

## Volume 6 Section 342

# The Armistice and Beyond

### 2nd Battalion - November 1918 to October 1919

*The 2nd Battalion were at Pommeroeuil when the armistice came into effect. - Continued from section 332.*

#### Esplechin

11th to 30th November 1918

The war diary does not mention the armistice so after their short spell in billets at Pomereoeul they moved on to Bouvrain on the 12th. After another pause for training the battalion transport set off by road to Esplechin on the 15th and the remainder of the battalion followed by bus on the 16th.

On the 20th they received a letter from the Mayor of Reading:-

TOWN HALL, READING 14th November 1918

Dear Sir,

On behalf of the Council and Citizens of the County Borough of READING, I tender you and the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the 2nd Royal Berkshire Regt hearty congratulations on the successful issue of the fight for Right, in which you have been engaged, and sincere thanks for the great gallantry and wonderful patience, with which, during the long period of the war, you have sustained the honour of England and of the ROYAL COUNTY, whose name you bear.

Yours faithfully

Stanley Hayward, Mayor. (DOS 144]

The CO replied:

Headquarters

2nd Btn Royal Berkshire Regt

B. E. F., FRANCE

20th November 1918

Dear Sir,

On behalf of the officers, warrant officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the 2nd Royal Berkshire Regiment, I desire to thank you, the Council, and the Citizens of the COUNTY BOROUGH OF READING for you letter of the 14th Instant.

The knowledge that the Citizens of your great and famous town were following the movements of their Regiment has been an inspiring influence on all ranks.

All ranks look forward to the time when the terms of the Armistice have been complied with, and the conclusion of peace will allow us to return to our homes, as loyal and dutiful Citizens of the ROYAL COUNTY whose name it is our privilege to bear.

Yours faithfully,

[signed] A. G. F. ISAAC, Lt-Col

Comdg 2nd Royal Berkshire Regt. [DOS 144]

At the same time he took the opportunity to write to Lady Constance Pasley, who had been organising the Battalion's Comforts Fund

Headquarters

2nd Btn Royal Berkshire Regt

B. E. F., FRANCE

22nd November 1918

Dear Lady Constance,

Now that the terms of the Armistice are being complied with, and peace is in sight, I cannot allow the moment to pass without a letter of thanks and appreciation for all that has been done for this Battalion by you during the long period of hostilities.

I write, therefore, on behalf of all ranks of the Battalion under my command, to thank you, Miss Allfrey, and other Ladies who have so generously helped us during the last four memorable years.

Throughout the campaign a continual stream of gifts have been received, and the thoughtfulness, labour and expense entailed have been very greatly appreciated by us all. No one could have done more for the comfort of the troops, and many games would never have been played but for the very material assistance you have given us.

Many incidents of the Campaign may fade from our memories, but the part you have played can never be forgotten.

Would you please convey to all who have so generously helped, our keen appreciation and sincere thanks.

I have caused a copy of this letter to be placed in the records of the Regiment.

Yours sincerely,

[signed] A. G. F. ISAAC, Lt-Col

Comdg 2nd Royal Berkshire Regt. [DOS 144]

On the 26th November the 25th Brigade held a ceremonial parade at Froidmont Aerodrome and on the next day they held an intercompany Guards competition in the Market Place at Esplechin.

On the 7th December the Battalion marched to Tournai for a special parade in honour of King George V who was visiting. 8th Division provided the guard of honour in the Grand Place. The Commander of this guard was Captain H T W Quick of the 2nd Royal Berks. Along

with the rest of 25th Brigade the 2nd Battalion lined the Boulevard Leopold and cheered the King as he walked by.

On the 12th the final of the Brigade Football Cup was held in pouring rain with the 2nd Bn beating 25th Field Ambulance 2-0.

The 14th December was polling day in the General Election. The men voted by post in their first opportunity since the Army were enfranchised.

The reason that they were in the Tournai area was because they had been earmarked to serve in the British Occupation of the Rhineland. They had received orders on the 14th November that 8th Division was to join III Corps, 2nd Army for the advance into Germany, hence the consolidation in the II Corps area at Esplechin near Tournai. However on the 16th December they were notified of a change of heart and got the news they were going home.

