

Section 268

Interlude III

The 8th Battalion - April to June 1917

This covers the period from the start of the Battle of Arras in April 1917 to the end of June.

Guarding the Yser

On the 10th June the 8th Royal Berks were at Warren Capell under training. They were joined by a small detachment of 10 men who included a future MP for Oxford, Private Frank Gray. He was allocated to 6 Platoon, B Company. His first impression of Company Quartermaster Sergeant Dodd was not very good, but as he admitted

I disliked that quartermaster sergeant, but as an instance of first impression being erroneous I record that I learnt afterwards to like my old first Quartermaster Sergeant Dodd.

He had mixed feelings about some of his other superiors:

Platoon Sergeant .. Brown [was] an ex signalman on the LNWR - quite a youth, but one of the smartest little men I have met. He had his limitations; he was not great in a crisis and he was weak.. where officers were concerned; but with it all he was a cheerful, well meaning little fellow. Our Captain had more the appearance of an unsuccessful poet than an officer of the British Army, but his merits, if fw, were great. He was a gentleman - fair - clever and brave.

They were billeted with the rest of their brigade in farm buildings with the officers occupying the main farm houses of the small farmsteads, white walled and red roofed, dotted around the countryside. Although tightly packed together it was a happy time, free from the horrors of the third Battle of Ypres which was taking place at the time.

On the 18th June the Brigade was mustered and they began the march to Nieuport. They bedded down in a meadow after only a short march and breakfast the next morning, of cold bacon and tea was overshadowed with the fear of what might be to come. They set out early to avoid the heat of the day and by noon had reached Fort Dunkerke where they were quartered in former seaside residences and boarding houses and allowed to bathe in the sea, a rare treat. The next morning, the 20th they were off again, this time by rail to Nieuport Bains. This time they were billeted in an hotel within a stonethrow of the beach but forbidden even to go onto the beach let alone bathe. Frank Gray wrote:-

The billets ... were in a tall gaunt hotel, actually on the coastline, and we could throw or even drop a stone onto

the beach. But we were forbidden to go on the sands or to attempt to bathe at this spot, for it was under the close observation by the enemy. At the time of our arrival light shells were falling within 120 yards of the hotel and already ... it had been struck two or three times. ... Its shape and place made it a particularly tempting target and yet into it three companies of our regiment were crowded. One heavy shell into this hotel would have reduced our battalion to the point of ineffectiveness.

They went into the line near Nieuport under cover of darkness three days later. They recorded in the War Diary:-

Line consists of shallow trenches in sand dunes and, support and front line of breastworks, revetted and sandbagged. Enemy command line from large dunes, the great dune having the observation of practically the whole of our system of trenches. Shelling increased 80% as soon as we took over from the French [WD8]

The new recruits were given a stern lecture by a young officer, they had expected to be briefed on the trenches and their duties but instead they were sharply reminded that being in the trenches was no excuse for being dirty or slovenly. They were strictly enjoined not to do any cooking lest the smoke attract enemy gunfire. They were then handed out raw bacon as their ration. A few men eat it raw, some cooked it in defiance of orders but most simply threw it away or oiled their boots with it.

To get to the front line trenches they had to walk three miles to the Yser Canal. The approach to the canal had been protected by the French with a quarter mile tunnel which kept them out of the view of the Germans. 6 platoon managed to take the wrong tunnel and emerged temporarily in the open in a very exposed position. The correct tunnel led to the pontoon bridge over the canal and a further three quarters of a mile brought them to the front line trench. The conditions were totally different to what any had experienced in other trenches but instead of being properly briefed by the troops they were relieving, they were simply left to find their own way around.

Frank Gray:

During the whole of this spell in the trenches, that section of my platoon to which I was attached was charged with the office of holding a sentry post, and this we did two at a time, for additional security, two hours on and four hours off, the four hours being spent in a concrete constructed dug-out in the sand, built by the French - an early and perhaps imperfect example of the afterwards famous pill box of the Germans. I say imperfect, because it had only an interior height of a little over three feet, so we could scarcely sit up, and also it was built in the loose and moving sands of the dunes, which conveyed a

feeling of rolling when shells burst in the vicinity.

One was glad to hurry from the sentry post, a distance of some 100 yards, to this haven of security after the vigil. And the entrance was less than three feet by one and a half, and irresistibly the idea of rats and their holes was brought to one's mind. I was struck by the similarity of our lives to those of rats - who by the way shared our lot. During the day we ran to our underground dug-outs like rats to their holes while if we did stir abroad during the day we went as if we expected a clout overhead from a human hand.

At night they were able to collect their rations and repair any damage done. The birds seemed unmoved by what was going on and the sound of larks in the morning made a strange contrast.

Sources

Petre

continued in section 288