

Volume 5 Section 301

Interlude VI - 1st Battalion

December 1917 to March 1918

At the end of the battle of Cambrai the 1st Battalion were still holding their positions to the west of Bourlon Wood. Continued from section 291

Bourlon Wood **1st to 4th December 1917**

The battalion were holding front line trenches near Bourlon Wood on the 1st, but for a change the intensity of German shelling was greatly reduced and there were periods of comparative peace. There was some rearrangement of companies. C was on the left, A in the centre, with D and B in support at the gunpits and quarry. B Company of the 23rd Royal Fusiliers, with two platoons of D of the same regiment, was on the right of A of the Royal Berkshires up to the sunken road, whilst C of the 23rd Royal Fusiliers took over posts beyond it.

The 2nd, 3rd, and 4th December were comparatively quiet days with some sporadic shelling, mainly aimed at the sugar factory. At around 16:00 on the 2nd the bombardment suddenly increased in intensity with British guns responding vigorously. By 16:30 practically every gun was firing. It later transpired that a German attack was being made on the Berkshires' left but it had been repulsed. At 20:10 two battalions of the London Regiment on the right launched an attack with the 23rd Royal Fusiliers moving up to keep their right flank in line. The operation was successful with eight machine guns and a number of prisoners captured. When all this had settled down D Coy relieved C Coy on the left and A Coy in the centre were able to establish new posts about 150 to 200 yards ahead of their original line with a much better field of fire.

The 3rd was marked by a more concerted attack on the sugar factory with the Germans using spotter planes between 13:00 and 15:00. Then at 16:00 they were observed massing troops opposite D Coy on the left and British artillery were directed to fire there, Perhaps they scored a few good hits as nothing came of the German movements.

On the 4th orders came for the Berks to withdraw and that night the Bourlon salient was evacuated without mishap, except that the battalion, being unable to remove them, had to throw down a well some spare Lewis-gun magazines, two machine guns, and other equipment.

Hermies **5th to 11th December 1917**

The battalion moved to billets in Nissen huts and shelters at Hermies, behind the front. The men were allowed to rest all day as they had been actively engaged for some time, but although exhausted they were in fine spirits.

On the 6th however the rest came to an end. The morning was taken up with PT and kit inspections. Then with D Coy acting as carriers, the whole of A B and C Coys were set to work from 23:00 to 05:00 on the 7th digging new trenches. They were allowed to rest for the morning and then off to the baths in the afternoon. In the evening and through the night they had to dig new communication trenches.

6 men arrived as reinforcements and were posted to B Coy on the 7th. Another 42 went to B on the 8th.

One man had been injured by shell fire on the 7th and 10 members of B Coy were injured on the 8th whilst they were waiting in a sunken road to go to work. The casualties were supplemented by an outbreak of diarrhoea and sore feet which put large numbers out of commission. The strain of the night time work and day time shelling was beginning to tell on even the strongest men. With the prospect of a return to the front line they were spared work on the night of the 10th and 11th.

Canal du Nord **11th to 13th December 1917**

The return to the trenches was delayed because the guides refused to move until it was completely dark. They had had dinner at 12:30 and marched off at 13:30. When they got to the front line they found the previous occupants of one of the posts had abandoned it before the relief arrived but luckily they were able to reoccupy it without incident and start improving their new positions.

The 12th was passed peacefully enough but at around 20:30 an alert was raised by the centre post who had spotted Germans approaching. The artillery were called in but several of their 4.5" shells fell short wounding 2Lt S A E Miles and 3 men and killing 13866 Pte Charles Allcock of Walthamstow. Although strong complaints were lodged no one would accept responsibility.

Their time at the canal was very short as they were

relieved by the 1st/KRRC and 22nd/Royal Fusiliers on the 13th

Hermies

13th to 17th December 1917

The accommodation at Hermies was very poor although everyone had some sort of shelter.

Here they were able to rest although each night 100 men were detailed to carry gas cylinders to the front line.

Canal du Nord

17th to 20th December 1917

The return to the front line was back to the positions vacated on the 13th. One of the posts had again been abandoned but the Berks reoccupied it.

The wind stayed in the wrong direction so the projected gas attack was not launched.