## Demobilisation

**December 1918 - May 1919**

They moved on by route march on the 16th to Gaurain-Boamecroiz and then to Ath in the Enghein area and here on the 2nd January 1919 demobilisation began. Over the next few weeks small parties left for England on almost a daily basis.

The Colours, which had been kept in the officers quarters of the Depot during the war, were taken out of store on the 26th January by car to Reading station and then by the 08:20 train to Paddington accompanied by several officers and an NCO. Later in the week they were taken to France and presented in a ceremony to the Battalion.

The Brigade ceremony took place at Engheim on the 31st January and they were inspected by General Dequette who commanded the northern group of French armies and who was presenting a citation to the 24th Field Ambulance who had treated many French soldiers. At the same time Col Isaac was presented with his DSO along with many medals presented to Royal Berkshiremen.

## Return to Reading

**3rd - 17th May 1919**

After this it was at Ath till the 3rd May when, at cadre strength, it entrained for Dunkirk at 13:00. They arrived at Dunkirk at 11:00 next day and went to theno 2 Embarkation Camp to await a ship.

They finally embarked on the SS Mogileff at 16:30 pn the 7th reaching Southampton, at 09:00 on the 9th.

After unloading they entrained for Sandling at 20:00 arriving 16:30 where they moved to no 4 Camp West. At Sandling they handed over all their spare stores and

equipment to the Royal Ordnance Corps.

The final leg of the journey to Reading was completed by train at 14:45 on the 17th May. The train was a few minutes late arriving at Reading. On arrival the cadre and band were formed up in front of the garage outside the railway station. The 84 Others ranks were lead by Lt Col A G F Isaac, with four other officers; Capt H T W Quick, Lt W C Weston, Lt S T Kydd and Lt F J Wedge. The band of the 1st Battalion joined with that of the 2nd Battalion and the colours, originally presented by Queen Victoria in 1881, were paraded. They then received an address of welcome from the Lord-Lieutenant of Berkshire. He was followed by Lt Col Isaac who noted that it was 21 years since the Battalion had last served in England.

Proceeding to the Town Hall, via Station Road, Friar St, West St, Broad St, Butter Market and Market Place another address was received from the Mayor and Corporation. Light refreshments were provided, and then the cadre and band marched through the principal streets of Reading to the Depot Barracks, receiving an enthusiastic reception on the way.

The cadre remained at Brock Barracks over the summer.

Lt Col Isaac moved on and was replaced as CO on the 23rd July by Lt Col R H Collins

He dealt with a letter and plaque received from the Mayor of Le Havre

TO THE COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE 2ND BATTN  
ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGT

Sir

The town of HAVRE begs to offer to your unit, as a token of the friendship and gratitude of FRANCE, this engraving, the cost of which has been raised by subscriptions in HAVRE EXCHANGE.

It is intended to act with your officers and men as a "memento" of their landing in our Country.

For nearly the last five years we have seen, first coming, now returning back across the CHANNEL some millions of BRITISH and COLONIAL soldiers. In August 1914, we warmly welcomed the small but heroic army of the "Old Contemptibles", then, in ever increasing numbers, soldiers of the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc., all of whom have won a glorious name in the trenches and on the Fields.

Big camps have sprung up in our vicinity, and the British Base has become, so to speak, a part of the HAVRE Community. Our streets are enlivened by your presence, and when you leave we shall miss you, as we should old friends, but our hearts will remain closely linked, and we shall never forget the old saying "A friend in need is a friend indeed."

But for the steadfast guard of the British Fleet, the town of HAVRE might by now have been a heap of ruins, and but for the fraternity of our joint Armies, for fully four years, the invaded provinces of FRANCE would not have been cleared of the HUN plague. The breaking of the WOTAN LINE at DROCOURT and QUEANT stands

among the most decisive achievements of the barbarous protracted war.

Now, after GERMANY'S military collapse, when she is trying to rise from her knees, we must remain close allies, standing shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand. Nothing will shake our union, and we shall always hold to PRESIDENT POINCARES' address to KING GEORGE V summing up in these words:

"Together we have suffered, together we have fought, Together we have vanquished; we are united for ever."

The Mayor of the town of HAVRE.

[signed] MORGAND

Le Havre May 1919.

