

## Volume 12 Section 308

# Interlude V

## The 8th Battalion November 1917 to March 1918

*The 8th Bn had been at Le Clipon for most of the summer getting ready to participate in the amphibious landings which were part of the 3rd Ypres plan. This was now abandoned and the 8th were sent to the mud of Passchendaele.*

### 22nd to 29th October 1917

By the 22nd October the 8th Royal Berkshire were in billets at Rubrouck, on the 26th east of Wormhoudt

## To the Salient

### 30th to 31st October 1917

On the 30th October the 1st Division was transferred to the Fifth Army, coming under XVIII Corps and Lt Gen Sir Ivor Maxse. The battalion had to march from Le Clipon to Passchendaele. The first day brought them to Watton, then next day to Arneke where they stayed for several days staying in farm buildings. On to Wormhoudt where they stayed for 14 days, training and playing football. They were able to relax a little in the evenings as Frank Gray recounted:-

These daily tasks accomplished we used to repair in little batches of comradeship to Wormhoudt in the evening. Sometimes the revels of the evening would be egg and chips and sometimes the almost as harmless indulgence in French beer in an estaminet.

One night we were in an estaminet which was in charge of one of that common type of capable business girl in which the French race appears to abound. She told us that she had been serving men going to and returning from this sector of the line and she had been saddened by the failure of so many fine Englishmen to make the return journey to her house of business.

### 1st to 6th November 1917

The Battalion was then in training at Herzelee, practising new methods of attack, from the 1st to the 6th November. They then moved to Schools Camp near Proven where they were brought rudely to the reality of the Passchedaele mud. Frank Gray described:-

It was a great change for we had left behind us all signs of civilization and peace and had come to the conclusive evidence of war. here the guns roared ceaselessly; here we witnessed many an air fight, and through all continued the drone of traffic from and to the lines.

And in our camp, a sea of mud in which tents stood, there were few marks of geography from which to take our bearings - in fact only a light railway running east and west for ammunition intersecting the sea of mud.

The soil in each tent had been removed to a depth of from one to three feet and banked up outside not only to give protection in the event of bombing and shelling, but in the attempt to remove the mud and secure a dry bed upon which to lie.

Here the conditions were such as to remove - to our great joy - any chance of repeating drills and parades. In this sea of mud to splash about carrying the necessities of food for meals was about the only duty of which the conditions permitted.

We remained in this camp for three days and at sunset we floundered out of the mud and in platoons advanced to occupy the support lines near St Julien.

### 1st to 10th November 1917

From the 1st to the 7th November the battalion was at Herzelee and Schools Camp, whence it marched on the 8th to Poperinghe, entrained there, and, after detraining at Brielen, N.W. of Ypres, marched to Dambre Camp.

### 11th November 1917

When it was at Irish Farm on the 11th three men were killed and eleven wounded by a bomb dropped by an enemy aeroplane. Lieutenant F. Moor's diary says that the bomb was dropped at 05.30 about thirty yards from B Company's marquee. It made a hole twelve feet deep and twenty in diameter, and the concussion brought down several tents.

### 15th November 1917

On the 15th November, the battalion was again preparing for an attack northwards on the northern side of the Ypres Salient in the neighbourhood of Poelcapelle. On the right of the battalion were the Cameron Highlanders, on the left the 2nd Welch. Zero was fixed for 17:00 on the 16th.

## The Attack

### 16th November 1917

On the 16th November at 17:00 the Battalion took part in a 1st Brigade attack in the neighbourhood of Poelcapelle, led by two companies. On their right were the 1st Cameron Highlanders who, because of the marshy nature of the land, were to attack separately. On their right were the 2nd Welch. To achieve surprise the operation was to be carried out after dark without any artillery preparation.

In front B Company under Captain D J Footman, and D under Captain T. B. Lawrence, led the advance without artillery co-operation and met with but little opposition

at first.

B Coy reached its objective by 17:20, but had more difficult swampy ground, and when at 18:40 they were as near their goal as possible, owing to the swamp, they were caught in the enemy barrage. The Camerons on the right were also in difficulties when, in response to their S.O.S., the British barrage was put down.

D Company moving north through Tournant Farm had more difficult ground to cover and were caught by an enemy barrage at 18:40. Not all their objectives were reached but a line was consolidated as near to them as the ground would permit.