It was a fairly uneventful spell and when they were relieved by the 17th Middlesex the whole brigade moved off to O'Shea Camp at Lebucquiere.

Lebucquiere

20th to 26th December 1917

They got to their rest area at O'Shea Camp at midnight on the 20th only to find the accommodation crowded, dirty and neglected. As usual they set to work to make it a bit more habitable.

By now it had got very cold and the hard frost and snow make most activities impossible. However there was ample fuel to be gathered from the ruins of nearby villages so at least they were able to get some warmth.

Brig Gen Kellett had taken over temporary command of 2nd Division and he held a parade service at 11:00 on the 23rd at which he particularly praised B Coy for their work on the 30th.

There was still lots of work to do. On the 24th the battalion worked from 09:00 to 16:00 building shelters for battalion HQ with dinners and teas served on site. Later D Coy sent 20 men to work in the RE yard at Ytres and two Lewis gun teams to Ruyaulcourt to relieve the 1/KRRC at the divisional dump.

Christmas Day was celebrated with a voluntary church service at the cinema at 11:00 and a christmas dinner in ten messes at 13:00. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make the bare Nissen huts as hospitable and festal as possible and the quartermaster, Capt F S Boshell had laid on a splendid meal of pork, beef and plum puddings with a liberal supply of beer and cigarettes. Major Nugent went around visiting each mess and addressing the men. The sergeants eat at 18:00 and the officers at 20:00. Everyone was able to relax and get pleasantly drunk but military discipline prevailed and there were no

disturbances.

Canal du Nord

26th December 1917 to 3rd Jan 1918

After the Christmas rest they were faced with another tour of duty, this time at the Canal du Nord. The morning and afternoon of the 26th were spent quietly getting ready and in the evening they moved up to the support line to relieve the 52nd Light Infantry Brigade. C & D Coys moved off first at 14:30 as their task was to relieve the work parties at Fort George but as things turned out the RE officer detailed to supervise the work failed to materialise and no work was possible. The rest of the Battalion moved off at 17:00 and had completed the relief by 20:00.

Very early next morning (27th) the enemy started a somewhat random artillery attack. It all seemed very haphazard although the barrage was very heavy. It ranged over front and support lines and one man was killed (32932 Pte Albert Grey of Faringdon) and one wounded. A and B Coys each had to supply a party of 50 men to work at Fort George.

The barrage was less intense on the 28th but went on all day. By now the weather had turned very cold and there was a blizzard at night.

On the 29th a party went up to survey the front line and arrange to relieve the 1st KRRC. As ever there were working parties at night and at 08:00 on the 30th D Coy provided 24 men to work with the 2nd Australian Tunnelling Coy building dug outs at the front line.

The move up to the front line was completed at 19:00 on the 30th.

D Coy were subjected to persistent shelling on the 31st and suffered one casualty - a man wounded.

The new year opened quietly with working parties out repairing the wire and other odd jobs. One man was wounded on New Years Day and Lt Col Hunt returned from leave.

The next day officers from the 8th S Staffs and 10th Sherwood Foresters arrived to discuss the relief.

At 16:30 on the 3rd January however the enemy suddenly opened a heavy bombardment and commenced an attack on the front and right of the battalion in numerous parties of about thirty men each. Two unprotected sentry posts had to be withdrawn behind the wire to save them from being surrounded. The enemy occupied these posts in force and began consolidating. Meanwhile, the relief was in progress, and by 23:00 all the battalion was out of the trenches, except two platoons of B Coy and Battalion Headquarters.

At 22:30 Brigade orders were received to evacuate three support posts. It was stated that the British artillery would fire for half an hour, after which strong officers'

patrols were to be sent out to recover the posts which had been lost earlier. The bombardment, from 00.25 to 00.55, was rather feeble and none too accurate, and when patrols went out under Second-Lieutenant Grimes on the west, and Lieutenant Hudson on the east of the canal, they came under machine-gun fire. The night was moonlit, and it was impossible to approach the posts unseen, as on both sides thick belts of old German wire had to be passed in single file. Under orders from Brigade, the patrols returned, after losing three killed and five wounded. Relief was completed at 02:30 on the 4th. The men killed were 38467 Pte Alfred Humby of Northam, 15292 Pte Leonard Roberts of Birmingham and 8155 Pte Christopher Stallwood of Ealing. Humby was taken as far as Hermies but apparently died en route. From Hermies the battalion were lorried to their new billets at Barastre.