The new COs response was

To: The Mayor of the Town of HAVRE.

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt this day of your letter of May 1919, and of the engraving which accompanied it.

On behalf of all ranks of the Battalion under my Command, I wish to express to you and the HAVRE EXCHANGE our deep sense of gratitude for the sentiments contained in your letter, and also of our warm appreciation of the handsome engraving commemorating our entry at HAVRE upon a comradeship in arms which was destined to last during a momentous period of more than four years.

The sacrifices and hardship suffered by the 2nd Battalion, ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGT, in common with units of the glorious FRENCH ARMY have promoted among us an enduring sense of comradeship.

The innumerable acts of kindness which we have experienced from your people during this eventful period will remain for ever in the grateful memory of the ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGT.

You may rest assured that the memento you have given us will be treasured in the annals of the Regiment. The engraving will be placed where it will serve to remind the present and future generations in the Regiment of the supreme sacrifices which could hardly have culminated in victory but for the firm friendship which was stimulated by the warm greeting extended to the 2nd ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGIMENT on the memorable occasion of its arrival in FRENCH territory on Nov 5th 1914 at the hospitable port of HAVRE.

I have the honour to be,

Yours faithfully,

[signed] R. H. COLLINS, LT-COLONEL

COMMANDING 2ND BATTN ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGT.

### **Dublin** **August 1919**

It had been decided that the 3rd Battalion was to be disbanded so the 2nd Battalion were sent to relieve them so they could demobilize. On the 7th August a party of 4 officers and 59 other ranks left Reading to be based at Portobello Barracks in Dublin. Here they absorbed 34 officers and 1032 other ranks of the 3rd Battalion.

The intention had been that the new battalion would get rid of men due for discharge and reorganise for peace time duties. However their training for this was constantly interrupted as they were called upon to aid the Civil Power.

Their new peacetime duties were revealed on the 23rd December. They were destined to police the plebiscite area in East Prussia.

Departure from Dublin was fixed at January 27th. Their depot was to be located at Chatham so in addition to the normal four companies they formed two additional 'detail' companies. No 1 consisted of the men who would transfer to the 1st Battalion and No 2 would form the depot company at Chatham

An advance party left Dublin on the 19th January and proceeded to Cologne via Dover but on the 23rd orders were received cancelling the assignment and everyone returned to Portobello Barracks by 31st January.

The final days of their time in Dublin were not pleasant. They celebrated Tofrek day on the 22nd March but in the evening, a party of 150 men returning from a visit to the theatre were ambushed by a crowd of civilians, some of whom fired revolver shots at them. The guard picquet responded and two civilians were killed. Next day everyone was confined to barracks. The incident had arisen because the practise of playing the National Anthem after the cinema show had been that the cinema owners waited ten minutes after the performance before playing it in Ireland to allow the patrons to leave. However on this occasion the men from the battalion decide to barricade the doors and keep everyone in until the Anthem was played causing great resentment.

To many people this incident marked the final end of the Great War. Times had changed and there were new realities to deal with.

### **North Russia** **March - October 1919**

In March 1919 a requirement arose for a force of British troops to go to north Russia to cover the withdrawal of British forces already there. The job was given to Western Command to form a battalion from regulars who had already been sent home on leave or for other reasons as the main regular battalions were still either serving overseas or on their way home having been reduced to cadre.

#### **The Background**

The battalion chosen to spearhead the force was the 1st Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and in their Regimental Chronicle they gave a fairly full account.

It may be of interest to explain why the Battalion was sent to North Russia six months after the conclusion of the war. During the war, while Russia was still one of the

