

Section 228

Interlude I (October 1915 to June 1916)

The 8th Battalion

The 8th Battalion had been engaged twice at Loos and had suffered large casualties. They were given an opportunity to rest and regroup (continued from section 218)

Lillers

15th to 27th October 1915

The battalion marched from the German Old front line to Noeux les Mines on the evening of the 14th October, stopping briefly at Saily Labourse for some hot food.

At Noeux-les-mines they boarded a train for Lillers arriving next morning and went into billets. Lillers is a small town about 12 Km north west of Bethune. It gave Private L W Whitwell an opportunity to write home on the 21st and comment on the hell they had been through:-

"Every one is very pleased to get out of that proper hell. Our Brigade made a charge and took three lines of trenches from the Germans with heavy losses to them. All we could get up there were whizzbangs and shrapnel for breakfast flavoured with a little bully Jack Johnsons and coalboxes for dinner and tea together with aerial torpedoes bombs and trench mortars. [TX01544]

A few days earlier on the 19th an officer had written:-

"We are now having a rest about 16 miles behind the firing line and as a rule out of range of the sound of the terrible guns. Yesterday and today though the wind has changed and we have been able to hear the reverberations of a most terrific cannonade. As I write the house is actually shaken by them. The country here is not ugly but flat and rural. We are in quite a nice little town and I have a comfortable room and bed I am glad to say. We hope that the rest will last several weeks but one can never tell. The trenches must be freezing now moreover it is dark for so many hours nowadays. We don't work terrifically hard at present though there is always plenty to do. There are scarcely any officers and as my company commander is going to leave tomorrow for a week I shall be Company Commander. A great deal of my spare time is taken up in reading the men's letters for the most part very pathetic documents." [TX01543]

They remained at Lillers until the 27th but the regimental diarist had very little to say of their activities

and many days wrote nothing.

A draft of 67 men from the 9th Battalion arrived on the 17th and 9 officers joined from the 9th on the 22nd, five more officers joined on the 27th.

The GOC 1st Division arrived on the 20th and presented medal ribbons to Capt D Tosetti (MC), 2Lt T B Lawrence (MC) and RSM Lainsbury (DCM)

Just before they left Lillers HM King George V came to Bethune to inspect IV and XI Corps. The 8th sent a small contingent to represent them. Just after the inspection the King's horse slipped but it is not recorded what happened to the King.

Noeux Les Mines

28th to 31st October 1915

After the contingent returned on the 28th the battalion entrained back to Noeux Les Mines. It was pouring with rain when they arrived and as all the billets in the town were full they were made to stand around in the cold and wet for over four hours. Finally it was decided to take them back to Lillers but this time they had to walk. They got back to Lillers at 14:00 on the 31st and went into billets. A further draft of 77 men joined them here from the 3rd and 9th Battalions.

Lillers

31st October to 14th November

Again very little seems to have happened at Lillers. The battalion put on a concert at the cinema in the Grand Place on the 5th November which was well received.

On the 9th they did a census of the length of service of the men in the battalion the result was:-

length of service (months)	number
3	1
4	53
5	123
6	82
7	19
8	8
9	10
10	34
11	12

12	46
13	15
14	324
15	4
17	1
total	732

As the Battalion had been formed only since August 1914 the five men with more than 14 months service must have come from another battalion.

Also on the 9th Major C F N Bartlett was appointed to command the battalion as Col Walton had been recalled to the Indian Army on the 29th September.

There was an inspection of 1st Brigade by Lt Gen Sir Henry S Rawlinson of IX Corps on the 11th He commented:-

"General Reddie, Officers, N.C.O.s, and men of the 1st Brigade, as commander of the IV Corps, I have come here today to inspect you, and to thank you for the magnificent work you did on September 25th last, especially the two battalions who led the assault, the 8th Royal Berkshires and the 10th Gloucesters, supported by the Camerons."

"I have been over the ground since, and standing the other day on the old first line of German trenches, and taking into consideration the nature of the ground and the strongly fortified condition of the trenches, I must say it seemed to me a marvel how you managed to take the position. I can assure you no more brilliant feat of arms has ever been performed by any body of men during the present war, and I am proud to have such regiments under my command."