Camp at Barastre 4th to 10th January 1918

The new billets at Barastre turned out to be huts which were filthy, with no form of heating and seemed to have neglected for some time. After a brief rest they all set to work to clean up and make the best of a bad job.

The weather was still very cold which made any form of training or recreation well nigh impossible. Instead there were conferences and lectures under cover. Attempts to dig drains and protective walls around the huts proved abortive.

Two of the companies were able to have a bath in the afternoon of the 4th and they managed some light training on the 5th when Lt Col Hunt was summoned to take over command of 99th Bde as the Brigadier was absent on leave. Major C Nugent assumed command of the Battalion.

On the 6th after the Sunday parade, the bodies of 8155 Pte C Stallwood and 25292 Pte L Roberts were buried at Le Bucquiere. They had been killed on the night of 3rd/4th.

A party of 12 other ranks were sent to Paris on the 9th for a short leave. That evening the rain came and the camp was turned into a sea of mud. Next day the snow melting and the rain combined to flood the camp but vigorous work kept most of the water at bay.

11th to 17th January 1918

Another leave party of 18 were sent to Amiens on the 11th and they tried to sent all the men in groups of 10 to 20 with an officer every day while they remained at Barastre. They set off at 05:00 each morning using Battalion lorries to the railhead at Achiet le Grand and were met again around 17:00 to return to camp.

Special training by the RE on 'rapid wiring' commenced on the 12th and 10 officers and 25 Other ranks were

instructed in 'the care and handling of pigeons' on the 14th. On the 17th the whole battalion was turned out to witness a demonstration of a Flammenwerfer. Otherwise training consisted of route marches with manoeuvres en route and practice with the Lewis guns etc.

As well as the leave some recreation was possible. On the 13th there was a football match against the 22nd Royal Fusiliers which was won by the Royal Berks. Later that day the Altershot Royal Artillery Band gave a concert in the cinemas at Barastre.

18th to 23rd January 1918

On the 18th the whole battalion set off on a route march to Baupame via Rocquingcy, Le Transloy and Beaulencourt. When they arrived they were treated to a special performance of Cinderella put on by *The Tonics* - a concert party of the balloon section of an FRC squadron. The special performance cost one franc a head but it was not clear whether this was charged to the individual men or paid for by the battalion. They returned via Bancourt and Haplincourt.

Recreation continued with a football match on the 19th against 5th Bde HQ which was won 1-0 after extra time as part of a 2nd Division competition. There was a point to point on the 21st at which 2Lt Fost was seriously injured after being thrown from his horse in practice. The band of the 1/60 Rifles put on a concert on the 22nd

Spasmodic training continued with a COs inspection on the 22nd. 2nd Lt Bush with a party of 25 men was seconded to the 2nd Australian Tunnelling Company that day.

The time at Barastre came to an end on the 23rd and the morning was spent cleaning up the camp and preparing to move.

Metz en Couture 23rd to 26th January 1918

The battalion set out at 12:00 for their new billets at Metz en Couture. They had first to march to Rocquigny where their expected train was late owing to severe congestion on the line. They eventually arrived just before dark to relieve the Anson Battalion of 63rd Division. Again their new accommodation proved dirty and neglected so the next day had to spent cleaning up. The village was littered with equipment and clothing.

Brigadier General G B Barker moved up from the 22nd Royal Fusiliers to take over permanently 99th Bd so Lt Col Hunt was able to return on the 24th to resume command of the 1st Royal Berks.

The Divisional Commander (Maj Gen Pereira) did an inspection on the 25th and company commanders went up to the front line to reconnoitre the ground the Battalion was due to take over.

Enemy aircraft were dropping lots of bombs in the area on the 25th but Metz escaped damage. However a Lewis Gun team of the Royal Berks had to be sent to the RFA to help with anti-aircraft work as the RFA men had used shell hole water tainted with mustard gas for washing and had suffered considerable casualties.

