shot in the head, but not fatally.

## **La Touret**

### **23rd to 26th January 1916**

Everyone had a bath on the Sunday (23rd) but then the Battalion had to provide work parties to support the Royal Fusiliers. The first party of 380 men left at 18:30 and were relieved at 10:30 by the second party who did not get back to billets until 04:30 on the 24th.

There was little that could be done on the 25th other than hold an 'itch' parade and a rifle inspection as everyone was so tired. As a result one man was sent to hospital. Work parties were demanded again, this time two reliefs of 100 men and two officers each to work on the line, two officers and 100 men to carry materials for the Royal Engineers and a second party of an NCO and 25 men for 'RE Fatigues'

Thankfully the Brigade was sent to Divisional Reserve on the 26th and they handed over to the 2nd HLI of 5th Brigade at 13:00 and marched back to Bellerive.

## **Bellerive**

### **27th to 30th January 1916**

Respite was short lived however. They just had time to get clean again and get their equipment sorted out. There was a parade on the 28th with drill and PT to follow and then the Battalion was put on short notice to move.

The next day this was 1 ½ hours notice but it was not

until 14:00 on the 30th that the actual order to move came and they marched off to Essars.

## **Essars**

**30th January to 3rd February 1916**

They arrived at Essars at 16:00 on the 30th and spent most of their time there strengthening the auxiliary line of defence at La Motte and Gorre Wood.

## **Givenchy Trenches**

**3rd to 7th February 1916**

The Battalion relieved the 1st Herts in the B2 Subsector of the front line at Givenchy. For a change they found the trenches in a fair condition with plenty of boarding and they were able to strengthen the parapets and paradots at night.

Enemy working parties were heard in the night of the 3rd and it was feared the Germans were indulging in some mining. There was some trench mortar and rifle grenade activity from the Germans aimed mainly at the Battalion bombers on the right. On the 5th some minenwerfers were added from the German side but the Berkshiremen were running out of grenades and were not able to retaliate as strongly as they would have liked. On the 6th the German snipers were particularly active. 8 men were wounded by rifle grenades, two on the 5th and 6 on the 7th but otherwise the German offensive action had little or no effect.

Three patrols were sent out at 23:00 on the 4th and they reported good enemy wire and sounds of hammering timber and metal behind a crater. Another patrol was sent out on the 6th to examine Deadmans Trench but found no sign of enemy occupation.

During their stay in the trenches the weather was quite good with only slight showers. The stay ended at 19:45 on the 7th when they were relieved by the 23rd Royal Fusiliers.

## **Le Quesnoy**

**7th to 11th February 1916**

They arrived at the billets at Le Quesnoy at 21:00 on the 7th. Billets were good. A & B Coys were in farms and C & D in huts.

The next day they were able to bathe and clean up and were allowed to rest. On the 9th they had an inspection parade and on the 10th went for a route march from 10:00 to 12:00

The CO and two of the Company Commanders went up to the B3 sector to inspect the line on the 10th.

## **Givenchy Trenches**

**11th to 15th February 1916**

The move back to the trenches, B3 Subsector this time, was completed at 19:45 on the 11th.

They had a quiet first night but from 14:30 to 16:15 on the 12th Battalion HQ was shelled, 14 of them failed to explode and while no damage was done several others came a bit too close for comfort. Another attack at 09:30 on the 14th was fairly light.

The Divisional Commander laid great emphasis on keeping the wire strong so there was lots of work to do at night.

A German bombing party advanced towards one of the British saps on the 13th shouting 'Come on Tommy, hoch, hoch' the Berkshiremen retaliated and drove them off. This was repeated around dusk on the 14th but 2nd/Lt Chase and one man crept out and bombed them.

They were relieved at 20:30 on the 15th by the 23rd Royal Fusiliers having suffered 4 killed and 3 wounded. However only 9702 Charles Edward Killingback of Stratford Essex is recorded as having been killed in this period, on the 15th.

## **Village Line and Hingette**

**15th to 19th February 1916**

The Battalion moved from the trenches to the support area billets at Village Line. They stayed there only about 48 hours being relieved by the 15th Royal Welsh Fusiliers at 19:45 on the 17th.

They marched off to billets at Hingette whence they arrived at 22:45. The new billets were quite scattered but good.

