

## Section 225

# Interlude I

### The 5th Battalion November 1915 to July 1916

#### Clearing Up

After the battle of Loos had been called off the 5th remained in Hairpin Sap and Breslau Avenue clearing up and dealing with the bodies of the dead, many of whom were from the 8th Battalion. At one time they were attacked with flame throwers. (ref 17)

#### 29th October 1915

The men had been reading in the newspapers how badly recruiting had fallen off in recent months and that Lord Derby, the new Minister for War was planning conscription. Pte Charles ball of Tilehurst reflected the feelings of the men when he wrote home on October 29th.

After a good weeks rest we are back in the trenches. Glad to say I'm still all right except for a nasty cold but of course that is nothing out here. No doubt you have followed the papers this last week or two and have seen what has been going on lately. I'm proud to say we have taken an active part in the operations. We have lost numbers of fine fellows recently including officers. I see they are just beginning to wake up in England regards recruiting and its about time for if only the people could witness what we have gone through and the blood that has been shed recently they would not sit still long. The folks at home will never know what things are like out here not even if some of our best writers wrote a book about it. It is really wonderful that the troops keep so free from fever etc. We shall soon have Christmas here and I think we shall be happy enough under the circumstances. All the other Tilehurst boys are safe and sound. [TX01537]

#### 11th November 1915

Captain Rickman wrote on 11th November after returning from leave in England.

The weather was vile, the trenches knee deep in liquid mud, the trench constantly falling in and needing continuous work to make it safe.

These conditions lasted six days when we came back into billets. We go straight back again the day after tomorrow, the weather is still vile, so we must expect a repetition of our last tour. We have a new Brigadier, a most cheerful man and almost exhilarating which is what one wants out here, especially when the weather is like it is. [ref 21]

#### 23rd November 1915

Corporal JD Smith was with an officer and two others on 23rd November repairing barbed wire entanglements. He was shot in the left ankle and was rushed to the casualty station. From there he was taken via a base Hospital to the Military Hospital in Norwich, having had to have his foot amputated. [RM15/1/16][BC 14/1/16]

#### 22nd December 1915

Just before Christmas on the 22nd of December Col Foley was severely injured in the jaw by a shell which fell near him and killed Capt Bath outright. They were hit as they were conducting one of their daily rounds. [RM1/1/16]

#### Christmas 1915

Christmas 1915 saw the Battalion at the Tobacco factory at Bethune where Christmas day was celebrated with plum pudding and cigars with cigarettes for the men. They had a welcome opportunity to clean up and many men took the opportunity to visit a nearby brothel. [Petre & ref 17]

DG Morgan of Camberley wrote to the Mercury with an appeal for footballs for the men of the 5th. He quoted his son as saying that *'having a ball to kick around keeps up the men's morale'* [RM 1/1/16]

#### 1st January 1916

On New Years Day they went into the line again at Festubert, but all was quiet that day. However the next three months were ones of attrition. As Pte Harding described their territory

"Two miles of mud up Hulloch Alley, across the quarries, along Stickey Trench to West Face and Russian Sap to craters A and C. The forward lip of crater A abutted upon an unoccupied one. Straight ahead was a huge slag heap and our artillery shelled it most days. With a low whine they came over and dropped like a sack of coal. The explosion was the only thing we had to cheer about in that God-forsaken hole" [ref 17]

#### 17th January 1916

2Lt HP Dymore Brown was in charge of a party firing rifle grenades on 17th Jan 1916. He was injured in the left eye and taken to the Base Hospital in Boulogne. It was feared he would lose the eye. [RM 29/1/16, BC 28/1/16]

#### 27th February 1916

Even in the thick of action the army bureaucracy lumbered on. Capt Rickman wrote on 27th February 1916

"We came back last night to here, a little behind the firing line, where we had a fairly warm time, 'some activity' as the papers call it. The second day there was a trench mortar fight. There were a lot of these in my line so I moved one

of my platoons out of their part of the trench a little way down having marked their place as one the Huns were fond of retaliating on. As soon as our mortars started the Huns replied and on that part of the trench doing a lot of damage. They then fired rifle grenades into the gaps in the parapet to stop us repairing them but I got our guns on to them and they stopped at once. When the bombs were at their thickest I was rung up by our Adjutant asking me where I had put some stores my men were bringing up. This reminded me of that picture by Bairnsfather of Colonel Fritzshrapnel being asked in the middle of a bombardment how many tins of plum and apple he had drawn during the last week. I ought to have referred the Adjutant to this instead of trying to tell him through the din through a husky telephone what had become of them. I am not a Major nor likely to become one, only I was temporary acting second in command, but am now back with my company which I infinitely prefer. [ref 21]

Private W Knight was sitting in 3" of snow eating his breakfast when he was wounded in the thigh by a sniper. He had to have an operation the next day. [RM11/3/16]

It was not without its light relief on occasions, although at the time it may not have seemed funny. As Private Harding recounted