In the Front Line at Lavacquerie 26th to 29th January 1918

The battalion returned to the front line on the 26th, relieving the 1st KRRC. The relief was completed by 21:15 but it had been hampered by one of the Lewis Gun limbers breaking down.

The trenches were full of mud and practically impassible. However the posts were dry and provided good shelter. Men were able to move around owing to a heavy mist, but this cleared in the afternoon and all movement had to cease.

2nd Lt Johnston with 25 men went for one month's attachment to 483 Field Coy RE for training as sappers mates on the 27th. A projected patrol under 2Lt Titley to reconnoitre the German lines had to be called off as the wire was too thick and the moonlight too bright.

The Germans were using balloons to observe the British lines on the 28th so again movement became virtually impossible.

The spell in the line came to an end on the 29th when the 1st KRRC returned. Relief was completed at 21:30.

Support at Villers Plouich 29th January to 1st Feb 1918

The billets provided on the 29th were good and comfortable for a change.

The next day they were detailed for salvage parties and a vast amount was collected including about 1500 9.2 inch shells which were unfortunately too heavy to be moved.

At the end of January the effective strength of the Battalion was 36 officers and 722 men.

Owing to a thick mist it was possible to get on with road repairs and other works such as drainage on the 1st. Several congratulatory messages relating to the action at Bourlon Wood were received.

In the evening they moved up to relieve the 1/KRRC with two men being injured in the dark.

Front Line - La Vacquerie 2nd Feb 1918

The news came through about the reorganisation into three-battalion brigades and the battalion dropped from

the 99th Brigade was the 22nd Royal Fusiliers. This caused great sadness from the Royal Berks who had worked with the Fusiliers for over two years.

In contrast to the previous day it was very bright making movement impossible. There was pronounced artillery and aerial activity during the day and when evening came patrols were sent out but could find no trace of the Germans in the sap they constructed.

3rd Feb 1918

The Royal Berks continued to hold the line during the day with both sides going hard at it with artillery. In the evening they were relieved by the 2/HLI who foolishly were using electric torches which gave away their position and attracted 5.9" artillery shells. Luckily the Royal Berks were able to slip away untouched but with one man injured when a limber ran over him.

Luckily the Royal Berks were able to slip away without further casualties. For a change the boarding and disembarkation from the train went smoothly.

Billets - Manancourt 4th Feb 1918

The journey was by train to billets in Manancourt where they arrived at 02:00. After a sleep the battalion were given a rest day to clean up themselves and their equipment as best they could. A start was made on protecting the huts against AA fire by building walls around them.

5th Feb 1918

Work continued on protecting their billets and two working parties were detailed to build similar protection for the 2nd Div HQ and the Signal School.

The whole battalion was able to get away to Etrecourt baths.

6th February 1918

The majority of the Battalion was employed pitching tents under the orders of the area commandant.

CSM Thurman of D Coy and CSM Loynes of C Coy were sent back to England as 'war torn' - they were replaced by CSMs Brooks and Woodley.

7th-8th February 1918

The 6th Battalion had been disbanded following the brigade re-organisation and 5 officers and 138 men arrived from them to be posted to the 1st Bn. They were very welcome reinforcements and next day they were posted to companies. 2Lts W T Ward and H M Avery went to A Coy, 2Lts C H Beer and J A Wright to B Coy and 2Lt JBT Mold to D Coy.

9th February 1918

The working parties which had been continuing for several days were abruptly cancelled. The divisional front was being reorganised and the Royal Berks, less a party from D Coy were sent to Brigade reserve at Havrincourt Wood. The party of 50 men from D Coy went to Lincoln Reserve for wiring duties.

Col Hunt went off to Camiers for an MG demonstration and Capt Pugh took over command.

Reserve - Havrincourt Wood

10th to 12th February 1918

At Havrincourt Wood life went on much the same. Working parties were extended and each day four parties of an officer and 40 men went out to dig communication trenches under the supervision of 483 Field Coy RE and another group of 100 at Lincoln Reserve completing the wiring.

