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Interlude V

5th Battalion - December 1917 to March 1918

The story of the 5th Battalion continues from the end of the Battle of Cambrai until the start of the German Offensive in March 1918

Resting 8/12/17 to 11/1/18

After its rough handling in the second part of the Battle of Cambrai, the battalion required a good rest out of line, and by the 8th December was at Aveluy, north of Albert, whence it moved by rail northwards to the Bethune area, where, on the 11th, it was reinforced by several officers from the 4th (Reserve) Battalion.

From the 21st December to the end of 1917 it was at Merville.

Reading Mercury 30/11/1918

When the 5th Battalion came out of the line after Cambrai they went to Merville and, soon after Christmas, went up to the Laventie Sector, in front of Saily and Fleurbaix, where they were on the left of the Portuguese. This was their situation, in Divisional Rest, when the German Offensive began on March 21st. The Berkshires, therefore, did not participate in the early stages of this terrific conflict.

The early days of 1918 call for little regarding the 5th Royal Berkshire.

On the 5th January there was a distribution of awards for the Battles of Cambrai—the D.S.O. for Lieut.-Colonel Nicolls and Capt. Ready; the M.C. for Capt. J. R. West, Capt. C. A. Mallam, Lieut. H. K. Hay, and Honry. Lieut.-and-Quartermaster J. R. Oxley, and several other decorations. At the end of the month and the beginning of February the battalion was in Brigade reserve behind Fleurbaix.

Private Chapman is Drafted to France

Private F H Chapman (45041) was part of a draft which joined the 5th Royal Berks in January 1918 from the Hampshire Regiment. He served briefly with them until he fell foul of trench fever. He recorded his impressions of his time with the 5th, and particularly a raid in Feb 1918.

During the Autumn of 1917 the regiment in which I served had been in training at Chiseldon near Swindon. As the months passed we had been moved to Salisbury Plain. It was shortly after Christmas that news began to reach

England that the likelihood of a German massive attack could be expected in the Spring of 1918. The French had been badly weakened at Verdun and were appealing for a greater effort from their allies. Of course I am far from hinting that our tiny re-inforcement could affect the issue, I just suggest the background as one of the reasons which sped our draft on its way.

We made our way from Salisbury Plain to Southampton and after crossing the channel we were disembarked at Le Havre. The railway journey from Le Havre to Albert provided me with my first disillusionment. We were packed into cattle trucks and my recollection is that 24 men were allocated to each truck. The railway line was marked by empty tins of all kinds and we were glad to stretch our limbs when we reached Albert.

From Albert the journey, some 12 miles, was made on foot. As we marched through the darkness the sounds of the heavy guns became plainer and our journey grew more tiring. The road was beginning to reveal the effects of artillery fire and before long we could discern the observation balloons, lit up spasmodically by Verey lights.

I recall that we were met at midnight by a Sergeant Major in or near a small hamlet called Roisel. He met our miscellaneous draft with the remark 'God send us some soldiers' I felt the comment well-deserved on my behalf for I am only 5' 4" in height. I was sent with a large section of the draft to join the 5th Royal Berkshire Regiment. We learned later that the regiment had suffered heavily during their last service at the front near a small devastated village called Villers Bretonneaux. We spent the night in partly wrecked houses and next day we were given badges which we had to sew on the back of our tunics. It was the Divisional Badge, the Ace of Spades. We had arrived at the regiment completed its rest period for late the next day we made our way to the support trenches.

First Time in the Trenches

It was customary for each of the four companies comprising a battalion to serve one week in support, one in the third line, one in the second and finally one week in the first line. We fondly imagined that the dangers and hardships were in line with this arrangement. However we soon learned that the front line was by no means the most hazardous. Each night the troops in the support trenches were sent to the front line with replacement supplies such as duck boards, barbed wire and ammunition and generally to act as carriers for the front line.

My first eerie experience was when we were called upon to repair the barbed wire in no-mans-land, the area between the British and German trenches. The Germans and British were constantly illuminating the whole trench area with Verey lights and the German Verey lights were much brighter than our own. In some cases this was helpful as it was always possible to find one's way back to the British trenches by this means. When Verey lights

were floating above and we were repairing the barbed wire, the only hope for safety lay in standing perfectly still until the light had faded - no mean task. I should add that the trenches we were in were about 100 yards from the German lines and that we were in or near the ruined village of Villers Bretonneux.

After a week in reserve trenches our company was moved forward as I have suggested and our week in the front line was comparatively quiet. After our service in the trenches we were relieved by another regiment and were taken back some four or five miles for a rest. I haven't mentioned the incidental horrors of the infamous rats and lice which made life so miserable in the trenches.

