

Section 288

Interlude IV

The 8th Battalion July to October 1917

The 8th had had a comparatively easy war since the Somme. It had moved to the Dunkirk area and gone into Support on the 29th June (Continued from section 268)

In Support

1st to 3rd July 1917

The 8th Battalion had moved to support trenches in Nieupoort les Bains on the 29th June, supporting the 10th Gloucesters carrying rations and ammunition and with working parties

3rd July 1917

2nd Lt Frewin Moor was about to join the 8th Battalion. He was staying with his family at Westgate in Kent when he got his orders. He began a diary covering his first few months in France. He typed and edited the manuscript later and donated it to the Regiment in 1980.

Bathed at 3pm with sister, Veronica, Dorothy Wicks, Miss Walker. Had just time to dress comfortably and have a cup of cocoa before the taxi arrived - and not too much time. Altogether an ideal send off. Took 4.05 train from Margate in which I met our dentist. Changed at Minster and Ashford and got to Folkestone at 6.07 pm. Met 2/Lts Carr and de Vitre and others on the boat, also 2/Lt Stocken of Bradfield days. Felt very happy. Went to rest camp at Boulogne getting there at midnight. I had a tent with 2/Lt Wells and two subalterns of the Devons.

Raid

3rd/4th July 1917

On the night of the 3rd-4th July, the 8th was again in the front line, it carried out a considerable raid on the German trenches.

At 23:00. on the 3rd July, Lieutenant Bland and two men crept forward from the battalion's trench with the first ten feet length of a Bangalore torpedo tube which was passed out to them. From this point it had to be moved to another place, owing to the difficulty of getting it forward. The second and third lengths (ten feet each) followed immediately.

It was 00:05 on the 4th when Lieutenant Bland and Corporal Davis (R.E.) reached the German wire, where they had great difficulty in pushing the tubes through and connecting them up. Bland then sent the corporal back to report to Captain Footman, who was commanding the raiding party, that all was ready. The latter sent up the signal rocket, but a minute and a half elapsed before the artillery commenced firing.

Lieutenant Gillespie (R.E.) then fired the torpedo, at 01.20, and returned to the trench. Waiting a few minutes for the smoke to clear, the raiders rushed out; but, just as they reached the wire, British shells exploded close to them, and they retired and lay down ten yards back, waiting for the barrage to lift. Then they advanced again and were fired on by a small party of the enemy, to whom they replied with a dozen bombs. The barrage was still in the same place, and three of the leading officers and men were knocked down by the shock of exploding percussion shells.

The party being disorganized by this, Lieutenant Bland gave the order to withdraw, and by 01:40 all were back in the trenches with only one casualty, an officer (2nd-Lieut. Johnson) slightly wounded. The Battalion Diary emphasizes the fact that every one was convinced that British shells were bursting in the German wire.

The success of the enterprise depended entirely on surprise, which was effected on this occasion but it would be useless to expect a renewed attack would be unexpected, so none was made.

St Idesbalde

4th to 16th July 1917

From the 4th to the 16th July the battalion was training at St. Idesbalde, and on the 17th took over part of the coast defences.

4th July 1917

On their last day on the front line they were treated to what most believed was the most ferocious thunder storm they had ever experienced, it outdid even the combined might of the British and the German guns.

Bray:-

Night of 4th /5th relieved by Northants. I went down with guides to meet them and walked back with them

This was the night of our raid and the CO, Footman, Bland and Johnson and the doc went up to front line HQs.

We were relieved by 11.30 but had heard nothing of the show up to then altho' it had been fixed for 11.5 pm.

Sarchel and I rode down to the place we were moving out to St Idisbalde farther back but on coast. We wondered what had happened to the raiders.

Moor

It rained hard in the night - it would - so we have started the mud campaign early. Spent morning in the Salvation Army hut. Left camp at 3 pm for the station. The train was about an hour late as it came from Calais and Etaples - the latter has grown enormously since last year. The first thing we did was to beat the cushions out of the window as the carriages were filthy. Got to Abbeville about 9 pm, after which we went to sleep.

5th July 1917

Bray:-

About ¾ way back - it was a distance of 9 miles - we heard our barrage going at 1.20 am.

Got into camp about 2 am and I must say I felt damnably tired and went to bed about 2-30.

Woke up at 4 am when the doc came in. Heard that raid hadn't been a success apparantly owing to our artillery firing on gap made by bangalore torpedo, but luckily we had no casualties.

HQs in a hotel. Quite a decent place. Men in tents & some of officers.

Quite a decent little village and a lot of civilians, Belgies

Training and sea bathing.

Moor

Stayed nearly two hours at Dieppe. Got to Rouen 6.45 am, had a bath at a French place after which we breakfasted at the Officers Club. Reported at the IBD about 11 am. Went down to Rouen again with Wells and met 2/Lts Carr and de Vitre and we all had dinner at the Hotel Poste.

6th July 1917

Moor

Gas course 9 - 9:45 then 'ne poo' for the rest of the day. Went with Wells to a very good concert for officers and nurses.

7th July 1917

Moor

Gas course 8 am till 4 pm with one hour for bully beef and biscuits and sweetened tea. Half a dozen Yankee Medical Officers were there and did squad drill with about 50 of us under a British Sergeant Major. Rather interesting from an international point of view (the Americans had only just come into the war)

8th July 1917

Moor

I censored letters all morning. Dined with Wells, Carr and de Vitre at Hotel de la Poste in evening.

9th July 1917

Moor

Went to Bull Ring and did Machine Gun from 8 am to 4 pm

10th July 1917

On 10th July, just after the Royal Berks had left, the Germans launched an offensive on the bridgehead, destroying the three floating bridges and trapping the two battalions on the east side of the river. The 2nd KRRC and the 2nd Northants were virtually obliterated and fewer than 100 men in all made it back to safety. The replacement by 66th Division and the withdrawal of the remainder of 1st Division to Le Clipon Camp near Dunkirk was thus seen by the Germans as a natural consequence of their offensive and did not grasp the true significance.

The Royal Berks went first to the support line where they were allowed to relax a bit and shave despite the falling shells. Then to the reserve lines at Coxyde where even bathing was once more permitted.

Bray:-

Have had a good slack time here. Parades only in morning. However haven't felt at all fit since coming out of the line and have been taking all the rest possible.

Evidently line became a good deal hotter after we left and they put quite a lot of stuff into OOST DUNKIRK & COXYDE BAINS where Division are.

From our window (I sleep in room at the top of house with MO) we can see shells bursting in back areas.

There has been the devil of a straffe on all day and all roads have been heavily shelled. No 1 FA lost quite a no of men and the Aust ... coy about 30 and Munsters 50 and all ... sharing out of back here and division also.

Night ops in dunes. Bed 1 am

Moor

Whole holiday except for lectures by CO on Courts Martial. Went for a walk alone down to the Seine in evening. Very pretty (it was then that I saw about fifty telegraph poles 8 feet high in a field. As I got nearer the poles seemed to be moving and when I got quite close I saw that a negro was fastened to each pole with his hands around the pole behind his back so that he could not get away. I was warned for the front tomorrow.

July 11th 1917

Bray:-

Bad news today. Bosch attacked 1st & 32nd Divisions and cut bridges yesterday morning. shelled heavily all day & attacked at 8.30 pm NORTHANTS overwhelmed and KRR on left absolutely surrounded & cut off by canal. No official report yet but seems pretty clear the two battalions have been scuppered except for 4 officers & 30 men of KRR who escaped and swam canal.

Heavy wind blowing sandstorm into our mens faces must have helped them a lot. no further details. Course Cuts merely says there was heavy shelling on both divisional fronts making communication difficult.