Apart from cleaning up there was little to do at Hingette but the stay was very short. At 10:30 on the 19th they were paraded and marched off to Bourecq

## **Bourecq**

**19th to 26th February 1916**

For the first time for a long time the officers were able to get together to have a general mess instead of separate company ones. The billets for the men were very good.

The weather turned much colder and heavy snow started on the 22nd. This started to thaw on the 25th making conditions very unpleasant.

Training and kit inspections continued and there were messages from Brigade putting them on and off short notice to move. The order finally came at 04:30 on the 26th.

## Barlin

**26th to 29th February 1916**

The Battalion marched to Lillers Station on the 26th and conveyed to Noeux les Mines, arriving at 17:30. Road transport was laid on to take them on to billets at Barlin which they reached at 20:00. There was a bit of a mix up however and it was not until 22:00 that the men were able to settle into their new billets which had been taken over from the French.

This was a sector which English troops had not manned before so the CO and two of his company commanders went straight up to look over the line they were to hold. When they got there they found the trenches very poor with no dug-outs and non-existent sanitation.

Before moving to relieve the French 77th Regiment they had to move again to temporary billets in Pt Sains on the 28th.

At 15:00 on the 29th a shell burst on the road near Battalion HQ wounding two men.

## Souchez

**1st to 5th March 1916**

Here at Souchez the town of Lens was clearly visible on the left front and they had a good view of the German trenches. This had both advantages and disadvantages in that the front line ran in several different directions and could easily be enfiladed, conversely they could do the same to the Germans. The trenches in this low flat country were badly water-logged, making movement difficult. The front line trenches were isolated for much of the time and could be supplied only under cover of darkness. One company held the front line and one was in support. They had the 23rd Royal Fusiliers on the left and the French 17th Division across the Souchez River on the right.

Conditions on both sides were so bad that there was a tacit agreement to leave the other side alone so it was a very quiet tour of duty. They remained until the 5th March when they were relieved very leisurely by the 22nd Royal Fusiliers.

## Bois de Noulette

**5th to 9th March 1916**

It was still snowing when they moved into billets at hutments in the Bois de Noulette. One company was detached from the rest of the Battalion. They were able to rest by day and were on fatigue duties at night.

## Souchez

**9th to 13th March 1916**

The second tour at Souchez was nowhere near as quiet as the first. This time the battalion on the right was the 9th West Riding. For most of the time the Germans were shelling and throwing whizzbangs over the British lines. Also their aircraft were very active. The Germans seemed to be very careless about keeping under cover and could often be seen moving about in day time. They even tried to open friendly conversations with the Royal Berks. It was difficult to do much about this as the parapets were badly constructed and with all the enfilading and overlooking it was too dangerous to employ snipers. In fact neither side used rifle fire at all.

In the evenings men were employed on fatigue duty as the General had decreed that the communications trenches had to be cleared and put back into commission. Work was carried out under the direction of the Royal Engineers and was aided by an improvement in the weather which for the most part was very springlike.

At 22:30 on the 13th they were relieved by the 22nd Royal Fusiliers.

## Bouvigny

**13th to 17th March 1916**

For their next period of Reserve duty HQ and two companies were billeted at Bouvigny with one company at Bois de Noulette and one at Bois Six. During the daytime, when they were trying to rest, the Germans were shelling the village. Night time again was taken up with fatigue duties.

## Souchez

**17th to 21st March 1916**

The third tour of front line duty at Souchez was similar to the 2nd. Again the weather was pleasant and lots of aircraft and artillery activity. This time 47th Division were on the right and the 23rd Royal Fusiliers on the left. C Coy held the right of the front line, A Coy held the left, D were in support and B in reserve. This time however all the work on the trenches had paid off and conditions were much improved.

On the 19th the GOC 23rd Division and BGGs from IV Corps paid an inspection visit. On the 20th officers from the 1st Worcesters (24Bde, 23Div) came to inspect the trenches they were to take over.

The first casualties for some time were suffered with one man being wounded by shell fire on the 20th and two on the 21st.

Relief started at 18:30 on the 21st and was completed at 23:00. Billets at Hersin were reached at 01:15.

## Hersin

**22nd to 28th March 1916**

The 22nd was Tofrek day and telegrams were received from 2nd Bn and Captain Redstone. They were billeted in a large comfortable building and Lt Boshell arranged for everyone to have a bath.