"I am well aware of the thorough preparation for this attack and the plans worked out in detail with great skill by General Holland and his staff; also the hard work for weeks previous in preparing the trenches from which you made the assault, and of the small loss of life in constructing them, which in itself, is most meritorious."

"Of the courage and fearlessness of the two leading battalions who were ordered to take the first line German trench, I cannot speak too highly, for on their efforts depended much of the success of those following them."

"Having taken the first-line trenches you wisely pushed forward and took the second, third and fourth, and some of your gallant comrades, I feel safe in saying, actually got into, and took possession of some of the houses in HULLUCH."

"The Second Brigade, on your right, was not at first successful, and the fine courage you displayed in pushing on with your flank exposed, is

worthy of all admiration. The great lesson to be learned from it is that, in battle it behoves a battalion to push on, irrespective of anything that is happening on the flanks."

"It has pleased me greatly to ride through your ranks today and to notice the fine spirit displayed by all; also to see the improvement in your condition since coming into rest, you will shortly be called upon again to go into the trenches and I feel sure that whatever work you are allotted will be done with the same cheerful spirit as in the past, and which has ever been a characteristic of the first Brigade."

"I wish to thank you again for your work on September 25th, especially the battalions who led the assault." {WD 8th 10/11/15]

Loos Area

14th - 21st November 1915

They were considered sufficiently reinforced to take up some front line duties again so on the 14th November they entrained back to Noeux-les-mines and marched to Mazingarbe where they halted for a meal.

That night they relieved the 7th Londons in the fire trenches from the Chalk pit, northwards to the crossing of the road from Loos to Hill 70.

The next day Major T G Dalby arrived from the 1st Kings Royal Rifles and took over command from Major Bartlett who relinquished his temporary Lt Colonelcy

On the 17th they went back to the reserve trenches displacing the London Scottish Regiment and on the 19th the 2nd Welch Regiment arrived and they returned to Noeux-les Mines arriving at billets at 23:00. During their time in the trenches they had sustained only two casualties but a number of men went down with severe trench foot. This was a condition which came on very suddenly but was easily countered by wearing proper trench boots. Unfortunately the men had not all been issued with these but such was the seriousness of the outbreak that supplies were commandeered and the regulations on rubbing and greasing feet were enforced.

Pep Talks

22nd - 24th November 1915

Lt Col Dalby asserted his authority on the 22nd with a pep talk to platoon commanders and sergeants. The diarist recorded:-

"4:0PM: The C.O. lectured the Platoon Commanders and Platoon Sergeants on Trench Discipline. The C.O. emphasized the heavy responsibility that lay on a battalion that had done so brilliantly, lost so heavily and had had its ranks filled by inexperienced junior NCOs and men. He pointed out that the strictest discipline would be necessary

to cope with the difficulties arising from the state of affairs, and observed that Officers and senior NCOs would, for a time at any rate, have to supervise their juniors work much more thoroughly than would be necessary normally. Among several interesting suggestions were: I. That rifles should be cleaned and inspected during the morning stand-to-arms; II. That platoons should be divided into groups of six men, of whom 2 would be on sentry (at night), 2 resting, 2 at work. A man would be on sentry for an hour, would then do an hour's work, after which he would take off his boots in a dug-out kept for this purpose, would, put on a pair of dry socks, and sleep for the remainder of the hour. By this means would be obviated any notion on the part of the men that they were being taken hap-hazard, and all would know, more or less, when their turn would come.

Two days later the whole battalion had a pep talk from Sir John French who addressed the Division:-

General REDDIE, Officers, NCOs and men, this is the first time since the great battle of LOOS, that I have had an opportunity of being present, to address you on parade after the splendid battle."

Therefore as the IV Corps took the most prominent part in the great battle, I wish, in the first place to fully express my heartiest congratulations to General RAWLINSON."

I cannot find words to express the admiration I feel of the conduct of you all on that occasion; from its leaders down to the privates who took part in that battle."

The 1st Division, of which you are the 1st Brigade, took the most prominent part. I think when this war is over, every man who has ever been part of the 1st Division in the years 1914 and 1915 will have reason to be proud."

They have splendidly conducted themselves."

They have been in the thick of everything from the first."

It is a matter of thorough regret to me to think that I am not addressing any men on parade who have been through all these fights."

