

Section 248

Interlude II

The 8th Battalion September 1916 to March 1917

This covers the period from the 8th last action as part of the Battle of the Somme on 3/9/16 to the opening of the Battle of Arras on 9/4/17 (continued from section 238)

Out of the Line

5th to 10th September 1916

On the 5th September the Battalion was relieved by the 2nd Royal Munster Rifles and went into bivouac in Bercourt Wood.

A draft of 220 men joined the battalion on the 7th.

On the 10th 1st Bde was relieved by 142nd Bde of 47th Division and moved to Millencourt via Albert, Here 100 men were left behind to do fatigue duty at the railhead while the rest moved on to La Housoye to begin training the new troops.

11th September 1916

On the 11th the battalion was joined by 2nd Lt Aubrey Mellish Bray who had left London on the 8th. He was to record his daily activities until he went on leave in July 1917. He began by recounting his journey from Waterloo.-

Went down from Waterloo by the 12:30. Baker, Crunsell Morley in train & also met Unwin going back to Synd. y came to train to see me off & others especially B most enthusiastic got Ston 5 & met Mecy Langerton. All reported to embarkation D & then at 44 turth? gave names & destination. All went & had tea & then bought food electric torch etc. Got our bits on board the K E very small.

Embarked at 5.30 400 men & over 100 officers. All in boats when we pulled out but when out a bit all sent below. Stuffy hole so I got under lee of some gear & eventually tried to sleep in cad? of Major Morley & Corn me. Very cold got little sleep but didn't feel sick. C did but being on with the aid of his flask. Quite enough. Went down below when it got nearly over. Officers lying all over kit. Spew everywhere, awful fug.

Got to Havre lay up there from 2 to 8.30. Awful struggle to get my breakfast Got some food abt 11. Fine trip up Seine to Rouen but as it was warm I slept most of the way. Got R abt 2 disembarked with kit. Had lunch at hotel L'Angleterre and quite acceptable after our trip.

Drove up with Mecy to rest camp abt 4 miles. Reported to HQs in canvas huts. Whole bunch to go to 8th & sent to no 1 TB regt at camp. Given passes till 11. Got V... went downtown Morley & Mecy & had dinner. Back to camp slept in very comfortable in camp hut.

Sun 10th

Were told at 6.30 to parade at 7.30. Got break & went to pay? ground a mile away. Thousands of men and lots of officers. Lecture on gas & helmets. Went through trench of gas - ambulance in attendance. Though helmet wasn't working properly but only fumes. - rest of day wrote letters & then downtown Crunsel & I had to walk back most of way. Ghastly Red Cross show, The bells

Monday 11

Got orders to move on by train at 4.30 pm Packed and got away after Had lunch at British Officers club after taking stuff to station. Found train after a time & after hanging round got away 5.30. Train too heavy for engine ... 3 mls per hour Got another engine went on til 9.30 & stopped at Ablincourt till 8 in morning All in together. Had to get our valises from Pugh? into our carriage. Fair sleep got on the rail head and dumped ourselves met officers who told us we were billeted at L. Hays only 3/4 walk away.

Got there after an hour Reported to Colonel Bartlett .as they were having mess had mess C. O. seemed O. K. Only eight officers in battalion all told and 180 men after push on Sunday Orders at 4.30 I apt to C Company with Hawkins: Corn takes charge B their officers being away Moseley D. Mecy D Langstone A Bland A. Battalion in rest billets 14 miles behind line and just hear guns

13th September 1916

Bray:-

Morning parade, physical jerks Company drill etc. nothing in afternoon but write letters Billeted infarm house on floor comfortable and clean

14th September 1916

Bray:-

Same stunt but I am D. O. messing with A & D coys. Capt Birch & Lawrence old timers.

15th September 1916

Bray:-

Got orders late at mess to cancel previous orders as battalion would move at 5:30 a.m. Got a new servant Gore who packed me all ready and left my sleeping bag out Fair sleep

16th September 1916

At 05:20 on the 16th they set off for Bresle arriving at 07:30 and went into billets. The reason for the move emerged that the attacking forces on the 15th had made greater progress than had been expected. The next day

the GOC 1st Division told his troops to be ready to join in the pursuit if the anticipated breakthrough occurred.

GOC

1. It is possible that the Division will be required to go into the line again for one of two purposes:-

(a) for joining in the pursuit should the operations about to be undertaken prove entirely successful.