The weather turned cold again with snow. Daytime activities were left to company commanders but every evening a working party of 200 men was required.

On the 28th they were taken by train from Hersin to Houdain and marched to Divion where they took over billets from the 52nd Light Infantry.

## Divion

**28th March to 19th April 1916**

The billets here were OK but not as good as at Hersin. The battalion were joined by the 1st KRRC as the Brigade had moved into reserve.

2nd Lt Hanney, a former csm, started a class of instruction in PE and bayonet work for 4 officers and 32 NCOs.

Lt Gen Sir H H Wilson announced he would inspect the 99th Brigade on the 3rd April and so on the 1st the Battalion was marched up for a practice parade. The real parade and inspection duly took place on the 3rd and Gen Wilson remarked that the Royal Berks looked very fit and strong. On the next day the GOC First Army, Gen Sir Charles Munro, turned up to inspect the Battalion at musketry.

For most of the time at Divion the Battalion were either training or on fatigue duty, although for a change they went on a route march on the 6th. During training on the 7th a bomb exploded prematurely and 2Lt Frogley and four men were wounded, three of them seriously.

## Bomy

**9th to 13th April 1916**

Bomy was the First Army training area. They left Divion on the 9th and marched to Calonne Ricourt where they entrained at 12:45 for Aire. They reached Bomy at 19:00 after a 15 kilometre march from Aire.

At Bomy they were training for 'The Attack' The training consisted of a march to Beaumont les Aire on the 11th and a practice advance spanning two days, but the weather on the 12th was so bad that after the Brigade had massed on hill 79 the Brigadier called off the exercise.

On the 13th they paraded at 09:50 and marched to Aire to take a train back to Calonne and their billets at Divion.

## Divion

**13th to 17th April 1916**

When they returned to their billets they were informed that all leave had been stopped and everyone had to be recalled to their units before the 18th.

There was a small range at Divion and this was used for musketry practice on the 14th

On the 17th they had a tactical entraining. They started at Calonne Ricourt Station at 14:00 and were taken to Hersin by train - a journey of some 20 miles by rail. They arrived at 17:00 having moved only about 4 miles as the crow flies. They then marched to Bouvigny but needed to halt for half an hour to allow the 1st KRRC to clear the village.

## Bouvigny

**17th to 20th April 1916**

When they arrived at Bouvigny they found that the billets had just been heavily shelled and the KRRC had suffered numerous casualties.

The main job there was to carry supplies to the 176th Tunnelling Company RE who were operating in the Souchez sector.

## Souchez

**21st to 25th April 1916**

It was soon back to front line duty at Souchez on the 21st. Most days there was either shelling or raking machine gun fire from the enemy lines.

The two main communication trenches between Headquarters and the front line, Headquarter Trench and Sap 8, were unusable so work parties from 23rd Division were being employed to dig new ones.

On the 24th a very curious incident occurred. Three English newspapers were delivered from Brigade HQ and it was ordered they be given to the Germans. Pte Barnes crawled out and threw them onto the enemy parapet and a German crawled out from his side to retrieve them. He acknowledged receipt by saluting towards the British line. Later, on the 30th, the process was repeated but this time the Germans responded with copies of a Hamburg newspaper, the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*

They were relieved by the 22nd Royal Fusiliers on the 25th.

## Bois de Noulette

**26th to 29th April 1916**

The same pattern as before while in reserve. Resting during the day despite sporadic MG fire and fatigues at night. The weather was fine and it was getting quite

warm

They were paraded at 21:30 on the 29th to return to the trenches to relieve the 22nd. It would seem the embargo on leave had been lifted as Major Sharpe and Lt Jeakes left on the 29th.

## **Souchez**

**30th April to 3rd May 1916**

The relief was completed by 00:30 on the 30th. After what had been comparatively quiet spells of trench duty at Souchez it suddenly livened up. At 17:00 on the 30th the Germans exploded a mine on the Battalion's right and followed it with a furious artillery bombardment. Everyone expected an infantry attack but none occurred.

There was howitzer shelling again on the 1st and 2nd May and a number of fizzes came over. Another mine was exploded at 16:45 on the 3rd which again was followed by a heavy bombardment but no infantry attack. A sniper on the hill at Givenchy caused several casualties and by the time the tour ended, one man had been killed and 16 wounded.