"Possibly I am mistaken, I hope I am, and that there may be some here who have been through all these fights. The terrible losses which you have suffered have caused the Division to change its individuality, several times over."

"Now we come to the first Brigade."

"The 1st Brigade, up to last September, was under the command of General LOWTHER, and it was he who went through all that work, and then General REDDIE took it over before the battle of LOOS."

"Now time does not avail me to go through all that I know that you were able to advance, you did advance with tremendous gallantry."

"The 10th GLOSTERS and 8th BERKSHIRES have a magnificent record with the IV Corps and 1st Brigade."

"I know the splendid work that you did, which helped very materially in that battle to capture the large number of prisoners which were taken. I can only tell you that if the results of the Battle of LOOS are not appreciated now, they will be in the future."

"It was one of the biggest battles that the British Army has ever won. To see what a difficult ground it was and how strongly fortified were the trenches it was all the more praiseworthy to take them as you did."

"I can only regret the losses that you suffered."

"I am quite sure that you had honour by that which you have won, in future generations it will not be forgotten that you worked hard for your country."

"It was with great pride I learnt that those two battalions of the New Armies (8th Berkshires and 10th Glosters) led that advance with the gallantry that they did. It is a most promising thing to see the Battalions of the New Armies behaving so splendidly. I heartily congratulate you." "I am quite certain that no task now will be a greater honour than having taken such a prominent part in that battle."

Officers and men, I thank you for the praiseworthy part which you took in that battle.

Trenches near Loos **25th November to 26th December 1915**

On the 26th at 07:00 the battalion took over the front line trenches from Hay Alley to Vendin Alley, relieving the 2nd Kings Royal Rifles.

2nd Lt W L Clarke was the Battalion Trench Mortar Officer and on the 29th he was buried by a shell and recovered unconscious. He was sent back to England on the 6th December.

That evening the rain was very heavy and the battalion was relieved by the 1st Black Watch and retired to reserve trenches. The roles were reversed again on the 2nd December when the 8th relieved the 1st Black Watch in the firing line. It was still raining very hard on the 5th when they moved back to billets at Philosophe taking over seven hours to move a little over three miles.

Court Martials

Corps Reserves

14th January to 16th February 1916

Under Attack

27th May 1916

Mrs Wort has received a letter stating that her husband 14954 Cpl T Wort won the Military Medal under the following circumstances:- Your husband was awarded the Military Medal for coolness and gallantry during a German raid at --- -- on May 27th. He and his gun team were largely instrumental in beating off the raiding party. His officer also told me that that when he was killed he lost a very gallant and promising young non-commissioned officer whose place he would find it hard to fill. [TX01673]

2nd Lieut F.D. PHILLIPS joined the regiment and is taken on the strength of the battalion."

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The CO

On January 26th the 8th held a football match in France when the Officers beat the Sergeants 2-1. A couple of days later they held a boxing tournament [RM12/2/16]

There was an appeal for hand ambulances for the 8th. These were very valuable as they saved lives by enabling the wounded to be taken quickly to a dressing station. There was also a need for two man stretchers called Furber stretchers. [RM 12/2/16]

Captain Rickman transferred from the 5th to the 8th in

April. He recounted an odd incident on 15th June

" I must tell you of a really funny incident that occurred during a gas attack that the Huns let off. Needless to say it could not have happened in any but an Irish Regiment. When the gas came over one of the men put his helmet on back to front and ran down the trench shouting 'I can't find the window, where are the windows?', meaning the eyepieces. In the course of his career down the trench he ran into another Irishman who promptly smote him under the jaw. On which the first man pulled off his helmet and went for the other, who, seeing the first man with his helmet off, pulled his off too and the pair indulged in a free fight in gas you could hardly see through until stopped by an NCO. The curious part of was that the only one of them suffered any ill effects from the gas. " [ref 21]

In the Reading Mercury of 26th Feb 1916 an appeal was made for anyone who had a claim against the estate of Ronald William Brakspear, late major of the 8th and formerly living in Henley.

2nd Lt C H Kingerlee was shot in the face by a sniper on 21st April. He was repatriated to a hospital in London [RM 13/5/16]

27th May raid - see Berks Chron 18/8/16

Continued in Section 238