

Volume 7 Section 303

Interlude V

The 1st/4th Battalion Oct 1917 to Feb 1918

*The Battalion had arrived in Italy after a gruelling train journey from the Vimy area.
[continued from section 283]*

The War in Italy

When war broke out Italy had been part of the Triple Alliance along with Austria-Hungary and Germany. They too had aspirations in the Adriatic along with Serbia and Austria-Hungary, but so far as they were concerned the war did not involve them and they declared their neutrality. However when Turkey joined the German side alarm bells began to ring. Italy had a long history of conflict with the Ottoman Empire and had no desire to see them overwhelm the Adriatic coast opposite Italy with Austria still in control of the head of the Adriatic in what was Italian speaking areas captured in the Austrian-Italian War of 1869. Equally they were keenly aware that they were neither strong enough to counter the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean nor the French on land.

This presented Britain with a golden opportunity. After protracted secret negotiations a Treaty was signed in London on the 26th April 1915 under which Italy would regain all its captured territories in return for a declaration of war on the Allied side. This duly happened on the 23rd May.

The Italian Army was very weak but it had a nucleus of crack alpine troops and a commander in chief, in the person of Luigi Cardona whose brutal methods would drive his troops to prefer to face the enemy than him. For the next two years the Italians and Austrians engaged in a series of battles of Isonzo, mostly initiated by a determined Italian attack on the Austrians which was repulsed.

The campaign took a dramatic turn in October 1917 when the Austrians with the Germans broke through at Caporetto and threatened Venice, the Italian army collapsed and Britain and France had to despatch a large contingent to prevent Italy being forced to surrender. Among them was 48th Division and the 1st/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment

In Reserve

The Division was part of General Haking's XI Corps and started off in Reserve as the Italians had by then

stemmed the Austrian advance. The two parts of the Battalion had been reunited on the 4th December at Zavatiere. The rest of the 145th Brigade were the Bucks at Villafranca, the Oxfords at Campodoro and the Gloucesters at Bosco di Nanto. The next day they all moved forwards again with the Royal Berks marching to Villafranca via Montegalda, Gristignano, pojana and Campodoro. The battalion was then told it could have only 30 officers so Second Lieutenants H G Buchanan, S W Reed, F H Mann, H T Wevill, R A Brake and O A Stott were sent to Base for redeployment.

The next day it was on again. This time to Marsango starting at 09:00 via Tremignon and Ponte Militare at Campo St Martino. As they marched past Piazzola they were inspected by the Divisional General, Major General R Fanshawe. They remained at Marsango until the 14th, even though they were put on a two hour standby to move on the 7th. It was an opportunity for light training and repairs to boots and clothing and all the men got a bath on the 10th after two tubs per company were borrowed from villagers.

On the 14th they moved to their intended destination, S Croce Bignolina near Tezze. They left Monsango at 09:30 having been delayed by a Brigade of Italians passing in the opposite direction. Their march took them via Busiogo, Paviola, S Georgio in Bosco, Facca, Fontavina and Frata. There was a halt at noon awaiting orders and from 14:00 to 15:00 for dinner. When they arrived at S Croce they found very good billets for the men but those for the officers very poor. Next day their mail caught up with them and it felt as if Christmas had come early.

Over the next few days it was the usual round of training with occasional forays of small parties of around 50 men to explore the foothills of the Alps and the country they were to operate in.

On the 22nd they were allocated a part of a lorry going to Vincenza and Padua for Christmas supplies. Each officer had been asked to contribute to a fund in proportion to his pay and this was supplemented by a donation of £50 from the County Association. The extras so purchased included pork, fruit, beer, coffee and vegetables. A C and D Companies were able to eat as companies but B had to split up into platoons. HQ, the band, and the stores and transport sections all made their own arrangements. The local priest made his premises available to the officers and scraped together enough crockery for them all to eat off. It was all a great

success and pronounced the best Christmas dinner of the war. In the afternoon the officers played the officers of the 5th Gloucesters at football and drew 1-1. Christmas messages were read out from General Sir Herbert Plumer, the C in C, Lt Gen Sir RCB Hacking, the Corps Commander and Major General Fanshawe the 48th Division commander, plus messages from the King and Queen.