Moor

Packed up in morning and marched down to the station at 1.45 pm. Had a very heavy pack as I had foolishly left a lot of stuff out of my valise (which was carried on the transport). Our train was due to leave at 2.45 pm and left about 8. There were four of us in a 1st class carriage. There was a very talkative subaltern who told us that the 1st Division is going to do a landing stunt with various other divisions near Ostend. It would be rather a stunt to be in. He also told us there were about 2000 deserters in the vicinity of Etaples. We got as far as Abbeville by midnight.

July 12th 1917

Bray:-

Further details came thru merely confirming show. Alas short account in papers. Few men of KRRs got away in night, about 100 men in all and several officers managed to get out of the affair.

Bosch holding upstream end of Yser canal making Edusette? one of their lines of defence. 32 division have got back most if not all ground they lost.

Lost our billet today. Division got the wind up when they got shelled the other day and so shifted back here, throwing both Black Watch and ourselves out of our hotels. Strucklands is only Hotel in des Baines. The DAC & staff took over our place. We got a mess in the town majors office and slept in a tent on the sands with Wallace.

Still feeling rather rotten as I have been ever since we came out of trenches.

Moor

Got to Calais about 11.30 am. I had rather a bad headache which got very bad in afternoon. Changed trains as we are going on to Dunkirk, but as the train was not booked to start till midnight I went down to the town for a shave, shampoo, tea and dinner. Met a Colonel of the Seaforth Terriers in the 66th Division who was going on leave. He says the Bosch have done a stunt near Nieuport, where we were preparing to make a push, and have driven us back to the Yser canal. And as that blew

up the bridges our men could not get back. He said that 1st Division has been badly cut up. I don't put much faith in these rumours although the Hun attack was in the papers this morning.

13th July 1917

Moor

We left Calais about 4 am and got to within half a mile of Dunkirk by about 8 am. There we stayed till 2 pm and then the train went on and we got about half a mile the other side of the station. After a long time we started for the Corps Rest Camp and when we got there (about 4 pm) we had to wait three quarters of an hour before the Adjutant would see us. Then he told us to go back to the station as we were going to Aden Kirk that night. I was hoping we should stay at the Rest Camp as I was dead tired. So we went back to the station and had some tea about 6 pm - our first proper meal that day. The train was supposed to start at 7.32 pm and did start about 11 pm. We were all asleep but I woke up at Aden Kirk fortunately. We met the Divisional Rest Camp Officer and he took us to the Rest Camp where we arrived about 1.30 am.

14th July 1917

At this point 2nd Lt Frewin Moor joined the 8th from England. He joined in the bathing and got badly stung by jellyfish on the afternoon of the 14th July. Also to arrive was the new commanding officer.

Moor

Got up about 9.15 am and joined 8th Battalion Royal Berks at St Idersbald about 12.45 pm. Bathed in the sea in afternoon and got badly stung by jelly fish.

Bray:-

This evening on coming over to mess for dinner saw the padre talking to an RE officer - a Lt Col. Went into mess and servant told me that he was our new CO Carlton was away on leave, but I didn't think we were getting a new man. However it turned out to be quite correct, Carlton going back to 6th Welch and Lt Col DEWIN DSO taking command. Quite young 32 or thereabouts and seems to be OK

Went up to the ASC mess after dinner with Laralut? They had a good selection of drinks. All the ASC officers under a certain age are being replaced by older men shortly and they have to join the infantry.

15th July 1917

Moor

(Sunday) - nothing to do.

Coastal Defence

16th July 1917

The 8th were instructed to take over the role of coastal defence. However they encountered some difficulty in finding out what they had to defend and who they should take over from.

Bray:-

As we were moving to BRAY DUNES tomorrow they sent the billeting party somewhere ahead and at 6 pm I suddenly got instruction to push off to the DUNES and thence take over the coast defences for some battalion of 146th Brigade - name unknown - find the billeting party who would arrive at the Town Majors office sometime and arrange for billeting battn next day by 8.30 am

Thought I should get a car going via La PANNE but found I couldn't go through without a pass so had to walk to ADINKERKE almost when I struck a car which took me past the turning up to BRAY DUNES - distance about 7 miles.

Had to walk to the PLAGÉ about ¾ mile away to our area commandant. He of course wasn't in, but I was told to go to 146th Bde HQs who were somewhere in the town. Couldn't find their HQs and finally went to 198th Bde HQs. They told me that the East Lancs in a neighbouring camp were responsible for the defences. Went to this battalion and saw their 2nd in command, who told me he had been i/c defences but had handed them over two days ago to the West Yorks of 146 Bde the other end of the town. I began to wish I had brought a bike as I was getting very tired of tramping around but the major gave me some cold ham and a mug of beer on hearing shelling had my dinner.

Went to West Yorks HQs & found ... right at last. They had a file full of bumps about the defences which looked most alarming but apparently none of them had been up to see them and no one knew where the 4 posts were.

Had a drink and went up town to PLAGÉ again & eventually found Gordon & his billeting party and also area commandant. I got a billet no & arranged to meet Gordon in morning at 6, bored as it was & so late and I couldn't make anyone hear in my billet & I eventually had to go to the hotel where he was billeted. Found he hadn't got a room but had met an officer he knew & was sleeping on the floor of his room & I did the same and spent a most uncomfortable night as I had a damnable headache & got little sleep.

Moor

Practised attack on dunes in morning. Three shells came over in evening - Firts I have heard this time

17th July 1917

Moor

Got up at 3 am and moved off to Bray les Dunes (further away from the front) starting at 5 am. We got there about 9 am. Bathed in canal in evening.

18th July 1917

On the 18th The 8th Battalion marched to St. Pol, and on to Le Clipon Camp six miles south west of Dunkirk. where the 1st Division was concentrated. They were to take part in a most secret operation

Bray:-

Marched on to (censored) or rather Hushland.

Hushland has been talked about for some weeks - in fact a couple of months back canteen intelligence supplied us with a synopsis of the land of mystery. And in passing I may remark that our Padre always knows what is going to happen weeks in advance of anyone else and he's hardly ever wrong. Nor is this exceptional, as most of the padres know a great deal more than anyone else. Our own padre is exceptionally clever in this direction but all the padres know a great deal too much, and as a class they are always meddling in regimental affairs which don't concern them in the least and neglecting their proper work.

This division may be particularly unlucky but I don't think so.

Their first halt was at Bray-Dunes where they sheltered in a barn for the night. Frank Gray describes:

On the morrow our journey in wet muggy heat was to Dunkirk, and south, beyond to an encampment ground of tents. Again the march was not dull. The passing through Dunkirk itself saved the day from monotony, for as we crossed the bridge and defences of the town we seemed to be linked with the soldiers of past wars. Then too we saw the damage sustained from oft-repeated air raids.

Lt Moor recorded in his diary for 18th July

Started our march away from the front about 11 am. It was raining so we wore our trench coats and carried our tunics in our packs; I do hate wearing a pack. We went through Dunkirk and got to St Pol about 3 pm. The men were packed 20 in a tent - we had a billet with three sleeping on the floor.

The Proposed Landing on the Belgian Coast

The 8th Battalion took no direct part in the Third Battle of Ypres. During the main Flanders offensive, from the 31st July to the 12th November 1917, the Royal Berks were either in training on the French coast several miles away from the main action or they were in support positions behind the front line. When they did go into action, on the 16th November, operations on the Ypres salient had been reduced to minor line strengthening before the winter.

When the lines of the Western Front had settled down at the end of 1914 the Germans finished up in control of the coast from Nieuwpoort northwards. This gave them control of the ports of Ostende and Zeebrugge and hence the inland port of Bruges. These ports were particularly useful to the Germans as bases for their submarines and destroyers which were harrying the cross channel traffic from British to French ports. Rear Admiral Sir Reginald Hugh Bacon, the Commanding Officer of the Dover Patrol, had long been of the view that an amphibious landing in the Ostende area could bring both naval and military advantages and he was working on a plan when the Germans added a battery of 12 inch guns at Knocke which could control the jetties at Ostende and made landing there impossible.

