

Volume 10 Section 306

Interlude V

The 6th Battalion - November 1917-February 1918

This period saw the end of the 6th Battalion. They played no role in the Battle of Cambrai and spent a very uncomfortable winter before disbandment

Winter in the Mud

From the latter part of November 1917 until January 1918 the Battalion was in and out of the front towards Houthulst Forest which, almost certainly, was the most uncomfortable section of the front on which the Battalion had been stationed.

Capt GHF Nichols provided a graphic description in the 18th Division's history -

'There was nothing sylvan about Houthulst, whatever imagination may have been conjured up from the name. It was a flat, low-lying six hundred acres of broken stumps and wreckage, a swamp with many a deep and treacherous hole to trap the unwary walker and let him in

up to the neck. There are stories that the Germans, in as much dragged misery as ourselves, came at times to pull out with ropes men of ours who had got engulfed in the slime. It was mud that stank. When the rain ceased the nostrils had to accept a faded musty smell that hung in the air five miles behind the line - a smell that told of desolation and decay, of gas shells, of dead men .

Trenches were impossible. The men in the line garrisoned a few shell holes, protected here and there with breastworks that were constantly being submerged; Company and Battalion Headquarters were in old pill boxes, where the concrete was cracked and no longer water-tight. The line was reached by duck-board tracks from six or seven thousand yards in the rear. It was inadvisable to attempt to cross the intervening area in the day time, and it was a difficult adventure in the darkness, because the nightly shell fire constantly introduced new pitfalls.

At first it was customary for battalions to spend four days in line and four days out, at the well-named Dirty Bucket Camp. Put in other words it meant that men were four

Destinations of Men of the 6th Battalion

Destination	1RBR	2RBR	2/4RBR	5RBR	8RBR	18MGC	18EB	1DT
rank								
Lt Col					1			
Maj							1	
Capt		1	1	1	2	1		
Lieut		2		3				
2/Lt	9	14	4	2				
Sgt	6	23		5			3	1
Cpl	5	12		5			7	1
L/Cpl	16	41		7			10	2
Pte	134	252		63			40	30
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Total	170	345	5	86	3	1	61	34
%	24%	49%	<1%	12%	<1%	<1%	9%	5%

Abbreviations

- xRBR - Royal Berkshire Regiment, xth Battalion
- 18MGC - 18th Machine Gun Company
- 18EB - 18th Entrenching Battalion
- 1DT - 1st Division Transport

days wet through and four days dry. Experience showed that the reliefs were not sufficiently frequent and casualties from trench feet rose to 100 per Battalion.

The 6th Battalion remained living in these conditions throughout December and January, by which time news of the impending disbandment was filtering through, adding to the loss of morale and the misery.

The Re-organisation of the Army

The decision had been taken to reduce brigades from four to three battalions. This had been brought about by a number of factors. The chief factor was simply that the losses suffered in 1917 posed severe problems in keeping battalions up to strength. At the highest level however was a bitter disagreement as to the need for such large reserves, many of whom were being scarcely deployed. Lloyd-George believed Haig was being over cautious and over-insuring against a German attack. Also battalions were needed for fighting in Italy, the Middle East and the Balkans.

The decision to reduce the size of Brigades would mean that Divisional and Brigade commanders would have to adopt new tactics in the way that troops were deployed and for the men on the ground it meant fewer opportunities for rest and training. Thus there was a severe drop in morale. Added to which the British took over an additional 14 miles of the front from the French.

Informing the 6th Berkshires

On the 29th January 1918 the Battalion was addressed by its Commanding Officer and Brigadier General Higginson, officer commanding the 53rd Brigade.

Private AJ Gosling (16070) did not hear about it until later.

'In February we were informed that the whole British Army was to be split up and that our Battalion was to be disbanded. This came as a bitter blow to those of us who had been with the battalion since its foundation.'

The Disbandment

The actual disbandment began on 6th February 1918 and groups of men were sent to other units, mainly other Battalions of the Royal Berks. The Commanding Officer went off on leave to America.

The last item recorded in the Battalion War Diary was by Major S Boyle, second in Command.

February 22nd 1918 - Lt Col VM Fitzhugh and Captain JN Richardson MC proceed to Cailloel for attachment to 8th Royal Berkshire Regiment. Only RSM Chick and a few WO and Sergeants left awaiting dispersal. Thus ending one of the finest Battalions of the Service.'

The Battalion War diary lists the destinations of all the 705 men of the 6th Berkshires, except for the few sergeants and Warrant Officers who formed the final cadre. This information is summarised in the table on

the first page.

Bibliography

Petre pp 284-285

War Diary

Nicholls G F - *The 18th Division in the Great War*

Cruttwell CRMF - *A History of the Great War* p501