13th to 15th February 1918

As well as the working parties the CO went to a demonstration of tanks working with infantry leaving Major Nugest in command. 7 officers arrived from England on the 13th and were posted as follows:- Lt W L Humbley and 2Lt T M Gower to D Coy; 2Lt S C Beresford and 2Lt H Street to C Coy, 2Lt G H Herring and 2Lt L Saville to A Coy and 2Lt E E Kerby to B Coy.

Front Line - Villers Plouich

15th February 1918

In the evening of 15th February the battalion came out of reserve and relieved the 23rd Royal Fusiliers in the front line near Villers Plouich, to the right of their position in January.

16th February 1918

On the 16th a patrol from D Coy was sent out to investigate a derelict tank at Jam Sap which was found to be occupied by Germans. Another patrol of A Coy under 2Lt Lord worked up to the La Vacquerie re-entrant near the deserted gun pits but were forced to withdraw when they encountered a strong force of the enemy.

17th February 1918

The 17th saw further patrol activity. One from A Coy moved north towards Jam Sap to find out whether the Germans were still working on their new trench - no movement could be detected. Another fighting patrol from A Coy under 2Lt Lord searched the area around the gun pits looking for an identification without success and were fired on by German machine guns. Further patrols from D Coy on the right were made.

18th February 1918

On the 18th a daylight patrol from B Coy, under Second-Lieutenant Reynolds and Sergeant Jenkins, reached an enemy dugout on Partridge Road and shot the sentry. The patrol was driven off after some fighting, in which at least two more Germans were accounted for, but no identifications were obtained. Lance-Corporal Davy was killed. A C and D Coys also had patrols out trying to take Germans either dead or alive for identification but without success.

19th February 1918

At 23:00 on the 19th, under cover of an artillery bombardment, a strong patrol, under Second-Lieutenant Lord, ransacked the gunpits where the enemy had been working. A lighted brazier and other signs of recent occupation were found, but nothing to identify units. There were no casualties and no prisoners.

Second-Lieutenant Wright was wounded on this day by a German "pineapple" falling in the entrance of B Company's Head-quarters. Though there is little mention of it in the Battalion Diary, that of the Brigade shows that on this day an unsuccessful attempt was made on a barricade erected by the enemy on a road, which practically neutralized the efforts of parties approaching from the north. A bombardment by four light trench mortars was a failure, owing to the guns all jamming. The enemy, who held their position with machine guns and bombs, wounded seven of their assailants, and two or three more were missing.

20th February 1918

Early morning patrols were out reconnoitring the enemy lines by Syme Sap and Partridge Road. All day they were watching for signs of movement from the German.

21st February 1918

A Coy were sent to relieve a company of the 52 LL on the left thus extending the front held by the Royal Berks to 2000 yards.

More patrols went out to try to make a capture but again without success.

22nd February 1918

At 03:00 a final attempt was made to secure a prisoner. A raid was made upon the enemy dug out where the enemy had been found in strength on the 18th. However the Germans had erected a barricade across the road and the Trench Mortar bombardment had been disappointing as all four mortars had jammed. They had been forced to add additional charge rings to cater for the extended range and managed to fire off only 38 shots. The enemy were holding their position with a machine gun and

throwing bombs. One of the bombs wounded a party of 7 men and when the roll was called later two were found to be missing: 38431 Pte Burman and 9904 Pte Fox

Reserve - Metz en Couture 22nd February

In the evening of the 23rd they were relieved by 1st KRRC and moved into Divisional Reserve at Metz en Couture. All had left the trenches by 20:15 and in billets by 22:30

No sooner had they settled in than the Germans lobbed 20 or 30 HV shells into the village but the Royal Berks escaped injury.

23rd February 1918

More shelling in the morning. The men spent most of the day building revetting against shell fragments and generally tidying up.

24th February 1918

All the men were able to get a bath and there were a few near misses in the shelling.

25th February 1918

For a change the Germans switched tactics and instead of shelling Metz they concentrated artillery fire on Havrincourt Wood using mainly gas shells. The British artillery responded vigorously. The CO held an inspection in the afternoon.

26th February 1918

The whole day was spent in digging a cable trench without molestation from the enemy. They were back in billets by 16:30

Two more officers arrived from 6th Battalion, 2Lt W S Winstanley who was posted to D Coy and 2Lt A E Foster posted to B Coy.

