

Section 283

Interlude IV

The 1st/4th Battalion

Last Days in France

After the horrors of Passchendale the 1st/4th left Flanders for the last time on 15th October. They left the road camp near St Jan Ter Biezen at 0245 on the 15th, marching to Hopoutre where they were the last battalion of 48th Division to board the train. They departed at 05:55 travelling via St Pol to Ligny St Flochel where they detrained and marched via Aubigny with A and HQ Companies going to Cambliquel and the remainder to Camblain L'Abbe. It was 20:45 before the last Company fell into their billets after an exhausting day. The relief at being in peaceful surroundings was so great that their diarist reported: *"It was a great change and relief to be in a country where there were no signs of war - the best change possible after the conditions in Flanders."*

They were now part of V Corps in Fifth Army and for a few days they were able to rest and train and meet their new superior commanders. Their former Corps Commander, General Sir Ivor Maxse of XVIII Corps wrote to the 48th Divisional Commander and his letter was read out to the troops on the 24th:-

Dear Fanshawe,

I tried hard to make another opportunity to come and say goodbye to you, and your Brigade Commanders before you all left this Corps. But as you know, plans were in full swing for the immediate operations, and time after time I had my days programme upset, and was compelled to think of the future, instead of thanking you for your past operations.

I shall however be grateful, if you will accept my thanks for all you and your Division did, and if you would convey to Sladen, Done and Watt how grateful I am to them, to their Battalion Commanders and to their Brigades for the strenuous work they all put in in Flanders.

No one but the weather can be blamed for our failure to reach our final objectives on the last day - 9th inst. Our next attempt was also frustrated by an even worse deluge of rain.

Believe me

Yours sincerely

Ivor Maxse

On the 18th they moved on to Villers au Bois being played out of town by the band of the 27th Canadians who were taking over the brigade's billets. At Villers they received a new draft of men who were transferred from the Motor Transport Section of the Army Service Corps. They were none too pleased to have been

transferred to the infantry but under the command of Major Aldworth they soon settled down.

Vimy Ridge

A little while before the Canadians had captured Vimy Ridge and had held it in strength. It was now the turn of 48th Division and on the 2nd November the 1st/4th Battalion relieved the 4th Glosters in the left Sector supporting the Oxfords who had moved up to the front line. They moved up by train from La Pendu and completed the relief by 00:30 on the 3rd. They took over dugouts made by the Germans in the brickfields and old concrete gun emplacements although some men had to be content with shelters in the trenches. Two companies were kept on standby at all times in case they were needed by the Oxfords and the rest were variously employed in moving up stores for the Oxfords and assisting the Royal Engineers in tunnelling and sorting out the stores left by the Germans.

They moved up to the front line to relieve the Oxfords on the 6th with all four companies in line. Each company had two platoons in the front line, one in support and one in reserve, a somewhat unusual deployment. The trenches held by C and D Companies on the left were very poor. They had been subjected to intense bombardment and any rain caused the sides to collapse.

31st Division organised a raid on the 8th and the Berks gave them cover by letting off smoke grenades and operating dummies to attract the Germans attention. In this they were successful and German shells rained down upon them without apparently causing any casualties. However 31st Division sent a wire thanking them for their assistance.

They withdrew from the front line for the last time on the 10th moving to Fraser Camp at Mont St Eloi. Here they received the news of the death of their honorary colonel, Prince Christian and sent a message of condolence to his widow Princess Helena.

From Mont St Eloy they moved back to Savy on the 14th for more training in anticipation to their participation in the Battle of Cambrai. But it was not to be - they were bound for Italy.

Journey to Italy

On the 22nd November Col Clarke addressed the

Battalion about their impending move to Italy. They were to travel in two trains each travelling by a different route to Italy. On the whole the arrangements for the journeys were quite good, but local congestion and other problems threw the plans into disarray at times and the promised four hour rest stops often turned into only half an hour.

En route they were greeted by local Red Cross ladies, serving, in France for the most part, only coffee. The men were dying for their brew which materialised only when they were able to get supplies of hot water. Rations for ten days were taken aboard and doled out at regular intervals. For the most part they were living off "bully and biscuit" so even dark brown and sour Italian bread made a welcome change when it could be purchased at wayside stations.

For the most part the weather was fine during the day, with occasional mists, but the nights were cold and frosty.

The First Train

The first train took 20 officers and 486 other ranks made up of the Band, B and C Companies and part of HQ Company together with the transport section and 18 attached ASC men. It was in charge of Colonel Clarke. They left Savy at 15:50 and travelled via Arras and Longeau where they had a half hour stop to water the horses and make a brew, They set out again at 22:00 via Creil, Gtetz, Verneuil, Longueville, Flambon and Nogent where another halt was called. Here some French ladies arrived with hot coffee for the men whilst the horses were tended to. They continued via Mesgrigny to Troyes where more coffee awaited. Thence via Bovilly Roncenay, Ervy, St Florentin to D'Arcy where another halt was called from 18:15 to 19:20. Here they were issued with their rations for the next day. They carried on via Dijon arriving at Ville Franche at 05:15 on the 24th. for more coffee. At 06:50 they set out again via Lyonvaise, Voultebur and the Rhone Valley to Rhone for a two hour stop. They crawled on to Le Tiel where they were held up for three hours. The scenery they were passing through was quite breathtaking for the men who were by now bored and tired but able to enjoy the dramatic change from what they had become accustomed to in Flanders.