"After stand down one evening I was sitting on 'the pole over the hole' at the crater's bottom when Jerry exploded a mine just short of the right hand lip. Huge boulders rained down while I pulled up my trousers running up and over into West Face landing almost on top of Lt Sharpe and CSM Munchin, who ordered me back. The sap being blown in, I was crawling over rotting corpses of previous actions. I found Nobby Livett attending wounded. Sgt Tommy Wooten and others lay dead. During the night another sap was dug. We took some wounded men to Barts Alley where the RAMC took over. [ref 17]

### 14th April 1916

Captain Rickman wrote on the 14th April

"Another of my subalterns got wounded last night. We were discussing whether tinned rabbit would be a good thing for the mess. He was for, I against, when a piece of shrapnel hit him on the head, ending the discussion. He got a pretty bad scalp wound, not serious unless he gets blood poisoning which I hope he doesn't [ref 21]

The subaltern was 2Lt Howard Cook of Reading. His wound was immediately bandaged and he was given medical attention before being taken to Base Hospital and on to a hospital in Torquay [RM 22/4/16]

## The Sharpshooter

Second Lt Birkby wrote several letters home describing his experiences. He had been with the American army originally and was something of a sharp-shooter. He had been specially recruited at Bovington Camp in Dorset to form a specialist sniping unit within the Battalion. He selected four men from each of 5 companies and kept them away from normal duties. Previously sniping had been an extra duty for the better shots and many were just too tired to be effective. Birkby set up 6 sniping plates which gave his men good cover and although the Germans spotted one and flattened the area around, the trench was rebuilt after dark. Lance Corporal H... was

buried alive twice but he always emerged smiling, dirty and swearing. The new tactic proved most effective as after the new team went into operation not a single man was lost to snipers although they scored heavily on the Germans. They were shooting from about 600 yards using telescopic sights. Birkby was thoroughly enjoying himself - he described his dug out as 'in the centre of the earth and very comfortable' and in one of his letters home he wrote '

I am feeling simply great and can't remember ever enjoying myself more than I did today'.

He also noted the great improvement that the new steel helmet brought. Alas a few days later he was killed on 20th April. [RM 13/5/16]

Private L W Perris had a narrow escape when an aerial torpedo was dropped on his trench. He was buried alive but several of his comrades were killed [RM 29/4/16]

## Pte Ambrose Goes to Rouen

Pte Ambrose had been with the 2nd/4th Battalion since its formation. He was destined however to serve on the western front with the 5th Battalion. While they were at Parkhouse Camp on Salisbury Plain and before the rest of the 2nd/4th moved to France on May 25th, Pte Ambrose was allocated to a draft destined for the 42nd Infantry Base Depot at Rouen. Here he was renumbered 37394 in the Regular Army Series. This camp was a notorious place whose aim in life was to 'toughen men up' and which was to spawn the mutiny. (see section 280)

Our draft proceeded overseas from Lugershall, leaving

about eleven in the morning, being accompanied to the station by the Colonel (of the 2nd/4th) and officers and the band, arriving at Southampton early in the afternoon.

We had some hours to wait there till dark as no troops crossed the Channel in daylight. During these few hours we saw several famous liners which were used as Red Cross ships, the Mauritania was one of them, sister ship to the Lusitania that was torpedoed early in the war, and the Laurentic and Asturias, and numerous ships being loaded with all kinds of war material.

We left old England at 7 o'clock at night having a comfortable journey as the sea was not ruff. We anchored off Le Havre about midnight as we could not proceed up the river Seine till high tide, which was nine in the morning. As autumn was beginning the scenery was lovely on the banks of the river, the soil on the banks being chalky and rocky showing here and there between the glorious tints of the trees made it a lovely sight, some parts of the cliffs were high and there were several caves in different parts of the cliffs.

At certain points of the river were small villages partly hidden in the trees and some running down to the waters edge, here the French kiddies greeted us with "Are we doonhearted new".

After a pleasant trip we arrived at Rouen in the afternoon, landing by the Suspension Bridge, which has a large cage which is drawn backwards and forwards as soon as it is filled with people and vehicles. We marched from the Bridge to the 42nd Infantry Base Depot arriving about eight

oclock.

At night we were given blankets rifles etc and then we found our sleeping apartments which was bell tents, being about twelve in a tent and then we had supper and retired for the night. On Sunday we did a course of firing in the morning and in the afternoon and evening being free we had a walk and visited the Y.M.C.A.

The first week was spent in passing out, as it is called which is passing a test in all the branches of soldiering. We started at eight in the morning and marched to the Bull Ring, a large open piece of ground surrounded by pinewoods a mile from the camp. The first day we passed Musketry and extended order drill, and the next few days bombing, bayonet fighting (including the final assault course) trench digging and the different methods wiring, knife rest pattern, concertina, trench covering, trip wire and alarm wires. On the Saturday we passed the gas course with P.H. respirators, having to pass through a dug out filled with Gas, four or five times stronger than it can be sent across from enemy trenches, also the rear Gas had to be passed through without helmets, this smelling like Pineapples.

Finishing with this we were ready for the line, all we had to do was order. On Sunday we attended Church Parade in the Cinema, and the next few days was spent route marching.

## Sources

Petre pp

Account of Pte Ambrose

Letters from Capt Rickman

Account of Pte Harding