

Section 227
Interlude I
7th Battalion

September 1915 to June 1916

The 7th Battalion moved to France on the 20th September 1915 - Continued from Section 117

On the Western Front
20th September to 9th November 1915

Beyond learning trench-warfare work, the 7th Battalion did no service on the Western Front. They arrived at Le Havre at 07:00 on the 20th September 1915 and went first to No 5 Rest Camp.

From Havre they proceeded by rail to Longeau and then to the front to billets at Ailly-sur-Somme on the 22nd September, and began learning its work attached to other units at Aubigny on the 26th.

Lieut.-Colonel A. P. Dene (D.C.L.I.) took command of the battalion on October 21st as Lt Col R E T Bray had fallen sick on the 28th September his place being taken temporarily by Major J J O'B Sexton. The 7th formed a unit of the 78th Infantry Brigade of the 26th Division. The other battalions of the brigade were the 9th Gloucestershire Regiment, 11th Worcestershire Regiment, and the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

They were attached to 53rd Brigade, 18th Division for tuition in trench warfare at Albert. A and B Coys were attached to the 10th Essex and the 8th Norfolks on the 1st October, their places being taken by C and D Companies on the 4th. After this introduction they marched back to Aubigny on the 9th for company training

On the 22nd they marched off to Bertangles and on to Vignacourt on the 25th Here a few men fell out sick. Two privates wrote to the Berkshire Chronicle requesting a pair of boxing gloves

Sir, Being a little lonesome here and all rather fond of sport we should much appreciate it if your readers would be so kind as to send us a set of boxing gloves which I am sure will pass many a lonely evening away. We shall have plenty of sport when away from our daily duties. Your paper is eagerly looked forward to every week.

Yours sincerely

13389 Private J BATES

15413 Private H CHINN

7th Royal Berks Machine Gun Section

British Expeditionary Force, France

October 27th 1915 [TX01534]

This was published on November 11th so it is doubtful whether they benefitted from the appeal.

New drafts arrived on the 4th and 5th November. Also on the 4th they exchanged nine heavy draught horses from their transport section for sixteen mules and two horses. A few days later on the 6th they swapped nine light draught horses for 33 mules and five limbered general service vehicles.

On the 9th November they entrained, at 13:30 at Longeau, near Amiens, for Marseilles. The 80 mules they had by then acquired had to be returned to the Ordnance.

There was a very cordial demonstration when they left the latter country. The people at ----- lined the street clapped their hands cheered and threw flowers at them while the Berkshires sang 'Tipperary' and other songs. [TX01409]

Journey to the Salonika Front
9th November to 26th December 1915

From Marseilles the battalion sailed, on the 11th November, on the *Arcadian*, with a strength of 25 officers and 906 other ranks Their sixteen limbered General Service waggons were left behind..

Alexandria was reached, after an uneventful voyage, on the 18th, and the battalion sailed again on the 20th, under escort of H.M.S. *Magnificent*, for Salonika, which was reached safely on the 24th.

At Salonika itself the 7th Royal Berkshire remained for the rest of November, refitting and route-marching. The

weather was very cold and snowy.

On the 1st December the battalion went into the camp at Lembet, about four miles north of Salonika, preparatory to proceeding to the line of defence known as the Birdcage Line which was then being fortified with the view of making about Salonika an immense entrenched camp.

On the 12th they marched to Laina, another four miles to the north-east of Lembet, to dig trenches on the line Laina-Tumba, returning to camp the same day. Tumba marked the right of this part of the line ending at the western end of the Langaza Lake. Beyond this lake was that of Beshik, and eastward again of that the sea.

On the 14th the whole brigade moved to a hill N.W. Laina, and on the 26th moved again to the foot of the hills three-quarters a mile east of Laina. The front line of the brigade consisted of the Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, and Royal Berkshire Battalions, with the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire in reserve at Yailajik. The Royal Berkshire occupied section C including twelve trenches.

The Doiran-Vardar Front 10th November 1915 to 30th June 1916

From the 10th November 1915 till the 4th June 1916 there is absolutely nothing to record. The entry in the Battalion Diary on almost every day mentions nothing but the fact that the battalion was at work on the trenches.

The men were appalled by the conditions they found themselves in as the following letters home illustrate. They were reported in the Berkshire Chronicle of 14th January 1915.

A member of the regiment describing his recent experiences says

'Biscuits and Bully was our staple diet. There is a canteen opened here and we have to pay 1s per loaf for bread. I get one now and then or I should snuff it for my teeth have given out. Now for a joke. I was sent with 54 men to take a bath. Well when we got inside I stripped and went into the drying or spray room along with the other NCOs. I looked round and on the wall there were about six cockroaches. I am not telling lies when I say they were 2 1/2 inches long. You could see them winking. Well this was not in my line so I made a dive for the door when a great rat, the largest I ever saw ran in front of me. That did it. I was outside the building in about two seconds and finished dressing there. I dint mind a German or two but not that.

The kindness of heart of the British Tommy comes out in another letter. He says

"There is a poor blind man with a little girl who are really destitute. I had only half a franc in my pocket but I gave it to him. There is also a little chap who has a soldier's jacket all ripped. He is about six years old and his cough is terrible to hear. I tied my silk handkerchief around his poor little neck. He wants it more than I do, though it was a present from -----, but she won't mind when it is a little to lessen the suffering of a poor little starving child. God bless them all and may the curses of this terrible war fall on the head that made such strife. War is hell" [TX01409]

Occasionally enemy aeroplanes were seen flying over to drop bombs on Salonika, a change of position from front line to reserve is recorded on the 23rd March.

All these months were spent in road-making and trench-digging, without any appearance of the Bulgar enemy. It was weary work, and men and officers must have begun to wonder whether they were to be considered as a battalion of soldiers or a labour battalion.

Christmas 1915 was a bleak affair. All they had to eat was bully beef and biscuits

By the end of May 1916 the entrenched camp was completed.

On the 5th June a move was made to Redan Camp, where the defended area was taken over from the 8th South Wales Borderers at Akbunar.

Here, too there is nothing to record till the 21st, when the battalion went into the camp at Dremiglava some six miles north of Laina and the ultimate line of defence at Salonika which so much about had been expended. The brigade was now, at last, about to advance to the real front line in contact with the enemy, which at that time was held by French troops in the line between Lake Doiran on the right and the Vardar River on the left.

A month, however) was spent at Dremiglava, and it must be remembered that all this country was very unhealthy and a hot-bed of malaria, from which the troops throughout this campaign suffered more severely than from the enemy. Dysentery, too, was rife.

Sources

Petre pp286-289

Berkshire Chronicle

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