Allies, the ports of Archangel and Murmansk were used for the dispatch of stores to Russia, but when the Bolsheviks made peace with Germany and thereby released a million fighting Germans to reinforce our enemy on the Western Front, our reason for being at the North Russian ports underwent a change. Russia was no longer our Ally, and having ceased to fight no longer required the munitions and stores which we had accumulated at the ports. There was the danger, also, of the Germans obtaining possession of them, and of using Archangel and Murmansk as submarine bases, if we abandoned those ports. And there was another reason for an Inter-Allied force continuing in occupation; during the war the Russians had captured from the Austrians a great number of Czechs (about two Army Corps), who had been compelled to serve with the Austrians, although in reality, pro-Ally. These troops, anxious to get away from the Bolsheviks and join the Allies, first endeavoured to find their way to Vladivostok; but this proving impossible, it was suggested to them that they should go in the other direction, and cut their way out by Viatka to Archangel. Taking all this into consideration, the Allies decided in August 1918 to increase the garrisons in North Russia by a small mixed force of British, French, Americans, and Italians, and to attempt to effect a junction with the Czechs. This part of the programme, however, proved a failure, as the Czechs never succeeded in getting anywhere near Viatka, and the Allied force had to remain in occupation of the two ports and the neighbouring country to a distance of about a hundred miles inland. There the Allied presence made itself felt, as the Germans could not leave such a force uncovered, and consequently for the last few months of the war had to cease moving troops from the Eastern to the Western Front.

The Armistice, concluded in November 1918, should in the natural course of events have brought about the withdrawal of the Allied force from North Russia, but the lateness of the season rendered this impossible. The winter had set in, the ports were ice-bound, and the little force was practically marooned, or at any rate cut off from all friends, except some loyal Russian troops who objected to Bolshevism and supported the new North Russian Government. Throughout the winter the troops suffered considerably from the climatic conditions, as well as from constant Bolshevik attacks; and to add to the difficulties of the situation, a large number of the Russian troops, thought to be loyal, mutinied, and went over to the Bolsheviks. It is not, however, necessary to enter into details of these and other complications, as they occurred prior to the dispatch to the scene of action of the reinforcements with which was the 1st Battalion of the Regiment.

In February 1919 it was decided at home to withdraw the force from North Russia, and to evacuate any Russian refugees who wished to leave, as soon as the northern ports should be free of ice and open to navigation. To effect this withdrawal successfully it was necessary to send large reinforcements from England, for the force on the spot was not thought to be sufficiently strong to withstand the Bolshevik attacks and fight rearguard actions for any length of time. The situation has been likened to Sir John Moore's Retreat to Corunna in 1808-9; and as Moore, when reinforced by Baird's troops, was enabled to hit back hard enough to check the French pursuit, so the reinforcements sent to North Russia dealt a blow to the Bolsheviks with such force as to make it possible to evacuate to the ships all the troops (29,000 British and

13,000 Allies) together with no fewer than 6,500 Russian refugees.

### **Formation in England March 25th to May 11th 1919**

Towards the end of March 1919 Colonel W Marriott-Dodington CMG was summoned to the War Office for a personal interview. He was told to assume command of the 1st OBLI and prepare it for service overseas even though the cadre of the battalion was still en-route from Mesopotamia to home. When he arrived at Aldershot on 1st April he found an officer called Titherington in charge of some 70 assorted men, many of whom were not fit for active service.

The other regiments of Western Command were asked to contribute what they had in the way of personnel and the new battalion was officially designated 'No 2 Composite Battalion' on the 8th April. Officers volunteered in droves and the depots scratched around to find men to send.

The main contributors were:-

H.Q. and A Company, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

B Company, Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

C Company, Devonshire Regiment.

D Company, Royal Berkshire Regiment.

A similar Battalion spearheaded by the Hampshire Regiment was also formed under Lt Colonel Sherwood-Kelly VC

The two composite battalions together with a Trench Mortar Battery commanded by Captain J L Carr of the Royal Berkshire Regiment, formed the 238 Special Relief Brigade under the command of Brigadier-General G W StG Grogan VC, CB, CMG, DSO

The composite Battalion was given the precedence of 43rd, that of the OBLI. It assembled first at Aldershot and proceeded to Crowborough Camp on the 15th April. The Royal Berkshire detachment was commanded by Major A G Macdonald, D.S.O., with Lieutenant P. H. Hight as second-in-command. The platoon commanders were Lieutenants W. S. Mackay, E C Denis de Vitre, A. H. Denham MM and Second-Lieutenant F W Paines. In addition there was Lt H E Baldwin and, attached from the OBLI, Lt D C Colvill MC.

By early May it was still some 500 men below strength but by the 9th it had been brought up to full strength of 800 men.