27th February 1918

There was an officers conference in the afternoon.

28th February 1918

The body of Pte Burman, missing since the 22nd was found by a patrol of the 1st KRRC near wire undisturbed by the enemy.

2nd Lt W S Hussey joined from 6th Battalion and was posted to C Coy.

Support - Villers Plouich 1st to 5th March 1918

The battalion took over the support trenches at Villers Plouich from the 23rd Royal Fusiliers who moved up to the front line. The weather was miserable, cold, wet and some snow and sleet. The men were kept occupied for the next few days in working parties under the supervision of the Royal Engineers, scavaging and moving up supplies.

There were persistent rumours of a major German attack, but none came.

6th March 1918

On the 6th March the battalion moved up to replace the 23rd Royal Fusiliers in the front line at La Vacquerie. Capt Valentine went on a short leave and 2/Lt J A Grimes took temporary command of B Coy in the centre.

7th March 1918

At 00:35 on the 7th the enemy projected gas cylinders using "Rum Jar" trench mortars. They were exploded with high explosives and such was the noise and the effect of the detonation that it was some time before it was realised the phosgene gas was spreading. As a result Second-Lieutenant J. A. Grimes, M.C., was badly gassed and died next day. He had been trying to rescue a man who had been buried by a shell. Second-Lieutenants Beer and Foster, and twenty-nine other ranks were also gassed, though not fatally.

8th to 10th March 1918

On the nights of the 8th, 9th and 10th they sent out patrols to try to capture some Germans but with little success.

On the 10th a patrol under 2Lt A J Harries went out to cut wire in preparation for a future raid by 23rd Royal Fusiliers.

A change of defensive tactics resulted in the front line being relatively lightly held by two companies so that in the event of a German attack they could fall back quickly to the main defensive positions on Highland Ridge and Blenheim Switch.

11th to 12th March 1918

German gas shelling was very bad at this time and on the 11th a bombardment, starting at 19:15 and lasting three and a half hours, with mustard gas mixed with high explosive caused very heavy casualties.

Eleven officers suffered from it: Major C. Nugent, Captains M. C. Dempsey, R. M. Porritt (Medical Officer), Lieutenant J. W. Johnson. Second-Lieutenants W. Leach, E. E. Kirby, A. J. Harris, J. Titley, A. S.

Durham, T. M. Gower and W. S. Winstanley. Also two hundred and fifty-seven other ranks. Few of these cases would have been bad enough for evacuation to England, but for the necessity of clearing the hospitals in France in the ensuing fighting.

War Diaries of 1st Battalion
Berkshire Chronicle.

Continued in section 311

The Berkshire Chronicle of 29/3/18 reported:-

FOOTBALLER WOUNDED - [2Lt W Leach] Second Lieutenant W Leach Royal Berks whose home is at Abingdon has been wounded and gassed and is in Rouen hospital. He is the well known footballer who has assisted the Reading FC. Recently he was awarded the Military Cross; he also did good work in the Battle of Cambrai. [TX00424]

Reserve - Metz

On the evening of the 12th they were relieved by 1/KRRC and retired to Divisional Reserve at Metz. They were still within range of the German guns and suffered several bombardments over the next few days.

13th March 1918

On the 13th the men were given time to rest and bathe and were issued with new clothes. There was spasmodic shelling at 23:00 and all day the smell of the gas was very noticeable.

14th to 18th March 1918

The day opened at 05:20 with another shell bombardment.

Later on the 14th, 125 ORs from the Buckinghamshire Territorials arrived as reinforcements (numbers around 50714+) They were used to replenish B and D Coys which had been practically wiped out as a result of the gas.

Although supposedly in Divisional reserve the battalion was on standby almost all the time, moving up to the support trenches in the evenings to be ready for the anticipated attack.

On the 18th the battalion relieved the 23rd Royal Fusiliers in the support trenches and eventually they were relieved by the 15th Londons of 47 Division and withdrawn to Corps reserve at Manancourt

Reserve - Manancourt

19th to 20th March 1918

Here at Manancourt they had a chance to relax and get a bath. The following day (20th) was very quiet. The storm was about to break however

Sources

Petre pp 45, 47 and 48

China Dragon 1919 p11