Relief came on the 4th when the 22nd Royal Fusiliers took over at 00:45.

## **Bouvigny**

**4th to 7th May 1916**

During the daytimes the men were so tired that little work could be done. Every night there were parties on fatigues, either carrying material to the 176th Tunnelling Coy or working on the support line.

They were able to get a bath on the 4th but on the 6th and 7th they were employed mucking out a farmyard and carting the manure to spread on the fields.

## **Souchez**

**7th to 10th May 1916**

The relief of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers was completed at 23:35 on the 7th. It was a comparatively quiet tour of duty in the front line with a few minnenwerfers being tossed at them at midnight on the 8th and again at 09:00 on the 9th. The battery was spotted and the British artillery fired on it during the morning of the 9th. It did not trouble them again.

A mine was exploded by the Germans at 19:00 on the 9th followed by a furious artillery bombardment, but again no follow up infantry attack.

They were relieved by the 1st Worcesters at 23:55 on the 10th and they marched off to Hersin to spend the night.

The CO, Lt Col May, was able to get away on leave. As it turned out he was destined not to return.

## **Callonne Ricouart**

**12th to 15th May 1916**

The next day, the 12th, they set out at 10:00 for their new billets at Callonne Ricouart which they reached at 11:30. The billets were very scattered which was probably a good thing as one platoon went down with German measles and had to be isolated.

Working parties were sent by lorry to Bouvigny on the 14th.

## **Divion**

**16th to 21st May 1916**

They were supposed to have moved to Beugin on the 15th for training but as no accommodation could be found there the destination was switched to Divion which was reached by a rather circuitous route at 15:15.

Again it was the attack which was being practiced. A complete stretch of simulated British and German trenches over 500 yards wide had been dug and these were used for training on the 18th observed by both the Corps Commander and the General.

The next day half the battalion practiced on the rifle range at Bois Louis and half practiced attacking over the high ground above Houdain.

On the 20th the whole brigade practiced together for an attack at 09:15. At the debriefing afterwards the divisional commander expressed himself as satisfied.

On the 21st they marched to Hersin arriving 13:00 to be billeted in an orphanage. At 15:00 the Germans started shelling the town causing considerable damage and several casualties. They were reported as having launched a gas attack but Hersin was about 4 miles from the front line so was not affected.

The shelling stopped at 17:00 and the Brigade was put on two hours notice to move.

## **Vimy Ridge**

**22nd to 23rd May 1916**

The action, or rather inaction near Vimy Ridge between 22nd and 23rd May resulted in the commanding officer, Major Sharpe, being court martialled for failing to obey an order.

The Brigadier, R O Kellett had gone off to take temporary command of 2nd Division and the Corps Commander, Sir H Wilson loaned the 99th Brigade to 47th Division to help them recapture trenches that had been taken from them on the 20th May. Lt Col Barker, the CO of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers had been given temporary command of the Brigade and he set out a plan which entailed the 1st R Berks and the 22nd R Fusiliers attacking at 20:25 on the 21st with 1/KRRC in support.

During the day the three battalions made their way up the Zouave valley to get into their starting positions and the 23rd R Fusiliers was brought up to provide additional support. The Royal Berks were split in two, two companies set out on motor buses early on the 22nd and the rest had to march as the supply of buses ran out, however after they had gone about two miles they were met by more buses and taken to their bivouacs arriving at 04:00 They were able to get a good rest there.

At 12:30 the CO was called to Villers au Bois by the Brigade Commander and given the time of the assault, 01:30 on the 22nd. He then went to view the line, returning at 15:30. At 18:15 after the battalion had paraded ready to move into position, a message was received from Brigade cancelling the attack but ordering the battalion to relieve the 7th London Regt in the starting trenches.. This was completed at 00:15

At 05:00 on the 23rd B Coy were heavily shelled and suffered 18 casualties. At 11:00 a German prisoner from the 86th Prussian Regiment was captured and sent up to Brigade HQ. Brigade HQ issued fresh orders for the attack to be launched at 20:25.