Haig too was not unaware of the possibilities. Following the failure of the French attack at Champagne in the Spring of 1917 Haig was under immense pressure to keep the Germans fully occupied to enable the French to regain their strength. Part of the plan for Third Ypres was to clear the ridge and enable a massive sweep of British forces along the coast. A leapfrog operation behind the German lines from the sea was an attractive addition to the grand plan. The French and Belgian troops who had been holding the line at the coast were withdrawn in early June and replaced by the British 1st and 32nd Divisions as part of XV Corps. The line was very precarious with the river Yser only some 600 yards or so behind the allied defences. This was a very deep and swift flowing river which was crossable only by three floating bridges.

1st Division had been placed in the coastal sector to gain some experience of the terrain and it was planned that they should be withdrawn after the 16th July for special training for the amphibious attack. heavy shell into this hotel would have reduced our battalion to the point of ineffectiveness.

At Le Clipon special training was to be carried out in preparation for the proposed amphibious landing on the

Belgian coast some five miles south of Ostend. One of the main aims was to neutralise the German submarine bases on the Belgian coast by linking the coastal landing with a break-out from the Ypres salient. In the area selected for the landings the coast was protected by a formidable concrete wall, a model of which was used in Le Clipon Camp by the assaulting infantry. This was the famous "Obstacle Course" referred to in the Battalion diary.

The camp had been specially prepared and a large area had been fenced off, with a light railway laid to facilitate the handling of stores. No one was told about the plan until the Division was settled in and the gates locked. Elaborate precautions were taken to ensure that information could not leak out. The troops were reported to be in quarantine for an infectious disease and they were not allowed to leave the camp or speak to anyone outside it. All correspondence was censored, rations and other deliveries had to be left at the entrance to the camp. From there it was taken to a second internal gate by troops who were not in the know.

At least that was the theory. Actually a young French couple were supplied with a pass and allowed in to sell newspapers, fishermen were allowed to roam the beach and the men were allowed to meet itinerant hawkers to buy supplies. The best security was that the men themselves did not actually know what was going on and so could not have betrayed the secrets.

The main training area was within an even more secure area. It was screened off from both land view and from the air and there was great speculation as to what it was all about. It was rumoured that some men of the Black Watch had tried to penetrate the area, had been arrested and were being kept prisoner in the secure area so that they could not escape with the secret. Eventually all the men had to be let to use the facilities and despite all the difficulties the secret was in fact fairly well kept.

Arrival at Le Clipon

19th July 1917

The 8th Battalion arrived at Le Clipon Camp around 14:00 on the 19th and settled in amidst very tight security. They were with the whole of 1st Division under canvas. The War Diary has large gaps over the next few weeks. However we have a couple of diarists who recorded the outlines of their activities.

Frewin Moore:-

(19th) Started marching west again at about 11 o'clock. It was quite fine and not too hot. We got to Le Clipon just before 2pm. There was a box up over the tents as usual; eleven tents per company, which worked out at 14 men per tent. The whole First Division is encamped here.

The third day .. we arrived at Le Clipon. A stretch of land skirting the coast, the sand and the sand-dunes had been marked off and reserved for our battalion. And it appeared that we were to be wired in ... and sentries were placed around all the boundaries, even the coast line.

Lt Moor speculated on the purpose of the camp in his diary

Rumour said that we were to be absolutely cut off from the outside world. Rations were to be sent by train. But the regulations have been modified for the present at any rate. However the transport is not allowed to come in. Some people say it is a landing stunt which we are going to practise, but it may be some new weapon with which are going to be armed. There is a great shortage of water here and we are only [getting] one pint per day for washing and drinking. But we are fairly close to the sea, so can bathe there - jellyfishes permitting -

Here Lt Col RE Dewing DSO assumed command, Lt Col CAS Carleton DSO having been, as the Battalion diary mysteriously reports, re-posted "*in the interests of the Battalion*" to the 1/6 Welsh Regiment. Dewing addressed the men and immediately won their confidence. Frank Gray especially was most impressed.

In age he was ten years my junior and he was very fine in physique. He addressed us when he arrived and from that moment he had won our affection. His whole attitude was that of calling for and not demanding comradeship. He won what he asked and in return he made it his constant duty to give all the men, not what they were barely entitled to, but what he could manage to give them, whether more or less.

Many times did I see him walking around our camp when food was being dished out, no cap on, a pipe in his mouth, coat unbuttoned and hands in his pocket, doing everything an officer should not do. And thus he would join a group waiting for dinner. Certainly he did not lose respect. At the first sign of him every man would spring to attention and he would smile at us and say "Whats the dinner like boys?" an on occasions I have heard him say "Rotton!, I wish we could get you something better."

Two things he made clear from the outset (1) a hatred of petty offences being brought to his notice and (2) a determination never to permit a man in the regiment suffer No 1 Field Punishment. Curiously enough, both officers and men were fond of him and in my judgement the fighting morale of the battalion vastly improved under him.

The Secret

20th - 21st July 1917

The officers were let into the secret on the 20th July and the men briefed on the 21st. Lt Moor wrote in his diary:

20th - Slack day. Only kit and rifle inspection in morning. There is to be an officers' conference at 9 pm at which it is said the great secret of why we are interned here is going to be revealed. (later) I was right about the landing which is going to take place on Z-day - whenever that is. There is great excitement about it and everybody is frightfully keen. I'm afraid though, it won't be much of a surprise to the Bosch. But the general opinion seems to be that if we do succeed in landing without heavy casualties, we should do well.

21st - The men were told about the stunt today, which the C O says is going to be the greatest fun on God's earth. I hope that is looking at it from our point of view and not from the Bosch's. Leave is still open, so I am afraid it will get about a bit. We did individual training on the shore all morning. I did not dare to bathe on account of the jelly-fishes. As there was so little water I had my bath filled with sea water, which my servant brought every day in a tent bag. One could not use soap and [when] I dipped my hands in it the water all lit up. I suppose from minute animalcules.

Bray:-

Of Hushland I can't say much except that we are continuously training and getting very fit.

The slogan of the division is at present "Every man his own wildcat" and obstacle courses and physical drill ever are certainly making the men far more active than when we came. Special training will be carried out later.

In the meantime we have had quite a good time, parades usually only in the morning and usually a bathe in the afternoon. Weather has been ...ashing hot up to a couple of days ago (I am writing this on the 30th) but now it seems to have set in for a wet spell, sea mists and heavy showers at

At present it is a case of Hushland with the hush off but this won't be for very long.

We are all among the dunes and when it is hot there is a rotten glare and my eyes troubled me for a week, my right eye being almost useless every morning when I got out on the dunes & not feeling really fit.

The Plan - Landing

For the plan to succeed there had to be complete surprise. The British forces would have to land on an almost straight coastline with no headlands across shifting sandbanks and strong tides. It was essential therefore that the enemy should know neither the time nor the actual place of landing. The Germans were understandably nervous about the possibility and had stationed two Divisions plus a fearsome array of artillery to guard the coast, if at all possible they needed to be distracted elsewhere.

To overcome the shallow draught it was proposed to use monitors to push large pontoons towards shore. These were 600 feet long and 30 feet wide with a draught of 1' 6" at the front and 4' 6" at the stern. They were designed to carry the equipment with a central gangway for the troops to stand on. Each pontoon required two monitors, one on each of its stern quarters, and three pontoons with six monitors could each carry a brigade which would be put ashore at night and build a sufficient defence before the enemy could gather enough forces to counter-attack.