(b) for relieving another Division of the IIIrd Corps and consolidating and holding part of the defensive flank.

2. Units must therefore be prepared for one of these alternatives and must realise that the result of this battle depends on the relative staying powers of the two sides. The enemy are believed to be nearly at an end of their resources and that a supreme effort made by us now is likely to be crowned with great success.

The Major General is therefore confident that should the Army Commander call upon the 1st Division once again for this effort the Division will rise to the occasion as it has often done before. [WD8]

Bray:-

Moved at 5:30 not a long march but had heavy pack Moved up towards firing line about four miles Men in billets officers in tents Fine but cold In tent with Council & Shiner.

17th September 1916 (Sunday)

Bray:-

Early parade much to our annoyance Company drill in morning CO told last we were free till 12 in afternoon and Council, Morley, Bland and I got horses and rode into Amiens 22 kilos Had chestnut pack beast and pulled like hell and quite a handful. Got A up 1½ hrs tied horses up & C & I went round and ordered dinner at Gobert. C & I strolled round, bought electric lamps had tea. Good dinner - champagne Carriage back to horses. Got lost Found them at last Morely and I went back together fine ride not a bit sore back at 11:15 left 9:15 Heard battalion moving to bivouac at Bec wood in afternoon

18th September 1916

The Battalion returned to bivouac in Beccourt Wood on 18th September.

Bray:-

Raining like hell mud everywhere Packed and started 2:30 marched about eight miles in pelting rain Soaked to skin passed Albert. Houses all windows gone etc. fact les church as per postcards.

Got to B[ecourt] W[ood]. Still raining like hell Big tent shelters for men but some had to sleep in pools under boughs mud had streams through our tent Wet cold and bloody miserable No valises. Tried to sleep on ground sheets Dozed woke and went out 4 am and sick five times and diarrhoea

Bazentin Le Grand

19th September 1916

On the following day the Battalion moved to Bazentin le Grand with the Black Watch to relieve 140 and 142

Bdes of the 47th Division in the Starfish line north east of High Wood.

Bray:-

Felt awful morning at last Chilled to bone Got little warmer about mid-day but still soaking Battalion moved on at 4:15 at 200 yards intervals between coys. First mile not bad then got to tram lines. Mud awful in extreme 7 in of sticky clay Very tiring Long halts Saw first shell holes and empties and duds Farthing(?) on dead horse Men muddy beyond description coming back Got descr(?) and we got messed up with Cameroons and Roads jammed with transport. Move a few yards and stop for twenty minutes and so on got beyond H & W. Artillery blazing away on every side noise extraordinary and flashes lighting up the sky Didn't get to our objective because order came down for us to leave the road we were on and await further orders - awful job in dark but got us all in somewhere Got quite a respectable dug out for our mob. Got tea and slept from 1 to 5 & then to 7 Warm but cramped

Got up and had breakfast Shelling in distance half mile away Cleaning rifles and making ready to move about 9:30 a dud shell fell the other side of the road about 100 yards away no casualties Just as Hawkins gave orders to fall in about 11 a.m. shell 4.5 came and burst about 30 yards from C company HQ Burst and knocked out three men Went towards them and another came and burst about 15 yards from me. I ducked but a great clod of earth hit me on the shoulder and knocked me down and any amount of smaller stuff came on top of me. Got up and found man standing next to me was hit tries(?) others beyond the and about six others. All yelling Tried to get stretcher bearers Got some. Sgt Long hit & Bouchier under left arm. Had been my runner yesterday. Took names and numbers and rest of company moved on Caught them up and and into trenches and not sorry. Shells dropping fairly near. Set men digging. Got coy HQs and found Hawkins & made out casualty list (13) but none killed

In dugout with Capt Birch. He lost 11 by shell fire at same time. Dugout just in front 18 pr battery shakes everything

Shelling but not so close as before HE little shrapnell. Got lunch in afternoon went out to look at caterpillarnr Z about 20 yards from me got blown up by German bombs. Got stretchers for him

Disinfecting our dugout Lawrence broke a live mills clean in half but luckily it didn't explode or we should both have got it but man hit an ... at three the same way got it thru arm & bottom not bad but blighty.under shell fire not bad at all. No one seems to take slightest notice except those who get hit. This gives our confidence. Probably stay here all night.