After about three weeks' training and equipment at Crowborough, the Force was inspected by Lord Rawlinson on 9th May prior to embarkation.

### **The Voyage 12th to 26th May 1919**

The Battalion were carried in two trains to Southampton where they embarked on the S.S. Tzar on the 12th May, together with the 155th Field Ambulance and a large number of Royal Navy and Royal Air Force details. Its embarkation strength was 34 officers and 779 other ranks. Another 13 officers and some other ranks proceeded in the Hired Transports "Czaritsa" and "Stephen." They sailed at 19:30 having been given a great "send off" at Southampton, the Mayor being good enough to come down to the Docks and make a speech. Their identifying insignia was a green square with a white centre above the Russian Relief star.

Except for the passing of a few floating mines, the voyage to Archangel was uneventful. They reached Murmansk on the 19th, and remained there as the ice pack outside the White Sea was impracticable without ice breakers.

On the 24th they set off again for Archangel, each ship of the convoy preceded by an ice-breaker. They were held up in the ice for some three hours, but on the 26th they were through, and arrived at the Subornaya Quay, Archangel, at about 13:00, passing from ice and cold to warm summer weather in a few hours.

### **The Reception 27th May to 2nd June 1919**

On 27th May the Brigade landed and was received by the Russian Authorities, Civil and Military. Their Commander (General Grogan) receiving the traditional offering of bread and salt, at a triumphal arch, erected in honour of the relieving troops.

The Regiment was quartered in the Olga Barracks and in a large river barge.

On the 28th the battalion paraded outside Olga Barracks where they were addressed by Major General Ironside who was the Commander in Chief of the North Russia Expeditionary Force.

On the 29th the Mayor of Archangel gave a tea, which was attended by 40 officers. Later an advance party departed Sorornaya Quay for Beresnik, and on the 30th, Major L J Carter (Second in Command), with some officers and men, attended a Memorial Service for the United States troops who had fallen in North Russia.

On 1st June the Regiment, with other troops, paraded to take part in the King's Birthday Parade, and to witness the presentation of a Colour to the 1st Battalion Slavo-British Legion (Dyer's) by General Ironside. This parade was most interesting, the slow marching of the Russian troops at the trooping of the colour being excellent. This Battalion, raised from Bolshevik prisoners, with a proportion of British officers, warrant officers, and N.C.O.'s, with so much care, later on mutinied at the

instigation of some dozen or so fanatical Communists who had got into the ranks.

On 2nd June the Battalion suffered a great loss. Lt G Dancey MC DCM of the OBLI, after completing all preparations for the impending move up the Dwina, shot himself in the head and died in a few hours. There is no doubt that he had completely overworked himself; he had been ill before leaving England, and the strain was too much for him. Capt A E Mason of the OBLI who was messing officer and had gone on with the advanced party on 30th May, was appointed Acting Quartermaster and eventually Quartermaster.

### **To the Forward Area 2nd to 15th June 1919**

The Hampshire Battalion started first in barges up the river Dwina, and was followed next day (3rd) by the composite battalion. (less P Company) which embarked in 15 tugs of various sizes at the Subornaya Quay, and proceeded up the Dwina, bivouacking two nights in the meadows on the banks, and on 5th June arriving at Osinovo on the right bank opposite Beresnik, where they went into a canvas camp for the night. Beresnik, the advanced base for both the Dwina and Vaga columns, lies close to the junction of the Vaga with the Dwina. Lieutenant W. S. Mackay, with his platoon of the Royal Berkshire, was left to guard the advanced base.

The next day (6th June) they re-embarked in two barges, and were towed up to Ust Vaga (on the left bank of the Vaga), a large and straggling village, with blockhouse and barbed wire defences. This place was and remained the base of the Vaga Column.

On 7th June they commenced relieving the troops (British and American) in the forward area, viz.: the villages of Kala Beresnik (left bank), and Nijni Kitsa, Koslovo, and Seltso on the right bank. Major L J Carter assumed command of the forward area, and on 8th June Lt Col W Marriott-Doddington took over the Vaga Column.