So far as place went, the further east they went the more difficult it would be to provide covering support and the greater the danger of isolation. In order to improve the cover it would first be necessary to put the German battery at Raversyde out of action. It was therefore decided that one landing would take place at Middlekerke and two more between there and Westende. The Middlekerke pontoon would also have to support a flying column whose job it was to deal swiftly with the battery

Training Begins

22nd-24th July 1917

The selected landing sites all had a concrete sea wall at the top of the beach. The parapet of this wall was generally about 30 feet above the level of the sand and was faced with a 45 degree ramp. This obstacle had to be overcome by both troops, tanks, artillery and all the other equipment that would be needed to dig in. Full scale models were built at Le Clipon Camp and then they practised getting tanks to scale them. With a little ingenuity to overcome a problem with a protruding coping it was found that the tanks could climb the walls consistently but at first the men found it very difficult, especially when carrying heavy loads. However every man had to practice daily and before long the majority developed their own techniques and could master the wall quite happily. It was decided therefore that those who were able should go first and lay ropes to assist their less agile companions.. So far as the guns were concerned one of the three tanks for each pontoon was equipped with a winch and a wooden ramp and this would be employed in hauling up the guns while the other two did the fighting. The winch tanks were known as the 'females'

Frank Gray was actively involved:

We were taken in companies to ... an imitation sea wall made of concrete. The surface was smooth, with a sufficient gradient to make it difficult to climb in army clothes even without packs or impedimenta, and the difficulty was increased by a four-foot perpendicular coping of the wall. Much of our training turned upon this piece of staging .. for first we learnt to climb unencumbered, then with battle order dress and afterwards with light guns and material to carry into battle.

Horses were banned from participating so equipment which was usually horse drawn would have to be manually hauled so a number of handcarts were added to the inventory to carry grenades and other supplies. It had originally been planned to use lorries but when practicing embarkation these had so many problems in the sand that it was finally decided to miss them out. Each Brigade would be supported by an artillery battery with four 18 pounders, two 4.5 in howitzers and six ammunition waggons, a Field company and a Pioneer Company, a Machine Gun Battery a battalion of cycle troops and a small medical unit with two motor ambulances.

Lt Moor described some of the training in his diary:

The 22nd was a Sunday and the men were able to relax a little after Church parade

23rd July - individual training in morning: musketry, physical jerks, bayonet gighting and drill. Quite interesting on the whole. Boxing tournament in company in afternoon.

24th - More physical jerks: I am getting quite stiff, which shows how much I needed it. Scheme at 11 o'clock D Coy forming a defensive flank to C Coy, who had landed (imaginarily) on the beach and were advancing as far as the end of the dunes - 400 yards. Had a very pleasant bathe in evening with [2Lts] Goodship and Langston. No jelly-fish. Four men were drowned - 2 Glosters and 2 Sappers. I don't know how. Went over the brigade obstacle course after dinner. The course is a very hard one and consists first of a rope 15 feet high to climb; then swing along a bar 10 feet and down another rope. Second walk a narrow plank; Third, get over a wooden wall 8 feet high; Fourth, run up a wooden slope 40 feet long 30 degrees elevation; Fifth, get over a wall 7 feet high; Sixth and last, get over a wall 11 feet high. The last can only be done by one man helping another from below; the last man would not be able to get up, as it is not possible when lying on the top to get a wrist to wrist grip - only a finger grip, which is not strong enough to pull up 5 feet on.

As well as practicing scaling the walls a great deal of attention was paid to disembarkation as this had to be swift and the monitors able to retire before the smoke screen was dissipated and they came under fire. The two leading battalions would travel in the pntoon and the third would travel in the monitors. Full scale models of the decks of the pontoons and the monitors were marked out and the men practiced incessantly with competitions between the three brigades. Eventually they were able to effect the complete disembarkation in under ten minutes.

Frank Gray:-

In connection with our training, we had marked out on the grass near by our encampment the shape and size of a monitor and it was part of our training for a brigade of men and light guns, with motor cycles, ambulances, ammunnition carriers and even tanks to take up our allotted position, and at a given signal to rush off in order up a hill as up a sea wall and fall into battle array.

The selection of stores was also another critical decision and it soon became obvious that the assulting troops could not carry all the stores they would need so the lower priority stores such as reserve food, water and ammunnition would be stacked on the pontoons and dumped on the beach as soon as the men had disembarked.

The Plan - Digging In

Once the landing had been effected and the walls scaled the men would have to move very swiftly with no confusion to take up their positions. Detailed and accurate intelligence was necessary. Appeals were put out for postcards and photographs taken before the war and the RAF were called in to do an aerial reconnaissance. The sorties were carried out by 34 Squadron and the first was very successful, taking the enemy completely by surprise. The second sortie ran into German gunfire and the plane was brought down about 200 yards from the river Yser. The pilot and observer stripped off their clothes and swam the river to safety pursued by the Germans. They were greeted with great suspicion by the British troops on the far bank. As a result of the intelligence a detailed model of the battle are was built showing every house, even down to details of colour. This model was kept in a strictly guarded shed and at first only senior commanders were allowed to view it. However it was agreed that before embarkation every man would be shown it and get a detailed briefing on his tasks.

The potential battlefield was like none other that the army had fought over, although it was similar to the terrain around the camp. So completely new 'open-warfare' tactics had to be devised and the men reacted enthusiastically and soon became quite adept It was planned that the men would embark at Dunkirk Docks and that an additional monitor would be on hand to convey Divisional HQ and oversee the operations.. As it progressed it would pay out a telephone cable to keep the Divisional HQ in contact with Fourth Army HQ near Dunkirk.

Frank Gray commented:-

Our remaining time was taken up with exercise over a specially constructed obstacle-race course, sham fighting over the dunes and the usual training of soldiers.

One day actual monitors arrived off the dunes and then indeed we thought after two months the time was approaching for our great attack. But that was not so. A few of us, of whom I was one, were selected to go on board the monitors and inspect them. The preparations were made for us and then after an exchange of visits and courtesies, anchor was weighed and the monitors left us.

He never did find out what it was all about.

Shortly after 1st Division had launched their attack, XV Corps would launch their strike along along the coast from Nieuport. On landing the left Brigade (the 2nd) would send out a flying column to deal with guns at Ravensyde in order to give the naval operations freedom of action. As soon as this was accomplished and the flying column withdrawn cyclists and Motor Machine Guns would speed towards and seize the bridges over the canal and a number of key road junctions. The Division would then have hold on and await the success of the XV Corps attack.

The left column was to consist of the 2nd Infantry Brigade with the 2nd Royal Sussex Regiment, 1st Northampton Regiment, 1st North Lancs Regiment and the 2nd KRRC plus supporting units. The centre column would be the 3rd Infantry Brigade including 1st South Wales Borderers, 1st Gloucesters, 2nd Welsh Regiment and 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers. The Right Column, made up of the 1st Infantry Brigade included the 1st Black Watch, the 1st Cameron Highlanders, the 10th Gloucesters and the 8th Royal Berks plus two companies of the 6th Welsh Regiment. A Grand total of 557 officers and 13193 other ranks.

Training in Earnest

25th July to 3rd September 1917

The War Diary makes almost no mention of the training and concentrates on events elsewhere and domestic issues plus reports of inspections and parades for visiting generals. Lt Moor kept a detailed record of the training his company went through. The following extracts give a considerable insight into training methods as well as into how people felt about the war and the conditions in which they were forced to live. All the subsequent quotes are from his diary unless attributed elsewhere.

25th July 1917

General Sir Henry Rawlinson, the commander of 4th Army turned up to inspect the Division. they all paraded on the beach and he presented medal ribbons followed by the march past.