Major Sharpe made his dispositions for the attack which was to be made in 6 lines:

- 1 - 2 platoons of C Coy
- 2 - 2 platoons of C Coy and two Lewis guns
- 3 - 2 platoons of D Coy with orders to consolidate captured trenches - they were equipped with picks and shovels. They were followed by 2 platoons of B Coy carrying SAA
- 4 - 2 platoons of D Coy and one Lewis gun
- 5 - 2 platoons of A Coy with orders to consolidate (carrying picks and shovels)
- 6 - 2 platoons of A Coy.

The remaining half of B Coy and the remaining Lewis gun were to remain in Old Boots Trench.

About 12:00 the enemy opened up a heavy shell fire on Headquarters Trench and Talus des Zouaves this lasted until 19:45

At 19:45 the enemy barrage intensified and was particularly intense over the ground that the battalions would be attacking; both the Royal Berks and the 22nd Royal Fusiliers suffered severe casualties. In addition all the telephone wires were cut and communication between battalions, brigade and division had to rely on wireless but at 20:30 that too failed. The barrage continued at a very high level until 21:30. The plan for companies to be in their assembly trenches by 19:55 ready for the attack at 20:25 was rendered impossible although C and D Coys each made the attempt.

The CO of the 1st Royal Berks assessed the situation and decided that it would not be sensible to attack

through the enemy barrage so he sent a wireless message to Brigade HQ to that effect at 20:22. He ordered the Companies to stand fast and await orders. Meanwhile the Brigadier had returned to his HQ. A few minutes after the R Berks message he got one from the 22nd R Fusiliers informing him that the Royal Berks were not going to move. At that point the wireless failed.

Lt Col Barker was sent to sort matters out. He found that the leading Company of the Fusiliers had advanced over 100 yards and had had to stop as their flank was unprotected. He described Major Sharpe as being in a state of extreme nervousness which he had communicated to his battalion. As a result he sent the Royal Berks back and put the 1st KRRC into their place with orders to attack at 01:30. Eventually the attack was called off and the leading company of the 22nd R Fusiliers was withdrawn.

Major Sharpe was put under arrest and court martialled on the 10th June at Camblain L'Abbe. He was exonerated to the fury of Brig Gen Kellet.

The incident ruined relations between the Brigade and the Royal Berks for some time. The situation was very confused and Kellet himself reported that the commander of the 2nd Division (Major Gen Walker) had returned to his post with the news that the 99th should only have relieved the 140th Bde on the 22nd with the attack taking place on the 23rd.

Petre's account is very bland:-

On the 22nd May, when the 1st Royal Berkshire were at Gouy and Servins, they were ordered to retake two trenches which had been taken from the 47th Division on the 20th, but the order was cancelled after the battalion had taken its place. The German bombardment was so heavy that it was impossible to reach the point of assembly. All preparations for the attack had again been made on the 23rd, when it was finally cancelled.

Kellet's account as sent to the official historian was as follows:-

For about ½ hour before the time for our attack to start & for a couple of hours afterwards the enemy barrage was very violent and was specially laid on C.C from which the 1/R Berks (on right) and 22nd R Fus (on left), my 2 attacking Bns, suffered pretty heavily notwithstanding the security of their forming up position at B.

All our wires cut about 7.45 PM but my diary adds "Wireless Working" and by this I got a message at 8.22 PM (3 minutes before Zero) from Major Sharpe cmmdg 1/R Berks saying he would not advance owing to intense barrage & heavy casualties, which message was at once followed by one from 22 R. Fus. saying that R Berks said they wd not advance, & asking for instructions.

Just then the wireless went & with it all means of communication by me with the attacking troops - I at once sent off Col Barker (who knew the ground & the position of my Battalions as he has issued all orders for the attack as Cmdg the Bde in my absence while Comdg the 2nd Div) & my Bde Major Kane, down to the 2 Regts (Berks & 22nd). Barker found that the leading Coy of the 22nd R Fus had advanced at 8.25 PM as they said they had orders to do so and didn't care what the R Berks did !! Barker told me that he found

Major Sharpe in a very nervous condition which apparently he had imparted to some or all of his Bn, so Barker on his own initiative put the 1/KRRC into the front line & the R Berks he moved into support.

About 1 AM all was ready for the 99<sup>th</sup> Bde to advance and I reported (wires repaired by then) to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Div that I proposed to advance at 1.30 AM but was ordered not to do so. (I was not ordered "to try and dig a line 300x forward of my position" until later and when this order was received it was carried out)

Major Sharpe was placed under arrest by me for his conduct on the night 23-4 May and tried by Court Martial – I cant quite remember what the result of this C.M. was but I think he was exonerated, wholly or partly – I presume that his Record of Service in the WO would give all information about his trial, the charges finding & injustice to me I think that that part of Page 17 which alludes to me should be cancelled.