The forward area was some 12 to 14 versts distant from Ust Vaga, which made supervision difficult; hence it was decided to move Head-quarters to Seltso. This move took place on 15th June, but Ust Vaga remained the base for all administrative services. [*a verst is roughly the same as a kilometre*] The most advanced village in the forward area (Mala Beresnik) was in fairly close touch with the enemy, and few days passed without its receiving some shells. All the villages were well defended with trenches, dug-outs, blockhouses, and wire, and showed the good work performed by the troops whom we relieved, and who had borne the "cold and burdens" of the previous winter.

They were able to form a small Regimental transport column under Eagle, which proved invaluable. They got together some 35 ponies and 25 carts, the latter carrying

300 lb.

The Battalion were relieving the Royal Scots at Koslova and Mala Beresink on the River Vaga, a tributary of the left bank of the Dwina. This was about two hundred and fifty miles south of Archangel, and the journey had taken two days. Here the right company was on the left bank of the Vaga and the left company on the opposite bank. The whole country which was the scene of operations was flat, marshy, and covered by pine forests. The whole area is unpassable in summer, except in a few strips on the banks of the rivers. The rivers overflow during the early summer thaw. By midsummer the rivers are so low that barges and other craft frequently ground. All houses outside Archangel were of wood, of which also all defensive block-houses were constructed. The temperature in the hottest part of the summer was above the English average for the season, and mosquitoes were extremely troublesome. Of course, in this high latitude, there was a short period during which the sun never set.

## Encountering the Enemy

16th to 24th June 1919

On 16th June they had their first brush with the enemy, a patrol of B Company (R Warwickshires) coming on some defences at Kitsa. The patrol spotted a sentry and decided to rush him but were held up by a strong belt of barbed wire. The Bolsheviks appeared out of their blockhouses and began running away. The patrol opened fire at about 30 yards and killed eight of the enemy before withdrawing, suffering no casualties. The next day a deserter from the 6th Soviet Regiment came in and surrendered.

On the 18th General Grogan came up to see the defences, and informed Col Marriott-Doddington that the Commander-in-Chief wished the column to undertake a raid on the enemy positions at Ignatovskaya and Kitsa. Meanwhile C Company together with HQ and two platoons from Ust Voga and two from Seltso relieved A Company at Mala Beresnik.

Reconnaissance in North Russia was difficult, and could only be carried out by patrols. The whole country is dense and swampy forest, through which run tracks more or less passable for small parties. The main road (a fine broad sandy road in very fair order, but unmetalled) followed the left bank of the Vaga from Beresnik, through Ust Vaga and Mala Beresnik to Ignatovskaya.

The villages were surrounded by open areas in which cultivation was carried on, but there were no inhabitants in the forward area. Ust Vaga was a hotbed of enemy espionage.

### The CO Commented-

It would have increased our chances of success had we known as much as we did later, when Tyrwhitt-Drake and his scouts had explored the tracks.

## The Raid

24th to 27th June 1919

During the first two weeks a small attack was made by the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire company, in which its commander was wounded.

The Commander-in-Chief (Major-General Ironside) visited Vaga Column Headquarters on 24th June, and it was arranged that the raid should take place on the night of 26th/27th June. Night normally implies darkness, but there was no darkness at this time of the year. The total force engaged (besides the Russian Artillery in position) was 2½ companies of the Battalion, two 3.7 inch mountain Howitzers, a detachment Royal Engineers, and some details of Machine Gunners and Trench Mortars.

The plan briefly was for the main column to move by the left bank, and after "mopping up" the enemy advanced position to capture Ignatovskaya. A small column was to move by the right bank and enter Kitsa after the capture of Ignatovskaya. The two columns would then unite, and after "mopping up" return to quarters.

The raid was preceded by a bombing attack on Ignatovskaya and Kitsa and three direct hits were observed. The enemy's advanced position was captured by Naylor and two platoons of A Company without difficulty at 23:15 on the 26th; 17 prisoners and two machine guns being taken. The enemy opened an intense and accurate bombardment of the road exits from Mala Beresnik, which, however, caused few casualties. It did, however, cause the pony in the telephone cart to bolt, and hence all communication except by messenger failed.