I was inoculated in morning and felt very rotten for the rest of the day

28th July 1917

Attack scheme towards the sea using ball ammunition in afternoon. Some of the fellows (officers) got tight in the evening and kicked up a beastly row till 1.30 am that is the worst of life out here. People seem to lose not only all sense of morality, but all sense of reasonable deportment, dignity or whatever else implies ordinary quiet behaviour. Most of the time they were roaring out the most filthy songs. It does seem unfair that whereas Father and the uncles were able to avoid this sort of thing, and consequently are quite incapable of comprehending it, we are unable to avoid it. I don't mind most of the filthy talk which is practically incessant out here, or at least I can put up with it, but the frequent drunken orgies annoy me beyond words. I must say I had more or less forgotten this side of the war at home, as the incidents which occur in the trenches make a far greater impression on one's mind. But it is gradually coming back to me, and my old absolute loathing of the life out here is returning. I suppose that part of the reason one looks upon England as a clean country is that the atmosphere there is morally clean compared to what it is out here. The same fellows in England are altogether different.

2nd Lt Bray had not been on leave for some time. He was allowed to go in the middle of the special training. But first he was able to take part in the Divisional Horses races.

Bray:-

Divisional horse races today.

I had got the job of riding Bamba in Col Dewing's name in a 5 furlong flat race for horses over 15 hands, weight over 12½ stone. Danby had one trial gallop with Phyllis the day before (Sat) and then did nothing serious. Bamba out of condition some skin trouble. Nine starters, Punch now belonging to Brigade being one of them.

Turned out to be quite a good race old Bamba showing better than I thought he would and got an easy second, O'Dowd beating me by a couple of lengths, as I expected him to, knowing Punch. Races were all good especially hurdles.

29th July 1917

(Sunday) It rained in morning so we had no church parade. I read "The Toilers of the Sea" practically all day.

30th July 1917

It rained in morning so we did not start parade till 10 am - Field firing - lecture on musketry in afternoon.

Bray:-

Question of leave which has occupied my mind for some weeks has at length been settled. I go today. Rather touch and go whether I should get it soon or not for some time.

He wrote later:-

On leave - Dunkirk, Calais, Boulogne, Folkestone, Town, Plymouth, Town, Woking, Folkestone.

Fine leave but one wants a month

Writing this at Woodham and shall leave this diary here and start another.

Came over with Kingerley & shall see him tomorrow on way across. Leave train goes 7.30 am from Victoria.

31st July 1917

The War Diary caught up with the missing entries, reporting on the replacement of Lt Col Carlton and the overwhelming of the 1st Northants who had taken over from the 8th guarding the front line. There was the usual monthly casualty report and notes of comings and goings of officers.

It rained all morning but only drizzled in afternoon. Everything is getting very damp.

1st August 1917

The General gave us a holiday and arranged a trip to Calais for officers. It rained all day: very miserable. I went to Calais; there was a whole chapter of accidents. To start off with the buses did not come to Le Clipon but about a mile away, so we did not start till 5.30 instead of 4.30. Then the second bus broke down and the fellows in it had to pick up lorries etc to take them in. Fortunately I was in the first bus. we got to Calais about 7.30 and had dinner. After dinner there was nothing to do so 2Lt Mecey and I went and sat down in the lounge of the Grand Hotel. The bus was due to start back at eleven o'clock but various people did not turn up and others went to the wrong rendezvous so we did not get started till 11.30. Then we lost the way and arrived at the Sugar Refinery about a mile from the camp at 2.15 am. So the bus turned round and had gone about a quarter of a mile when the left back wheel went through a bridge and nearly overturned us. As it was obviously impossible to get it out that night we walked back. It was still raining. Got in about 3.0 am.

2nd August 1917

Seemingly as a follow up to the day off for officers the security clampdown struck on the evening of the 2nd

War Diary:

On the night of the 2/3rd August restrictions were placed upon the Camp, consequent upon it being closed. No one inside the camp being allowed to leave or hold conversation with persons outside the camp.

Lt Moor

There is no doubt that life for a quiet person out here simply is not worth living. The mess is exactly like a class room at school, and people are continually talking or fooling about and take a childish delight in saying 'Bo' in ones ear when one is reading. I find that in spite of my determination to enjoy life out here it is practically impossible except in the fine weather, when one does not attempt to read. This is what people at home are quite unable to realise. For three days we have been more or less confined to the mess by the rain and have to rely on our own resources for amusing ourselves. The tents are so damp and cheerless that one cannot read there all day long.

3rd August 1917

It rained all day again. Had a letter from Mrs Teetgen which I answered in the evening. Everything is damp, but fortunately, being on sand there is no mud.

4th August 1917

We had a brief spell of sunshine during which I was able to get most of my things dry. But in the afternoon it made up for it by a regular deluge whilst we were out on field firing practice and we all got soaked. It was quite obvious that it was going to rain and we could easily have got back to camp before it started. But as it was we got back as it finished having stopped our field firing in the middle. Typical of the army. The CO (Lt Col Dewing) came to dinner.

5th August 1917

Lts R Holland and C H Kingerlee were promoted to acting Captains as the War Office had extended the establishment of the battalion.

Fine day. No church parade. Had ripping bathe in afternoon.

6th Aug 1917

Very misty. The 2nd Brigade were doing field firing about a mile away. The reports of the rifles were scarcely audible but the swish of the bullets was very distinct. At first I did not know what it was. We practised the landing scheme in afternoon. But the whole thing has been altered - typical of the army. Before the Camerons and Black Watch were to rush off the pontoon and form a semicircle. Then we were to push right through and they would wheel outwards to protect our flanks. But now the Black Watch are going off to the right and we (the 8th Berks) are going to the left. B Coy are going straight ahead keeping in touch with the Black Watch on the right. After them comes A Coy who form a temporary facing front. Then comes D Coy (in which I was) who relieve A Coy's flank platoon and push on, 16 platoon getting connection with A Coy on right and facing front 15, 14 and 13 platoons facing left, forming left flank guard of Battalion. As usual they imagined that the sea was in a different place from where it is, but apart from that, and the fact that we had not room to do the extensions properly it was fairly successful.

In the evening four of us (2Lts Holland, Walls, Goodship and myself) went down to the range to shoot against the Black Watch officers - a bottle stunt. Four R Berks and four Black Watch subalterns lay down, each with a bottle in front of him. The bottle in front of me represented one of the the Black Watch officers and when I hit it he was deemed to be killed and had to stop shooting. We had to double from 250 yards to 200, fire five rounds then go on to 70 yards and fire five more if necessary. I was knocked out before I had even loaded my rifle and our whole team were out before we had killed one Black Watch. Their shooting was marvellous, as they knocked down four bottles at 200 yards with only about a dozen rounds. Their C O was very sporting and said we must have a return. I got one bottle at 200 and one at 70 yards in the return and we won. So we had a conqueror and we won that too. Walls broke 3 bottles in three shots at 70 yards. Holland got mine just as I was going to loose off at it for the fifth time. So we returned victorious after our very bad initial failure.

7th August 1917

Companies practised stunt from 2.0 to 3.30, then the battalion did it. I was in charge of C Company

8th August 1917

We bathed immediately after breakfast - Went to Hush land before lunch (Hush land was a piece of ground camouflaged and protected by barbed wire containing a section of the sea wall near Nieuport which we would have to run up after landing. It was quite difficult to get up without any equipment and I am quite sure many of the heavily laden men could never have made it.

9th August 1917

Four of the best men of each company and four platoon officers had to go to Hush-land in the evening to practise. It is only a wall of 1 in 2 inclination with a projecting curved top. Supposed to be exactly like the wall we shall have to climb on landing. The men make an awful fuss about it.

10th August 1917

We tried going on to the imaginary Monitor in Hush-land. There will be some squash.