During the attack very few of the enemy were seen, and these could not be got at on account of impassable ground. Communication was very difficult, and only possible by runners. The German barrage came down on the line of the Paddebeek stream, beyond which were enemy pill-boxes. The 1st Northamptonshire, on the left, crossed the stream in an endeavour to take these, in conjunction with D the left company of the Royal Berkshire.

During the night of the 16th-17th useful patrols were carried out by Lieutenants C. F. R. Bland and W. C. A. Hauney.

Lieutenant Moor's diary gives a very detailed account of his movements with Nos. 13 and 15 Platoons, but does not convey the impression that there was any severe fighting.

The affair is thus reported by Sir Douglas Haig in his communique issued on Saturday morning:-

A successful operation was carried out late yesterday evening by detachments from Highland, Berkshire and Lancashire battalions in the neighbourhood of Passchendaele. Further portions of the enemy's defence on the main ridge north of the village, including a strongly fortified farm, were captured by us, together with a number of prisoners. Our line west of this locality has also been slightly advanced at several points." [TX00723A]

The Times correspondent supplied the following interesting details:-

While the latter part of the week has seen only minor operations the situation on the Ypres front remains strained and tense and, with guns and aircraft, what is practically a great battle rages almost without cessation.

Since the breakdown of the German attempt at counter-attack to recover the lost ground north of Passchendaele on Tuesday November 13, the only change of position has been the result of the very neat local thrust made on Friday night of which the communique has already told you, the troops engaged being parts of Highland, Lancashire and Berkshire battalions. But nothing like three whole battalions were engaged.

On the western slopes of the Passchendaele Ridge the mud and water have made advance more difficult than on the summit, so that it has been hard for the troops operating on the left to keep pace with those advancing due north along the Passchendaele - Westroosebeke road. About the slopes on the lower ground are a

number of old farms, converted by a lavish use of concrete into formidable redoubts as well as scattered blockhouses. Certain of these positions were so placed as to be able to annoy us badly and on Friday night a sudden thrust was made to clear them out. It was entirely successful.

The attack was made in the dark and wet without preliminary bombardment or barrage.

The Germans were unwarned and relief was going on and we took prisoners both from the 199th Division which was going out and from our old friends, the 4th Division, which, though already so badly battered was being put into the line again. We had some very light losses.

We seized the positions, killing or taking prisoner the garrisons which in some cases were at double strength owing to the relief and now these strong points are welded into our line. It was a little affair but very cleanly executed.

Meanwhile the artillery battle which rages around the ridge is of the greatest intensity. Prisoners say that many new batteries have recently been brought up to the front from Russia. That may or may not be true but the Germans undoubtedly concentrate a very heavy fire on our advanced positions along the Ridge as well as on the areas behind, from either flank. That the enemy will long be able to keep his guns in their present positions is unlikely, for every day and night our heavies are moving closer up and our fire on the enemy batteries grows more and more destructive. [TX00723B]

## The Mud of Passchendaele

Private Frank Gray was sending items back home to the Oxford Mail in one he described his journey with the 8th Royal Berkshires to the Front and back again to support the attack on Poelcapelle. He was part of a party of a dozen who were detailed to provide rifle cover for a carrying party.

We started early in the afternoon upon a journey which it would take us until eight or nine at night to perform. It was a bright afternoon, typical of golden autumn, and one can imagine how delightful a long tramp would have been if one had under one's feet the springy turf of a Berkshire Down. But instead of that we had to journey through an illimitable sea of sticky and oozing mud, only varied by water-filled shell holes and the floating waste the battlefield and we had to perform our journey entirely on duck or trench roads; indeed it is difficult to conceive how we could otherwise have accomplished it.

At the time of the journey of which I speak the British had opened up a fierce bombardment, and at first I was dazed by the blinding flashes and reverberating cracks that assaulted eye and ear as we picked our board-way between our own guns, locked almost wheel to wheel and nose to tail. But after a time I gained some confidence and was able to survey my surroundings as I marched. They were horrible surroundings - the flotsam and jetsam of the last battle, the bodies of friend or enemy, irrecoverable in that wide morass, and then, as you walked by some water-filled shell hole, a drowned horse wide-open eyes seemed to look up and rebuke humanity. Ever and anon as we pursued our track across that weary waste we saw other parties tracking their way through the wilderness to meet us. Among them was a train of stretcher bearers for whom we selected a piece of ground drier than the other pieces and stepped off our boards to give them passage.