We have just room to sit down side by side. Terrible job getting in and out have to sit in muddy trench & crawl in anyhow - just in front of a battery of 16 prs and they make a hell of a row & shake the earth.

Intermittent shelling in front & behind us. Evidently fire being directed by sausages. When it got dark we bombarded heavily and a bit later they replied with moderate heavies. Started up to 9 & 10 plat abt 10 pm to see they were all right. Awful job getting up past them in the narrow trench & going in mud and water above tops of my field boots which QM brought up in the afternoon.

Got through to them all OK but took ages as couldn't find gas sentry of no 9. However got properly lost trying to to get past no 2 guns wandered over the top for about an hour & at last got to A Coy. They put me on the right trail to C & got back where I started from. Fellow they called

Treb showed me the way. Quite a good man. Got back about 1 am & just getting to sleep nicely when the started shelling us with gas shells. Had my helmet ready but even so got three or four breaths of the filthy stuff. Lawrence coughed a hell of a lot before he got his on as he was just rearranging his things differently.

I went up trench towards 9 & 10. Ghastly flounder my along through mud, unable to see anything and very short of breath. Men all seemed to have helmets on & the better off then I was. Damned glad to get back to our dug out. Kept having to put on helmet thro night

20th September 1916

On the 20th September the Black Watch and the New Zealanders succeeded in bombing out the Germans who had occupied Drop trench. Two companies of the Berks moved up to occupy Rifles and Seaforth Trenches, with one company in support of the 1st Black Watch in Starfish.

Thursday 21st Sept 1916

Bray:-

Shelled us with gas heavily just before it got light. Most unpleasant but not really very dangerous as long as one has helmet handy. Went up trench to make run for stand to about ¼ to 6. Fairly safe not much doing. Shelled us again quite fairly heavily in morning after breakfast none so very close Two splinters hit sandbag on which I was resting my arm but they didnt hit with much force. Thought we were going to have a nice peaceful evening but about dark message from HQ giving us direction to dig a trench indicated on map. A Coy and C Coy in shifts. All coy officers went out to find it headed by Birch

Rather ghastly trip it being very dark & any amount of shell holes.

Passed an old crater with some ghastly corpses of Bosch strewn around & their ghastly attitudes & white faces & beastly smell were most [unfile?] and although there was but little shelling it was something of an experience.

At last we found our objective more by good luck than anything else and then we came back & very happy I was to roll into my dugout again.

I was to take a party of 50 or so up at 1.30 am turned up and had rather a broken sleep waking about 1. Took [HMB?] or do by Dancer with me as guide. Several shells landed along our front while going up at 9 and 10 but found them all correct & after some trouble got them all together & started. Got on OK, had to go slow, but eventually reached our object relieved [Garyoton?] but the system I had arranged for taking over picks & shovels was done in as A Coy chucked down their [logops?] when they saw us & halted. Took some time before the men were all working. Moon got up and gave us a bit of light. Ahead the front line Verey lights going up & shells soaring over our heads but nothingdisturbing us. Some 4.5 falling a good deal beyond us on ourway back.

Got 9 into trench & went back to swear at Sgt Adams for getting his men into dugouts without my permission & cursed a man for saying he was sick when he had to turn out for work. Dance & I then started back towards 9

when we heard a 4.5 screaming into us. I lay flat and it pitched only 3 yds or so away & the explosion lifted me & flung me four or five feet. When I landed I saw Dance still rolling away and I thought he was done in but he got up & dived into 9' trench & I did likewise. We went down some distance clambered out & doubled across past rest of ? another big one going off 50 yds beyond us. Ran along top of parapet like hell & then more went off on way down but we arrived safe but winded & pretty badly shaken. Didn't sleep much too cold. Hawkins got in all right. Glad its fine bright day

Sat 23rd September 1916

Bray:-

Quiet morning not many shells and sun came out and we got warm for about first time. Inspected rifles etc During morning adj came to give coy instructions about moving up to support. Whilst up here he told us to reconnoitre the comm trench we were digging last night in order to see where it joined up with first line.