11th August 1917

Did Brigade stunt by Sugar Refinery (areas A and B) with Artillery, motor bandits, trench mortars, cyclists and machine gunners. C Coy got ahead of my platoon and rather boxed things up. But the General was pleased and after all that is the main thing. I was told that they man-handled two pip-squeaks (field guns) over the first dune (some job). The Artillery consists only of the 18 pounders. The Nieuport guns are going to shell our area until zero and will presumably shell the area B of the Nieuport - Ostend road, which is our second objective until the third move is made. We dont know yet what that will be and I dont think we shall have to do it. We have now got to push out posts from our first objective 250 yards to left of 16 platoon. Only 13 and 15 platoons will go forward. The 2nd Brigade will meet us there - we hope. As far as I can make out the Division should make good a strip of land three miles wide and half a mile deep in about an hour if all goes well. The following is a copy of my notes read out to section commanders and scouts.

- 1 - Rifle Grenadiers must mop up.
- 2 - Directly we get our first objective, scouts under I/Cpl Young will go forward 200 yards to 2nd objective to reconnoitre ground for best Lewis gun position
- 3 - On advance signal, Lewis gun sections of 13 and 15 platoons will advance; remainder will dig strong line on first objective.
- 4 - Aeroplane will call for flares at 11.0 am Only posts must light (ie only Lewis gun sections of 13 and 15)

5 - When Lewis guns go up into 2nd objective L/Cpl Young's patrol will be responsible for maintaining communication with C Coy on right and 13 platoon Lewis gun on left

6 - Go over first dune in extended order.

12th August 1917

(Sunday) Church parade in morning. Bathed and got stung by jelly fish in evening

13th - 18th August 1917

Carried on with training of a general nature; we did not practice the stunt again. The stunt seems to have been put off as we were expecting R Day some time back. There has been a push north of Lens.

19th August 1917

(Sunday) Went to dinner with C Company: had an interesting discussion with Kenny. He subsequently lost a leg and I met him at St Thomas's Hospital where I was then a student.

20th August 1917

We are now starting ceremonial drill. Army Commander (General Rawlinson) is to see us on 25th. Still no news of R Day. R day is of course 9 days before Z day

21st August 1917

Did night opps in evening, same stunt as we did on 11th. Quite successful on whole, except C Coy did not go far enough towards second objective: consequently my Lewis gun was practically isolated 200 yards ahead of anyone else.

22nd August 1917

Officers rigger match against Black Watch. We lost 8-17. I scored a try and Cloak the other.

23rd August 1917

Brigade march past Divisional General in afternoon. It pelted with rain so that we were all soaked to the skin. Went to a very good concert given [by] Black Watch in evening.

24th August 1917

Division practised the march past for tomorrow's review. Afterwards we were told that mess boxes were to be ready my midday tomorrow, which meant that today is Q-day. But the GOC Division saw all officers and NCOs of 1st Brigade and told us that leave is to be opened again as the stunt has been postponed. I am still very stiff in the legs from a gallop I had three or four days ago. We were bathing in the sea and as I came out I saw some horses coming out too so I asked the groom to let me ride one. It was bare back and wet with only a snaffle. However I felt very comfortable on it - I was naked and wet too.

25th August 1917

General Sir H S Rawlinson GCVO KCB inspected the 1st Division on the beach and presented medal ribbons

Marched past G O C 4th Army in morning. The new list of officers promoted to full Loots came out. Three of them are over a year junior to Goodship and me. I must say it was a smack in the eye for each of us, especially for me as Mecey is now second in command of the Company when before he was 15 months junior to me. It seems rather unfair that after nearly 28 months with commissions, doing our best, we should be deliberately passed over. And the worst of it is that even if one is rather a failure as an officer one cannot resign as anyone with any pride would do at any other job. We are absolute slaves in these days and can take no action whatsoever as one would in normal times. To be a dud is one thing I want never to be, and if I can't do the one thing I'll give it up and start something to be a success at. As a moral gymnasium the Army is really wonderful.

28th August 1917

It rained like hell: very strong wind

29th August 1917

It rained all morning. My platoon had a race along the shore in afternoon.

30th August 1917

Bathed in morning. It was very rough.

31st August 1917

Lawrence went on leave: Mecey is in command of the Company. Three Monitors came and anchored off the coast and sent a lot of sailors in in pinnaces. I believe they are going to stay with the 2nd and 3rd Brigades. I hope they enjoy it. (meaning the miserable conditions we were in)

1st September 1917

The diarist made his monthly return of officers movements.

We did a Brigade Scheme in morning, which was not highly interesting.

2nd September 1917

Church parade in morning. Went fishing in evening but we only caught a few small fish. It was very rough and quite good fun.

3rd September 1917

Fine day - the first for a long time. A lot of fellows went over to the monitors which are anchored about a mile out.

4th September 1917

Fine again - Went for a long route march in morning. I have got a very bad cold and did not enjoy it. Some Hun planes came over in evening and dropped bombs on Loon Plage. I don't suppose they hit anything, but it was a wonder the Belgian anti-aircraft did not as they were bursting shells about 500 feet over our camp, umpteen miles off the planes which were quite invisible. The words of the psalmist fitted the occasion when he said "Scoff not at the anti-aircraft gunners, for their nose caps return to earth as thou walkest: and though thou sayest "pooh" yet is thy heart cold within thee"

7th September 1917

We have got some Chief Petty Officers staying with us from the Monitors. Went to Divisional concert in evening. The OC Concert Party sang a very good song entitled "The five point nine" (this was a German shell) - a parody on "The five fifteen" (a popular music hall song) but I cannot remember any of it, chiefly because I do not know the original.

8th September 1917

Went to Divisional concert again. Merrefield (the OC Party) sang a parody of "Three hundred and sixty five days" which started:

A trench is the nuddiest, ruddiest, bloodiest place on this earth

One verse went like this:

You make trenches and nestworks

Of strong points and breastworks

Then you hear a shell whine (somebody off stage made a perfect imitation of a shell and we all covered down)

You rush down a dug-out

And daren't put your mug out

For a hell of a time.

Here is one of the choruses

Three hundred and sixty five days

All go to make a year

Three hundred and sixty five days

The sergeant's voice to hear

But always remember

From January to December

His language you really can't praise

If he thinks you're a dud

He will make your life -- pleasant

Three hundred and sixty five ways.

9th September 1917

(Sunday) Church parade in morning. I went for a long swim with Crampin (2Lt) in afternoon. I think we must have done about a mile altogether.

11th September 1917

2nd Lt C H Sharp was struck off the strength as he had been ordered 'medical board' by the War Office

We went for a long march in morning to the other side of Gravlins, where we bathed and had lunch. Then we came back and had tea en route. We were going to march past the Major General at the Distillery, but he didn't turn up.

12th September 1917

We did an open order stunt SW of the Distillery; it was quite good fun. In evening we went to Regimental Concert. Merrefield sung two good songs. One was a parody on "murders" and one verse went like this:-

*The Battalion Sergeant Major is no longer with the ranks
And once again I take the blame to me is due all thanks
He used to damn and blast our eyes and take our ruddy names
Now his own soul forever lies in everlasting flames
For I muidered him last Tuesday - outside the CO's hut
I started with the bayonet and finished with the butt
He made my rifle dirty so I think it's well he died
He completely spoilt the foresight and bent the charger guide.*

A naval fellow came to dinner from the monitor P50. He says that if our landing stunt does not come off in the second week in October it will not be this year. It may either be put off till about next April. There is to be another push at Ypres, he thinks and one further north on 26th. I am very fed up with doing nothing and wish that we would either cancel the show altogether and put us into the line again, or do it at once.