The new year was very cold and bright and with only light work to do the men fared well. There were the occasional inspections by both General Plumer the CinC and by General Hacking. When the time came to leave there was sadness on both sides, the local community had come to appreciate the discipline and chivalrous behaviour of the Royal Berks and had been as helpful as possible. The parish priest in particular was praised in the diary. Many of the villagers had made a room available for men to read and write letters home. Lamps and oil were obtained from Divisional resources to make this feasible as the evenings were very dark.

They left Bignolia on 24th January marching to Paviola via Fontaniva, Barina, S Georgio in Brenta and S Georgio di Bosco. They were all in their billets by 13:15 but next day half the Battalion moved back to St Georgio di Bosco leaving the rest of the Battalion at Paviola. For a while the fortunes of the two halves was to diverge.

First Part (Right Half)

HQ, B and D Companies and part of the transport section moved to St Georgio di Bosco on the 25th for a days training and were then ordered to Villa Jonoch. They set out at 14:00 via Cittadella to billets at the Chateau. Here they carried on training with the occasional route march and inspection.

On the 9th February they moved by march to Resana via Cittadella and Castel Franco. En route the King of the Belgians and his entourage passed by while they were having a rest stop.

On the 13th they moved on again to Paese marching via Albaredo. Training and inspections continued with a break to supply a party to work on the St Luca aerodrome from the 20th to 22nd.

Second Part

The detachment left at Paviola were to be used as labour troops for GHQ under the command of Capt O B Challenor. They left Paviola at 09:00 passing through S Georgio di Bosco, Villa del Conte and Camposimpiero to Lorregio which they reached by 15:25. A thaw had set in making the roads very muddy and slippery. The next day they were ordered to Battaglia by the Railway Travel Office but a message from Division told them to stay put. They finally left Lorregio at 09:25 on the 28th January to march to Campo Sampiero to board a train

to Battaglia via Padova. Here dinner was served at the station and then a very long and tiring march to the Convent di Praglia. The march took from 15:10 to 20:00 via Galzignano and Tramonte over very bad roads with steep hairpin turns and, from 17:00 in dense fog. When they arrived they found they were unexpected and no billeting arrangements had been made so they had to make the best of it

Next day Capt Challenor himself went around the village and found much more suitable billets for his men.

On the 28th they formed two working parties for the afternoon. One with four officers and 90 men were employed in filling in the assault course and the other of five officers and 130 men were pipelaying. This went on for several days with varying numbers of parties of different size attacking a very wide variety of jobs from electrical wiring and quarry work to a trip into Padua to replenish the rations.

The 1st February was marked with a concert with the band of the 26th Royal Fusiliers. Saturday the 2nd was declared a half holiday for the men although those engaged in laying transmission wires were kept on the job owing to its importance. The Sunday was declared a full holiday, again except for the wiring men - the day was marked by a football match against men from XI Corps HQ which the Royal Berks won 1-0.

Mail had been arriving somewhat spasmodically and taking between eight and twelve days to reach Italy owing to the severe congestion on the French railway system. In February the postal authorities introduced a travelling post office to link Modane and Padua. This connected with an express service from France to Modane which was used for the mails instead of the usual supply train. Couriers and divisional trains then delivered the mail to the operational units. As a result the Field Post Office which had been at Padua was moved to Battaglia on the 8th Feb and the mail service greatly improved.

An inter-company football competition was organised within 145 Brigade. C Coy beat the Glosters D Coy 3-2 on the 10th, A Coy beat the Oxfords D Coy 1-0 on the 11th, B Coy drew with D Coy 1-1 on the same day and the game was replayed next day resulting in another draw 0-0. D finally won on the 21st by 2-1. There was also a Divisional competition as the 4th Berks lost 0-2 to the 5th Sussex at Badoere on the 17th competing for the Fanshawe Cup.

C Company left the detachment on the 18th going by train from Abano Bagni at 14:00 after a long delay. A Company followed on the 23rd but they were conveyed by road in motor lorries. They left behind an officer and 50 men who were engaged on working parties but they rejoined next day being relieved by men of the 4th Gloucesters.

where the battalion split up once again with B and D Coys going on to billets at the Convent di Praglia, just to the south of Padua where they stayed until late February, training for the mountain warfare to come.

Sources

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

Petre pp163-5

Cruttwell pp131-136

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