Had lunch and hung around. B departed and about 3 pm it and I and Dance started off. Got to trench OK. State of ground for miles absolutely undescrivable - 30 foot shell holes, not a level foot of ground. Beastly corpses strewn about arms legs etc detached & stinking. 30 foot dug outs. Quite healthy afoot otherwise. Were out there about an hour & half & very much set on souvenirs. Not a bit interested myself. Tea & found orders for going up with old fatty to dig under direction of CQMS around before we started & had some letters. One from W one K about D and Basil. Got off abt 7 & B led us sucessfully. Picked up guides OK & got on to work. Capt B came out with us & gave us a hand which was very good of him. Bloody job getting back. Dark had to guess way got lost several heavy shells but eventually to my great relief got back abt 1.30 am. Felt quite done up and 2 slight cuts shrap etc. No sleep too cold. Tried to get book off tomorrow No wash or shave yet.

24th September 1916

On the 24th September the Battalion moved back to Bazentin le Grand from where it was relieved by the 19th London and moved out of the line for the remainder of the month to Bresle. During this period the companies not in the front line had to pitch in to carry up ammunition. This was very hard work owing to the weather conditions. They also built a new communications trench and marked out new tracks with white posts.

Bray:-

When I got back last night found H who had also been on fatigue & got back few minutes before me. Both rather done and fed with these night jobs. W & he about 6.30 & CO & major up too. Gave us good news. Had slack day. moved in evening abt 8 & got to our present quarters quite successfully. Rather more comfortable. Turned in & had fair sleep.

Found CQMS & he had about a dozen letters for me. 2 from Scott, 3 about D one K one D one Basil one M took long time reading them. Turned in and slept roundly 1 am

Medals September 1916

There were quite a number of medals awarded to men of

the 8th. In September the list read

MC

Capt P S Cloake

DCM

11246 Sgt C A Oliver

18993 Pte G Mansfield

18567 Pte G W Yates

MM

10913 Pte F Bailey

13439 Sgt J Brown

14627 Pte H Cale

15638 L/Cpl W G Dewe

13098 L/Cpl P C Double

15233 Pte A W Eley

15429 Pte J England

12955 Pte P Fitt

13570 Pte E L Hall

13076 Pte R Hine

14582 Pte J A Petch

14955 Pte T B Wort

18567 Pte G W Yates

Franleu

2nd to 27th October 1916

On the 2nd October the Battalion left Besle by motor bus to go to Franleu near Abbeville where they stayed at the Divisional Training School until 27th October.

At the training school they were able to make up deficiencies in equipment and train men in basic techniques and in cooperative working.

More Military Medals were awarded on the 22nd for good work in the trenches:-

15047 Pte W Arter

15609 LCpl E Hughes

14494 Pte J Donovan

39376 Sgt E Hammond

14150 Pte W A Eldridge

17842 LCpl W Woodley

18835 Pte C Poynter

18434 Pte C A Rowe

18140 Pte A H Gosling

There was a serious outbreak of German Measles which required them to remain in quarantine until the 27th November. Or at least that was what the Diary said: the truth was yet to emerge.

Bazentin

27th November to 31st December 1916

They had to remain behind at Franleu when the rest of the Brigade departed after the close of the Somme campaign.

On the 27th November they were given a practical demonstration of the use of whale oil to protect themselves against the cold and then at 11:30 they marched off to Gamaches to board a train for Albert.

They finally arrived at Albert at 13:00 and went into billets which had been prepared by men who had been temporarily attached to the 10th Glosters for this purpose.

At 08:00 next morning they marched off from Albert to Bazentin le Grand and set up bivouacs,

They were employed on fatigues for a while and on the 30th they received a letter from the OC of the mobile veterinary section of the Lucknow cavalry brigade:

"I inspected the transport horses of the regiment under your command on the 15th inst. These horses were in exceedingly good condition and well groomed. The shoeing is quite perfect and reflects the greatest credit on the Transport Officer and the farrier concerned."
[WD8]

They had a brief spell in the trenches from 1st to 8th December. They were near the Butte de Warlencourt but as a result of the atrocious weather 200 yards of the trench were unusable and they had to go out into the open to reach the front line. At least while they were there the weather was not too bad and morale was maintained by cans of hot tea brought up by the supply parties.

They were relieved by the 2nd Royal Welch on the 5th and went back to huts at Bazentin le Petit.

For the remainder of 1916 they alternated with the 2nd Black Watch and 10th Glosters in and out of trenches. On the 18th two companies went up to Flers to make new weather proof shelters.

They spent Christmas Day in the front-line trenches but at least their dinner was supplemented with beer, oranges, nuts and cigars. By New Year's Eve they were back in billets in Albert.

Bibliography

War Diary

Diary of Lt A M Bray

Petre