Another very good parody of "The five fifteen" entitled "The hush-hush" wall went like this

*The hush-hush wall
The hush -hush wall
You run and climb and clamber
Then you slip and slide and fall
You go up at a hell of a pace
The you fall down upon your ---- face
I t takes me all day
To get up half way
Then I slip and wear the seating of my trousers right away*

13th September 1917

We did another Open Warfare stunt today. Had a bathe after it. it was very rough and great fun. The latest from Division is that either we shall do the stunt next month or we shall go into billets for the winter, one brigade to St Pol, one to Loon Plage and one to Gravelines. Or that we shall go right back and train with two divisions of Americans all winter, or that the stunt will be cancelled and we shall go down south and take over from the French near St Quentin and do a stunt. One thing is certain, namely that if we go into the line we shall be for it.

14th September 1917

I refereed in a soccer match between the Black Watch and Camerons in evening. To judge by the shouts of the crowd my decisions were not very good and I let a lot of things go. I shall not try again unless I cannot avoid it.

15th September 1917

Went over to the monitor Prince Eugine in afternoon. It was rather rough and very hard to get into the cutters which were about 100 yards out. The navy brought umpteen ropes ashore and coiled them up in various ways and after about an hour got a raft ashore onto which Bray, Crampin, a Cameron fellow and I (all 2Lts) went on the raft which was pulled through the breakers by a rope. At one point we got broadside on and the raft went over to an angle of about 45 degrees and the Cameron fellow fell off. But we hung on somehow and he got onto it again, having been in about 4 feet of water. We got on board eventually and were shown all the guns, the biggest being 12 inch which were worked by hydraulic power. The full charge for the 12 inch is 200 ponds of cordite but on this stunt they are only using 24 pounds so as to minimise the discomfort to the infantry if they poop off. The extreme range will only be 2000 yards as they won't have a much higher velocity than trench mortars.

17th September 1917

Bayonet practise in morning: my platoon did very well and I praised them for it, which bucked them very much and I felt braced with life I often find that when I come on parade with a "liver" and a fixed intention of cursing the fellows, they do extremely well.

18th September 1917

We did a battalion stunt in morning SW of Distillery. My platoon were very cheerful and good tempered about it which bucked

me up no end

19th September 1917

We had a Brigade scheme lasting all day. We went a long way and got very tired. The Major General gave a pow-wow afterwards which bored me to extinction. The net result of it was that the men are to be got to use more imagination. Think of the British Tommy with imagination. I am bored stiff with this training and want to get back to the line. I had a letter from father. He seems to have taken this non-promotion business very seriously and is getting into touch with some Major General at the War Office, so I shall have to look out for trouble if I get involved in anything of that sort as it would be a breach of discipline for me to do it. As a matter of fact after mature consideration I have come to the conclusion that I had better do nothing, as although I am in the right it would not pay to get into the bad books of the regimental authorities. They always can get at you in the Army. It is like trying to fight a man with ones hands tied. I hear that Lieut Barrett of Mrs Cornwallis West fame has had to resign his commission, more or less I expect as a result of getting his CO cashiered. It would probably pay me better to remain in the Army as a Second Lieutenant all my days than to be socially or otherwise compelled to resign.

I have written to father as follows: (it is a long and boring recapitulating when I wrote on 25 and 26 August and shewing that I had got over my pique at not being promoted.)

20th September 1917

Whole holiday. We had breakfast in bed (in our tents) and got up at 11:30. I bathed in morning and read "The Right Stuff" all day (Ian Hay)

21st September 1917

2nd Lt S A G Harvey had been promoted Lieutenant on the 1st July and rejoined the Battalion on the 21st.

Went for picnic to Bourbourg - three hours march - where we had lunch and came back in afternoon (2Lt) Harvey arrived while we were out. (He was killed in the German push in March 1918)

However all these careful preparations came to naught when the plans were abandoned in October. By then it had become clear that no break-out from the Ypres salient could be expected.

22nd September 1917

Brigade scheme in morning. Went to watch rigger match with Harvey in afternoon. Glenister and Morley came to dinner in evening. Very jolly time.

23rd September 1917

(Sunday) Church parade in morning. Went for ride along the beach with Holland in afternoon. My horse was rather lazy. Bathed with Harvey in evening. Dunkirk was shelled.

24th September 1917

Misty in morning. Someone was shooting on the range and I could hear the hiss of the bullets distinctly today, just like on 6th August.

25th September 1917

Went for a bloody long march in morning - 9 to 1.30. I was very fed up.

26th September 1917

Brigade scheme at Grand Snythe again. D Coy (in which I was) did sweet F A - I was not sorry.

27th September 1917

Whole holiday. I had breakfast in bed around 10.15 am then took the morning quietly. In afternoon Hanney, Crampin Kingerlee and I went down to the shore to shoot at bottles. I loosed off about 30 rounds and killed four bottles. There was a rumour that the RE and 6th Welsh are going to move on Saturday, some people say back behind Calais, but others are more optimistic and say up to the line. I am absolutely fed up with life at Le Clipon so hope we go up the line.

28th September 1917

Major G A Battock who had been attached to the 8th from the 1st/4th left to join the 1st Loyal North Lancs as their 2ic

Went on so-called Staff Ride. We are not on the Staff and had to walk, but that is a detail. Anyhow we got away from Le Clipon for a little while. The RE and Welsh are certainly moving tomorrow and everyone says they are going up. It sounds too good to be true. The only bad thing is that we shall certainly go over the top and the best of luck if we do. But even if we stay back here, or go down the line to Calais we shall have to go over the top just the same, so the sooner it is over with the better as far as I am concerned. It will probably save me a lot of trouble.

29th September 1917

Two battalion scheme in morning. I was in command of D Coy. Most fortunately I was in a non-worrying mood as everything went wrong from start to finish. In the first place when (Maj) Tosetti explained his plan of attack my mind was surrounded by thick fog, so I didn't know exactly what was going to happen, beyond the fact that we were in support to B Coy. Then half C Coy got muddled up with us and we lost our connecting files. However I let the platoons extricate themselves, which they did quite quickly. Fortunately the CO was on the left (he was umpiring) and we were on the right, so didn't bump into him which was just as well, as we came along a road in file to within about 300 yards of two Lewis and a Vickers (machine) gun. The "stand fast" blew at the critical moment and the situation was saved.

The 6th Welsh and RE moved out early this morning and have gone to dig in reserve line in the Nieuport sector as we think the Bosch are going to attack there. How they (the Huns) are going to do it God only knows as they have got to cross the canal (90-100 yards wide) which at present separates the front lines. However GHQ have evidently got the wind up about it. It is thought unlikely that we shall go up the line, worse luck.

Went to dinner with (Capt) Shaw of the Gloucesters in evening. (the 11th Gloucesters are brigaded with us with two regular battalions - 1st Black Watch and 1st Camerons - my regiment looked down on them and they probably looked down on us)

Very fine night. The Hun dropped some bombs on the transport lines (which were outside the Camp) and killed five men according to rumour. I think myself it is much more likely that a dud Archie (anti-aircraft shell) did the damage.

30th September 1917

Major General Montgomery of 4th Army staff gave us a lecture on "The situation" in afternoon. It was neither interesting nor witty and the tent was extremely hot. He talked the usual rot about the beginning of the war and gave us a lengthy and very boring history of the war. The only interesting [thing] he said was that the British have got 62 Divisions on this front and the French 110 against 145 of the Hun. Also we have got 2 Portuguese and 6 Belgian Divisions.

The latest unofficial information from Yates, the Brigade Major, is that we shall probably go up to the Nieuport sector for a spell when winter comes on and all danger of a Hun attack has passed. That in my opinion will be within a month as we have had a fortnight's good weather lately so can't expect much more this year till the frost sets in.

1st October 1917

Quite a warm day. Bathed in afternoon. Very fed up with being here and doing nothing. I want to go up to the line.

2nd October 1917

The Battalion was inspected by Brigadier General A J Reddie DSO the CO of 1st Brigade. The Battalion Concert Party which had been formed under Lt and QM C F Moon in late September gave its first concert in the Brigade Recreation tent.