On the 25th at 02:00 they arrived in Avignon, twelve hours behind schedule. The next stop was at Miramas for more coffee and then a halt at Marseilles from 09:15 to 11:15 and Toulon from 16:45 to 17:15 where the French Red Cross served tea and handed out flowers. After Marseilles they found the route lined with French civilians cheering their progress. Outside Toulon some trucks had been derailed after an accident which delayed them even more. They got to Cannes at 02:00 for more coffee and then via Nice, Monte Carlo and Mentone to cross into Italy at 08:10, arriving at Ventimille at 10:00 Italian time on the 26th.

They found Italy quite different from France. For a start they got tea instead of the usual coffee and at stops they were expected to show the flag and march around behind the band. The journey continued to Savona but after that the train was split into two because of the gradients as far as St Guiseppe. They pulled in to Pavia at 07:00 on the 27th with a further stop at Godogono and arrived at Cremona at 13:00. Here local dignitaries took the salute as they marched back to the station after a tumultuous reception from the locals. They left Cremona at 05:00 next day getting to Peive St Giacomo at 08:00 where they had breakfast and lunch and put on an informal band concert, much appreciated by the gathering crowd. They got away at 16:30 arriving at Piaveno at 20:30. Travelling overnight they reached Mantova at 01:00 where there was a stop for coffee but most men were asleep. On again at 03:00 to arrive in Cerea for 07:30 and finally Saletto at 10:30 on the 29th.

Here they detrained and marched for an hour on the road to Minetta but stopped at Scia di Rora from 12:30 to 16:30 awaiting instructions. The problem had been the very congested railway line and their late arrival. This had necessitated detraining early to try to clear the congestion. Eventually they were ordered to Noventa which they reached at 19:50 to find very good billets. C Company were accommodated in the theatre, B in a large private house and HQ in a monastery which they shared with a contingent of the Italian veterinary Corps along with their mules and horses which looked a bit sad as if they had just returned from the retreat.

Unfortunately the chateau where B Company were had all marble floors which were most uncomfortable and very cold to sleep on. They were glad of the extra blankets that had been issued to them at Saletto along with two days rations.

Next day, the 30th, they moved on to Albetonne but marching on the frosty roads was quite hazardous, made even more difficult by the extra blanket which the men had to carry. The accommodation here was luxurious - in the Chateau Negri di Salvi which had been owned by an Italian Colonel who had been killed in the August fighting. The war diary made the laconic comment *'It was the finest chateau any of us had been in since we landed in France. Too comfortable for us to stay long'*. Next day Brigade HQ arrived and promptly took over the chateau.

The Saturday, 1st December, was spent in general clearing up with some bayonet practice and PE thrown in. There was a church service next day at 11:00 followed by a short march, with musketry training etc on the Monday. The next morning Brigade moved off at 09:15 to Zavatiero where the troops from the second train rejoined them.

The Second Train

The second train under the command of Major Aldworth

travelled much faster. They had 18 officers and 462 other ranks and left Savy at 21:05 on the 22nd November. Before they set out they were issued with hot tea and soup. They passed Amiens at 01:30 and had a stop at St Pontin for more tea. Thence via Nogent sur Seine for another 40 minute coffee stop and on to Troyes which was reached at 16:15. There was another stop at Gray at 05:30 on the 24th and then another at Lons le Saunier where the men had an opportunity to wash and shave while they drank their tea. At the next stop Bourg en Bresse, which was reached at 14:45, they had to sweep out their carriages and trucks and shake out their blankets. On via Chambery to St Jean de Maurienne for another coffee stop at 21:30.

They had crossed the frontier at Mont Ceris by mid night on the 24th and when dawn broke the men awakened to the sight of snow capped mountains. They passed several batteries of French artillery en routewho greeted them cordially. Busseleno was reached at 09:00 Here the train halted a while for hot tea and rations to be served while the men admired the magnificent scenery and listened to the church bells reverberating across the town - it was Sunday.

At noon they reached Turin to a very warm welcome. Italian ladies swarmed onto the station with gifts of chocolate, cigarettes and small Italian flags. As with the first train crowds lined the embankments and cheered the train as it passed. There was a rest stop at Montarro from 17:00 to 20:00. The next morning they had another stop for half an hour at Cordono and another at 10:00 for the men to wash and shave, have tea and get in some light physical exercise. They moved off again at noon getting to Bozzolo at 15:50. This time the men were encouraged to walk around the town and meet the locals for an hour where they received a warm welcome.. They left Bozzolo at 19:40. Their journey took them via Milan, Pavia, Mantua to Nagaro where they unloaded very quickly and went into comfortable billets by 21:00 on the 27th.

Next morning they hired civilian transport, presumably to carry the men's baggage, and set off at 13:00. The roads were very good and they made good progress. They got to Bovolona at 19:15 where a hot meal was served and they moved into their billets: Headquarters and stores in the Picture Palace, A Company in the school adjoining the church, D Company in a large farm near the station and Transport at the back of an hotel.

They left Bovolona at 11:00 on the 29th on their way to Issolo Rizzo which was reached at 12:30. Here again the billets were good and they had time for a foot inspection in the afternoon. Next morning at 10:00 they set out for Bonavigo which was reached at 12:30. The accommodation here was quite scarce so HQ set up in the loft of a local doctor's barn, A in an empty house and D were scattered in barns of several farmhouses.

On the 1st December they moved on to Pressano where contact was made with the other half of the Battalion.

Billets here were described as 'clean and commodius, although not too warm' The next day it was on to Cagagno via Cologne where their billets were very scattered. They moved out of Cagnagno at 10:00 on the 3rd arriving at Rampazano at 13:20 to be welcomed into town by the band which had travelled on the first train. The next morning they moved off to rejoin the Brigade and the other half of the Battalion at Zavatiero.

Sources

Interview with Col Whitehead in Reading Mercury 5/4/19

War Diaries

Cruttwell - History of the 1st/4th

continued in section 303