There were some points of interest in that Slough of Despond. We passed our own no longer used trenches, and we passed trenches from which our troops had expelled the enemy. We examined them carefully, noted the labour and material which had gone into their making, and knew that the enemy never intended, nor expected to leave them

After a nerve-racking period of suspense under heavy shell fire the moment for the advance arrives: It is dark and foggy, and we welcome both the darkness and the fog for we know where we are going and neither darkness nor fog can alter that knowledge, although we are in a sea of mud. We advance watchful and in silence. We near and, but for a little, gain our positions and then we are in touch - in close touch - with the enemy. The enemy thus alarmed send up their SOS signal to their artillery; they repeat and repeat again the signal of distress, but before their artillery can get into action our artillery has started, for we, seeing the enemy's signal send out the SOS too. But we do not need to repeat it, for every artilleryman is ready and waiting, and our message has scarcely arisen above the height of man when it is answered by one great roar, not of one gun, but of many guns, but of every gun which is detailed to come into action that night, and every gun speaks at once. Then the German artillery opens, and thus begins that duel which is to last 15 hours. During that 15 hours we completed and consolidated our advance, and settled down to wait until our relief came in the evening - till the new spare parts the great machine arrived to carry on where we left off.

At last that death dealing duel over us and around us ended. It was followed by a great and welcome calm in which we watched against attack while we waited for relief, counting the minutes that passed so slowly, but still passed.

Then came relief and a start was made for a camp in the support lines. The journey commenced in the dark and occupied the whole night and was a very painful ordeal. The enemy, as if enraged at the escape of his prey, shelled them firecely.

The journey was first a struggle through an area of mud made dangerous by deep water-filled shell-holes. Then we traversed miles of trench or duck boards laid like a continuous bridge over shell-holes and bottomless mud: next we struck a footpath and finally a wood. [We had not struggled more than a few yards when I discovered that the long standing and sitting in clay mud up to and above the knees had partially deprived me of the control of my legs. I speak of myself because I know of myself, but in all that I say my case and condition did not differ materially from the case and condition of others. A few yards further and I had fallen into a shell-crater and my right arm was buried in mud right up to the shoulder so that I was powerless to help myself. From this unpleasant position I was rescued by the muscular strength of the clay digger. I got righted just in time to see one of my friends disappear in a water filled shell hole, but he too was rescued.

At last exhausted by this time from struggling step by step as the treacherous mud held us back, we gained the friendly boards. But the boards did not give us the relief expected for they were uneven, broken by shell fire and in places missing and the darkness helped to confuse and baffle us. Mile after mile we struggled on, sometimes slipping into infusing mud three feet deep, at other times falling headlong into cold slimy pools of mud and water.

At length with a great weight of mud clinging about me, and a feeling of exhaustion heavy upon me, I begged to be allowed to lie where I was while the platoon went ahead. But the platoon would not abandon a comrade in distress. And so I made one effort more and, mud plastered, sweating from every pore, encouraged by kindly words, helped by friendly arms, I struggled to the road at last. And there for a time we lay, weak men and strong alike in the mud of the road, exhausted. After a while we staggered to our feet and continued our journey until we came to a spot where men make soup under shell-fire to feed exhausted troops. I was too worn to get the soup for myself, but a young friend who had kept steadfastly with me through all these miles always uttering words of encouragement, got me some and this meant so much.

At last we started on our journey again, but many of us had become fagged out beyond the restoring power of soup and the sergeant called out for volunteers to carry the rifles and equipment of men who could no longer carry them for themselves. Some worn men staggered forward to bear the burdens of men still more worn. Eventually we reached the road to our camp and here we anxiously awaited the reserve and noncombatants, cooks and others who had not been into the line. Plenty of help was soon forthcoming. I was supported by strong arms on both sides and so singly or in little groups of two or three we staggered and struggled into the camp. When we got under its lights what a forlorn spectacle we presented. Our clothes were weighed down and caked by the adhesive slimy mud and gaped in rents where the mud's sheer weight had pulled open seams. Prompt and kindly hands fed me with what I needed so much, and then my wet clothes were pulled off I was wrapped in blankets and slept.

On the morrow a message of thanks and appreciation was brought from our Divisional General followed by a personal visit from our Brigadier for we had won ground, but more than that we had held our positions, receiving all the enemy could give us without the power of defence.