Four temporary Lieutenants were promoted to Lieutenant: F K Weedon, G H J Walls, F Moor and G R Goodhip.

General's inspection in stunt order: the men are taking the following - 3 sand bags (empty), 2 flares, 1 PH (gas) helmet, 1 box respirator, 1 water bottle (filled), pack containing waterproof sheet, cardigan, towel, soap, holdall (razors etc), spare oil can, iron ration, mess tin containing unexpended portion of day's rations, 2 bombs, 170 rounds small arm ammunition, steel helmet, rifle, bayonet, entrenching tool and handle.

3rd October 1917

There are rumours that the camp is going to be opened tomorrow. Restrictions are a mere farce now as (2Lts) Weedon and Phillips came up from Transport Lines, which are outside the hush area, to come to Battalion Concert. Also they have sent for the name of an officer to go to GHQ Musketry School. He will be more than himself if he does not let out something about the hush, so I think they must be washing it out. In all probability we shall go up. I have been out three months today and have only seen three Bosch shells burst - the nearest 400 yards away.

I have heard nothing yet about my request to relinquish my commission and go on with medicine, which I sent on 1st. I hope it won't come through for a few months if we are going up the line. I have got my second pip at last (been promoted Lieutenant) it came out in last night's orders.

4th October 1917

The camp was inspected by Brig Gen Reddie.

We have started winter now, strong west wind and rain. Played footer, 15 and 16 platoons v 14 and 13 platoons in morning - no rules - just get the ball through the goal. Wiring drill in afternoon. I was fed up. Such a damned sweat putting the wire up and pulling it down again umpteen times. Why can't we go up to the line instead of wasting time and bad language here.

5th October 1917

Route-bloody-march

6th October 1917

Concert in evening. Drury, a South Wales Borderer, came to dinner. Afterwards he sang some songs of his own make up. The only one I remember was a skit on "A little bit of heaven". This is how it went

*Sure a little bit of Hades fell from out the sky one day
And it settled down by Dunkirk in a casual sort of way
And when the Angels saw it, sure it looked so dismal there
They said 'suppose we leave it' and thats all they damned well care.
Then they sprinkled it with creosote to keep the flies away
And they took the First Division and left them there to stay
Then they planted it with duck boards just to keep away the damp
And when they had it finished sure they called in Clipon Camp.*

8th October 1917

Route march. About half way it clouded over and looked very threatening and was obviously going to rain. However there were still about ten minutes before the next halt was due so we went on. It rained cats and dogs for about five minutes and we all got soaked. At the end of that time we halted to get waterproofs on and the rain soon afterwards stopped. The whole Army is run by lunatics.

9th October 1917

We had a lecture on the new method of attack. There is no pucker trench system round Ypres now as the rain and shelling together make it impossible to dig trenches. There are just various odd strong points called pill boxes dotted about on the German side and the remainder of the men are in shell holes. These pill boxes are made with concrete and iron and present a considerable mark for our artillery. Our troops form up at night just behind our front line, a brigade being put into an area 600 yards wide and 300 yards deep. The attack takes place at dawn. The artillery put up five separate barrages - first a creeping barrage of 18 pounders behind which our infantry advance. Secondly a barrage of 18 pounders and 4,5 howitzers on the Bosch front system. Thirdly a standing barrage of 4.5 and 6 inch Mows on their support system. Fourth a standing barrage of 60 pounders and six inch guns on their gun emplacements; gas is freely used in this barrage. And lastly the heavies bombard their heavy guns, billets etc. The creeping barrage advances in front of our infantry at about 100 yards in 6 minutes. When it reaches no 2 barrage they both go on towards the German support position where they meet no 3 barrage and then creep on about 600 yards and remain stationary for 15 mintes then stop. They find out in advance where the enemy are going to counter-attack and directly a counter-attack commences a barrage is put on the direction it is expected from. The infantry attack in wave formation, but only the first line is extended. The remainder go in snakes.

10th October 1917

We had a demonstration on new method of attack. It was very cold and as usual we were kept standing about for ages with no overcoats on. I caught a cold. Very fed up. Violent storms in night.

11th October 1917

Drill &c on beach. Very cold strong wind with occasional storms of rain. Violent storms in night. Camp life is very pleasant in summer but in winter it is "no bonns"

12th October 1917

General Sir H S Rawlinson, the GOC of 4th Army gave a lecture to all officers of the 1st Division in the Cinema Hanger.

Lecture by General Rawlinson in afternoon. His delivery was very bad and he didn't say anything new or interesting except at the end when he said the hush is nearly over. And although he could not promise that we should have a go at the Bosch within the next fortnight, we should be engaged in some important work before long. (2Lt) Morris suggested that the important work is road making (Morris had a mordent wit) I expect it means a push at Ypres. I hope so anyway as I want to do something useful instead of these eternal schemes which we have nowadays. A new push started at Ypres but was held up by wet weather. Rained all afternoon and evening. Violent storms at night.

13th October 1917

Very violent storms in morning. We had one bright flash of lightning and some hail. Cleared up in evening.

14th October 1917

(Sunday) Very fine day but rather cold wind in morning. I am second on the list for leave at present. The men's leave is simply swishing through; six or seven go every day. But there are still 60 men who have been out here over a year without leave.

The lates is that General Persing (Perishing Percy) the American bloke, is going to come and see this division do a stunt on Saturday (20th). This battalion is to give an exhibition of rapid wiring - what joy - I don't think. It will mean umpteen hours of

rapid wiring this week and the men hate that worse than anything else. After that we are going to be attached to either the 2nd or 5th Army and are going to do a stunt at Ypres. My progress is to go on leave, go on the stunt, get a blighty and then carry on my medical studies. If I do not get a blighty I hope to be allowed to carry on with the Medicine and have sent for the necessary certificates from the Dean of the Faculty, Medical School Cambridge. Anyhow I want to do the attack at Ypres first to see what this kind of attack is like. Of course it will be far worse than the Somme and I hated that, but still, on the Somme we had bad shelling, no water but no mud. At Ypres we shall have worse shelling and frightful mud. However I don't put up to be sane where this war is concerned, and am going to do the attack if possible. Anything will be better than the eternal Le Clipon.

15th October 1917

We did a night marching stunt, practising getting to point of assembly for this new attack. A Hun plane came and dropped bombs about half a mile away. We heard one swishing down rather like a 5.9 shell only less musical.

16th October 1917

Practised new attack on other side of Mardick. Very cold and windy. The latest is that we are going to move on Sunday to a place near Wormhoudt. We are certainly moving soon as the transport is being got ready.

17th October 1917

We went to the other side of Mardick to get across a dyke in the most original manner. My method was very simple and consisted of carrying a 10 foot plank of a 4x4 beech. It was frightfully heavy and consequently my platoon dropped behind on the way back. The Colonel was fed up about it. The damned fool for taking us out on such madcap stunts which are quite useless, is what I say.

18th October 1917

Brig Gen Ready returned to England and Brig Gen J R M Mindtull-Ford DSO took over 1st Bde.

We did a night assembly march, practising getting into position for new attack stunt. My compass is not luminous which is rather a bore, but I marched on Arcturus which was quite accurate enough. A Hun plane dropped some bombs, one of which fell fairly close to us. We could hear it coming for about five seconds. The explosion was a very big one - as big as an eight inch shell.

19th October 1917

Practised new attack in gas masks; it was very hard indeed and I hope we don't have to do it that way.

20th October

General Pershing did not turn up. Instead Maj Gen Greble of the American army came to witness the demonstration of wiring under Lt R Holland.

Clearing up camp and being photographed in morning and afternoon. The 3rd Brigade left and A Coy struck their tents.

21st October 1917

On the 21st October the 8th Battalion moved to billets in Rubrouck and thence to a position east of Wormhoudt by the 26th.

Sources

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GUNFIRE #11

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