I never sent any order to my attacking Battalions to stand fast, and when I got the R Berks (Major Sharpe) message to say that they would not advance I at once wrote a message to say that the attack must proceed forthwith – but this message never reached them as the wires etc were cut

The Berkshire Chronicle on 13th October 1916 published the story of Pte W E Lacey who was awarded the MM for his part in the affair. His tale throws a new light on the incident:

Private W E Lacey Royal Berks of 63 Sherman Road Reading who has been at the front for 21 months has been awarded the Military Medal for devotion to duty and carrying despatches under heavy bombardment. He is 20 years of age and sailed for the front in November 1914. William is now at Reading having been wounded at Delville Wood. He is now convalescent.

Lacey won the Military Medal under the following circumstances: - The battalion was suddenly ordered to move the men not knowing their destination and after travelling in motor buses they came to a wood where a halt was made for a few hours. Each man was given two bombs. Then they moved up to Vimy Ridge to relieve a London division who had sustained many casualties. As soon as the Berkshires entered the communications trenches they were heavily shelled. The attack was timed for the next night May 23rd. As soon as the men were ready to go over the Germans opened heavy shell fire. The telephones had been destroyed so that the orderlies of whom there were four were constantly engaged in going down the communication trench which the Germans were shelling very persistently to Brigade headquarters to take messages concerning the German fire. As a reward for their bravery three of the orderlies, Pte W E Lacey, Pte F Catchpole and Pte C Pride were awarded the Military Medal. Owing to the strength of the German bombardment the attack was cancelled, the Berkshires losing a number of men. The German bombardment of Vimy Ridge is described by those who were there as heavier than the German effort on the Somme - at least in the earlier stages. It was while the battalion was at Vimy Ridge that second Lieutenant W C Hanney won the Military Cross for gallantry in occupying and consolidating a new crater and that second Lieutenant L E Parsons (of Windsor) won the Military Cross. Lance Corporal D W C Wimpenny the DCM and Corpl Stevens the Military Medal for bravery in a bombing raid. Lieut Cyril Thorne of Reading was missing on the occasion of the bombing raid.

While Haney was occupying the crater Private Lacey was instructed to take a message to him. He could not locate him at first but found him in the crater busy bombing. Hanney had puncture wounds all over his face. [TX01669]

## Berthonval Sector

24th to 26th May 1916

When the Battalion was relieved by the 1st KRRC they in turn relieved the 22nd Royal Fusiliers.

On the 24th they were ordered to start work on a new line about 250 yards in front of the Tallus des Zouaves and made good progress each day until they were relieved by the 22nd Royal Fusiliers at midnight on the 26th and marched off to billets in Camblain L'Abbe

The tour had cost 76 casualties.

## Camblain L'Abbe

27th to 28th May 1916

Major A E F Harris arrived to take command of the Battalion on the 27th as Lt Col May had still not yet returned and Major Sharpe was under arrest.

They were billeted in huts on the outskirts of the village, accommodation which was very good.

The weather was fine during their stay and training was by company.

## Berthonval Sector

29th May to 2nd June 1916

Their spell at Berthonval began when they once more relieved the 22nd Royal Fusiliers at 01:00 on the 29th. The new line had been worked on considerably but it was still not in a sound state for defensive purposes. The wire was very thin and needed strengthening.

The Germans had apparently devised an apparatus for listening in to telephone conversations so apart from cursory communications by officers between battalion and Company HQs, use of the telephone lines was forbidden.

Enemy activity was limited to artillery fire, directed mainly against the communication trenches but one officer and 12 other ranks suffered wounds.

There was an enemy barrage on Tallus des Zouaves on the 1st June which caused the suspension of a planned raid on the German trenches by the Brigade on the Royal Berks left. It started at 19:00 and continued until 02:15 the next morning, making work on the trenches impossible.

They were relieved on the 2nd by the 2nd Ox and Bucks of 5th Brigade.

## Gouy Servins

3rd to 10th June 1916

They reached their billets at Gouy early on the morning of the 3rd with the last company arriving at 04:30. This was a fairly good billet with the whole battalion

accommodated in the Chateau.