### **17th November 1917**

Evacuation of the wounded was successfully carried out during the early morning of the 17th. Casualties were 6 killed and 28 wounded, the small number being due to the fact that the attacking companies were able to advance beyond the line of the German barrage before it came down. About a third of the casualties occurred before the attack started during an enemy retaliatory bombardment. At the end of the operation the Battalion occupied a position north of Tournant Farm, about half a mile north west of Goudberg in the direction of Poelcapelle.

During the night of the 17th/18th the Battalion was relieved in the front line by the 10th Gloucesters and moved to Hill Top Farm.

### **18th November 2nd December 1917**

On the following day it moved to Dambre Camp; on the 22nd to Road Camp and on the 27th to Poodle Camp.

### **3rd to 31st December 1917**

On the 3rd December they entrained at Proven for Boesinghe from where they marched to the French shelters at Lizerie.

Here, next day, they relieved four companies of the 208th

French infantry in the left battalion front of the Houthulst Forest area. The Berkshire diary praises the French arrangements for relief, under which five officers were left behind for twenty-four hours to show the newcomers their way about. The weather was fine and frosty.

The line here consisted of outposts without any regular trench system.

During the night of the 6th-7th the 10th Belgian Infantry relieved the French 110th on the left of the Royal Berkshire. The latter went into reserve on the 8th on relief by the Gloucestershires. On the 12th they were at Chauny Camp where there was a presentation of medals, including the Military Cross for Lieutenant Bland.

Christmas Day was spent in billets at Reninghof and it is noted that the men had an excellent dinner of turkeys, vegetables, Christmas pudding and beer, and received presents from Queen Alexandra's Field Force Fund.

On the 27th the battalion went to the reserve position at Boche Cross Roads, where they had been on the 8th, and in the night of the 28th-29th they returned for the last days of 1917 to their old position in front line, between the Belgians on the left and the Cameron Highlanders on the right.

#### January 1918

The last year of the War opened for the 8th Royal Berkshire on the Houthulst Forest front where they were at the end of December. Conditions in trenches in Flanders were generally bad, but, to judge from the History of the 18th Division, the Houthulst Forest front was the most miserable of all. Here they remained with nothing special to record for the whole of January, taking their turn in front line, in support, or in the reserve areas.

They ended the month with a strength of 44 officers and 855 other ranks.

#### February 1918

On the 1st February the battalion was preparing to leave the 1st Division, in consequence of the reorganization of that period. General Strickland, commanding the division, bade them farewell on the 2nd, and they received many manifestations of good feeling from the other battalions with which they had served so long in the 1st Brigade.

On the 3rd they left the 1st Division, being played out by the band of the Camerons, and marched into the area of the 18th Division, to the 53rd Brigade of which they were now to be attached. On their way to Portsmouth Camp they marched past Major-General Lee, C.B., commanding the 18th Division.

The 6th Royal Berkshire was, disbanded in the early days of February 1918, and their place in the 53rd Brigade was taken by the 8th Battalion. The other battalions of the reduced brigade were the 7th Royal West Kent and the 10th Essex.

The 18th Division which, like the 1st, had spent a miserable winter in the water-logged country about the Houthulst Forest, was now about to move to a more congenial country, though it was to undergo more terrible experiences of modern war than it had yet incurred in the great German offensive against the British 5th Army on the Somme Front in March 1918.

On the 7th February the battalion entrained at Proven for Noyon, S.E. of Amiens, where it arrived at 3 p.m. on the 8th and at once marched to Babœuf, whence on the 10th a fourteen-mile march carried it to Jussy on the St. Quentin Canal, and the next day saw it at Clashes, two miles farther north, working hard at the defensive lines. On the 15th the battalion was at Caillouel training and working, on the 25th at Haut Tombelle Camp, and on the 26th in the left sector of the brigade front line. Most of the 18th Division front at this time was separated from the enemy by the River Oise, flowing through a marshy plain between Alaincourt, six or seven miles S. by E. of St. Quentin, and Travecy, another six miles to the south.

#### March 1918

There is nothing much to record in the early days of March, beyond the rather heavy loss of two men killed, fifteen wounded, and two missing, the consequence apparently of German bombardment for a raid directed on the troops to the right of the battalion.

On the 20th March warning was received of an impending enemy attack.

### Sources

Public Record Office File W095/1265

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FRANK GRAY *Confessions of a Private*

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Lt FREWIN MOOR - diaries

*Continued in section 318*