Rest and Training

While out on rest great efforts were made to improve morale. 'rest' was a complete misnomer. On one of our rest spells we were rewarded with battalion sports. It was at this time that things moved somewhat quicker for me. One of the more popular events for all concerned was an impromptu steeplechase. This consisted of a massive scramble through crater-scarred streets and old disused trenches. I was very elated to be the narrow winner. It was only later that I learned that such victories could be misnomers. A few days later I was informed that I would be one of a trio selected to undergo initial training for a special raid on a German machine gun post across the wide Somme valley. The post had been a very deadly one as day by day our raiding parties and outposts had suffered at its hands.

The training for the projected raid was planned by using countless yards of tape in a huge pock marked field which had recently been the centre for the battalion sports. Of course the scheme elicited the full humour of the non-selected, especially as I was given an identity disc bearing the number '13' and am very short. The whole idea

of the miniature raid was to destroy the machine gun and capture at least one of the crew.

However the numerous ones were silenced when, on the night before the raid, an order came through from HQ that the projected raid should be cancelled and a raid at battalion strength was planned for the following evening in its place.

The Topography of the Somme Area.

Before attempting to recall the raid it will be helpful to give some idea of the local geography. The Somme is a small sluggish river which winds its way through a wide valley in a generally north-westerly plain in Picardy and finally reaches the sea near Le Havre. The soil is predominantly clayish and, in a rainy period, the out-moded vehicles quickly became a horrible burden for the poor struggling mules and horses.

The Raid

A raid at battalion strength would entail about 800 men and the advance was made by communication trenches to the front line. We set out at about 2100 and reached the front line around 2200. It rained for the whole evening and our new instructions were to climb out of the front line trenches and advance in open order (each man about 4 yards from his neighbour). We were then to continue across to the German trenches and remain for 2

hours.

I should mention here that the number originally selected was some measure of the casual approach to the raid. The special identity discs were issued but I was to retain my lucky 13! We had crouched in the front line for some time when whistles sounded for us to move forward. By this time we were quite soaked and so pretty wet and miserable and therefore actually glad to be moving.

Behind us, on higher ground, were scattered groups of machine gunners. In that distant past the guns were on stout metal tripods and consequently sank somewhat with the vibration of the firing. At any rate their projecting streams of bullets soon began to cut deadly swathes in our advancing ranks. Several men fell on my right as we waded forward and it was only when I collected my thoughts in retrospect that I realised I had been at the end of the machine gun swatting storm of bullets.

Strict orders had been promulgated that no halt should be made to help fallen comrades and to emphasise this the advance was followed by a small force of military police. With the rain and the barbed wire and obstacles of all kinds we were very soon an untidy and scattered unit. It had really become an individual adventure as I was very soon to realise. I remember suddenly finding myself in the remnant of what must once have been a trench - dug out and literally sandbagged by either Germans or British in the 1915 or 1916 era. I was soon to learn more as I heard guttural voices quite near at hand. They were evidently coming from a party of Germans and as a Verrey light hovered above I waited and changed direction as its light faded. By this time the Germans had evidently signalled for supporting artillery fire and any hope of approaching the much vaunted machine gun post rapidly faded. Scattered remnants of our battalion managed to enter the remains of German trenches and we managed to hold these points for an hour or so.

When the time for the return to our own trenches arrived our troubles were far from over. The troops in our own front lines had been warned of our return but in some cases the look-outs were very nervous and liable to shoot on sight. Another potent danger was infiltration. Often Germans seized uniforms from our dead comrades and came back in their turn to obtain information on the regiment facing them and on the strength of the support lines and any material hints on machine guns or artillery strength.

I was soon to learn one effective method of thwarting information. To return to our starting point we had to enter our front lines and to make our way individually by means of the communications trenches. These trenches were very narrow and deep and led in a zig-zag manner back from the front line. I had proceeded a couple of hundred yards when a sentry suddenly appeared and, placing a revolver at my head, wanted my regiment, my company and my number. It was a device to prevent a German from infiltrating but it certainly frightened me and I simply cannot think that any German would be able to give satisfactory answers under such duress.

In retrospect I have often wondered over the possible usefulness of such a raid. With hind sight I realise that the Germans had actually shot their bolt and the new drafts were being indoctrinated into the nature and horrors of war and the unforeseen hazards of trench warfare. The real suffering and misery however was caused by the freezing and insanitary conditions prevailing. A month after the raid I developed trench fever and was evacuated to an American hospital at Etretat, a coastal resort on the outskirts of Le Havre.

A Change of Brigade

It was at this period that brigades were being reduced from four to three battalions, and the 12th Division, from the 6th February, was to consist of three brigades of three battalions. In the rearrangements consequent on this the 5th Royal Berkshire were transferred from the 35th to the 36th Brigade, comprising, besides them, the 9th Royal Fusiliers and the 7th Royal Sussex. They passed into their new brigade at Fleurbaix on the 6th February, and remained in that neighbourhood doing nothing requiring record till the breaking of the storm of the German offensive on the front of the 5th Army, on the 21st March, necessitated their moving rapidly southwards.

Bibliography

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