On the 4th June Lt Miles Dempsey arrived to join the Battalion accompanied by Lt Freeman.

Most of the time at Gouy was taken up with parades and fatigue parties and so tired were the men that training got very behind

## Carency Sector

**11th to 15th June 1916**

On the night of the 10th the first company left Gouy for the trenches at Carency at 19:30. They relieved the 2nd South Staffords in support with HQ and two companies in the Zouave Valley, one company at Cabaret Rouge and another at Carency.

For the next three nights practically all the men were employed on carrying fatigues at night. It was wet and cold although there was little or no enemy activity.

On the 15th the Daylight Saving Bill came into effect and all the clocks were set forward an hour.

At 23:00 on the 15th the 23rd Royal Fusiliers took over the support role and the battalion moved into the front line trenches.

## Carency

**16th to 18th June 1916**

The battalion relieved the 22nd Royal Fusiliers to find there had been a great deal of mining taking place on both sides. In accord with IV Corps orders each company had to form a 'dug out platoon' but it is not clear what their purpose was.

At 22:00 on the 16th a British mine was exploded on the right of the battalion front. Ten minutes later there was a severe bombing fight lasting till 23:00 in which the Germans were repulsed. The battalion had fourteen casualties, including Second-Lieutenant Lane, seriously, and Second-Lieutenant Hannay slightly wounded. Strangely the Germans did not retaliate with heavy artillery when the bomb was exploded and it was surmised that they had moved their heavy guns elsewhere. They did however send over a few whizz-bangs.

The next day, the 17th, the Germans started a mortar bombardment which did a lot of damage to the British trenches and despite targetting by the artillery it had little effect on the mortars. When darkness came a lot of work had to be done to repair the trenches.

On the 18th the Germans repeated their mortar attack but this time did very little damage.

The 22nd Royal Fusiliers relieved the battalion late on the 18th.

## Villers au Bois

**19th to 23rd June 1916**

They arrived at their new billets at Villers au Bois by 03:30 on the 19th and were able to get some rest and clean up. During the day 100 men were detached and sent to the Chateau de la Hale for training in 'raiding' under the command of Captain West.

For a change they had only one night of fatigues on the 20th when 300 men were detailed for carrying duties.

They had the interesting experience of meeting infantry sailors when the Drake Battalion of the Royal Naval Division joined them on 20th.

On the 22nd the officers played the rest of the battalion at cricket and won by 1 run.

The raiding detachment rejoined on the 22nd and next day they left Villers to relieve the 22nd Royal Fusiliers.

## Carency

**24th to 27th June 1916**

The daily mortar bombardment was still taking place when they returned to the front line trenches, but now the British were responding in kind and doing great damage to the German trenches and cutting large holes in their wire.

On the 26th June a raid on the enemy front trenches was planned with a hundred men under Captain West, to start at 23:30. The scheme was to make a frontal attack in two waves with two officers and fifty-six men, whilst bombing parties on the flanks advanced simultaneously by communication trenches leading into the German trenches. The cutting of their wire, however, had put the enemy on the alert, and, as soon as the signal for the advance was made, they opened so heavy a fire with trench mortars, machine guns, and rifles that the raiders were unable to reach their objectives.

Their casualties in this failure were: Lieutenant H. C. Thorne, missing (now recorded as killed), Second-Lieutenant Jackson wounded; four other ranks killed, and twenty-one wounded in the raiding party alone, besides eighteen more casualties in the rest of the battalion in the trenches.

The raiding party were withdrawn to billets in Villers as soon as they returned, their place being taken by a company of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers.

Later that day they were all relieved by the 2nd Highland Light Infantry

## Gouy Servins

**28th June to 5th July 1916**

For the next few days they enjoyed a rest at Gouy. They were able to catch up on training as only on the nights

of the 29th and 4th were they required for fatigue duties.

On the 30th they lost to the 22nd Royal Fusiliers at cricket by 3 wickets and they started an inter-platoon football competition on the 3rd.

News of the Somme offensive reached the battalion on the 1st but it all seemed a million miles away.

## Sources

Petre pp 24-25

War Diaries WO329/1371

Court Martial Records WO96/6

Berkshire Chronicle

*Continued in section 231*