The attack on Ignatovskaya by A and C Companies commenced at 02:30 and the raiding party made rapid progress without opposition along the Ignatovskaya road, until suddenly held up by rifle and machine-gun fire from the enemy defences. A free fight ensued, but as the British bombardment was to take place shortly, the troops, who were closely engaged, had to be withdrawn for safety's sake. On conclusion of the bombardment, they again attacked, but made little progress, and at 02.50. Col Marriott-Doddington decided to break off the engagement. The withdrawal was carried out without incident and without interference by the enemy.

The casualties were 2nd Lieut. N. L. Hughes (Devonshire Regiment) and eight other ranks killed. Captain C. S. Baines, Lieuts. Sturges, Maunder (Devonshire Regiment), and Browne (R.A.), and 25 other ranks wounded. Five other ranks missing (these, four of whom were wounded, were afterwards ascertained to be prisoners of war).

The right bank column met the enemy, and withdrew after a short engagement, as there was no object in

pushing forward, unless the action of the main column was successful. Notwithstanding their want of knowledge of the country, it seems probable that the raid would have been successful if communication had not been lost. It is certain that the enemy was fully aware of the intention to attack and was prepared.

The Royal Berkshire company, D, then relieved the right company in front and sent out several patrols at night. Lieutenant Denham made two reconnaissances with his platoon, with the object of locating the line of the Bolshevik forces and a machine-gun nest which had been giving trouble. In the second of these a lance-corporal was wounded.

## Low Water

27th June to 25th August

On 27th June the Routine Tug came up the Vaga for the last time until August 25th; thus, owing to the low state of the river, they were dependent for two months on convoys moving by the main road for supplies of every description.

Lt Colvile with one platoon of D Company had been on detachment at Beresnik, They arrived back at Usta Vaga on the 27th. Two days later on the 29th HQ and three platoons of D Coy moved back from Usa Vaga to Mal Beresnik to relieve C Coy. D Coys strength at this point was reported as being 187, so far they had suffered no casualties.

On 3rd July Capt G Naylor (OBLI) carried out a silent raid on the enemy's advanced position south of Mala Beresnik with complete success. The raiding party consisted of two platoons of A Coy (under Lt Neville and Lt Sawyer) and one platoon of D Coy under Ly D C Colville. They captured the enemy trenches and then proceeded up the Ignatovoskoya Road to the Bolsheviks new forward position which was in the process of completion. They burned two blockhouses and returned to Mala Beresnik at 04:00. The enemy lost one machine gun and eight men killed. Casualties were Lieut. J. E. H. Neville and two other ranks from A Coy slightly wounded. For this action and the main raid on 26th/27th June, Naylor received the Military Cross. Another patrol from D Coy went out on the 5th and heard voices and the chopping of wood so presumed the Bolsheviks had reoccupied the position again.

The Battalion less one platoon of D Company and details at Beresnik, was concentrated on the Vaga,

There was a revolt of the Slovak-British Legion engineered by communists who had infiltrated the ranks. One company of this was commanded by Lieutenant Cecil. Frederick Ramsden Bland of the Royal Berkshire, who was murdered on 9th July, as well as nine other British and Russian officers. Captain Barrett of the Royal Berkshire, commanding another of the mutinous companies, escaped and was awarded the M.C.

On the 10th July a patrol of 30 ORs from D Coy under Lt A S Denham went to the left bank to locate the enemy positions. They found the forward trenches had been dismantled and they carried on up the Ignatovoskoya Road but about 200 yards beyond the trenches they came under rifle and machine gun fire from the east of the road and withdrew with one OR injured.

On 12th July was completed the footbridge from Koslovo to Gunners Landing, which was of the greatest assistance and reflected the utmost credit on Lieut. Wakeford and his section of Royal Engineers.

Two more soviet deserters came in on the 16th from whom it was gleaned that the 6th Soviet Regiment was about to relieve the 156th that night so it was decided to do a small patrol action with artillery support. The artillery attack commenced at 22:00. The guns commenced intermittent shelling of the left bank on the Ignatovoskoya to Mala Beresnik road. No 16 platoon under Lt A Q S Denham and 2nd Lt F W Paine left Scots Post and moved to Tin Hut. At 23:00 a second bombardment poured three minutes of fire onto the Bolsheviks and then No 16 Platoon moved on through the woods to try to find the Bolsheviks advanced positions but it was too dark to see properly so they withdrew at 23:45 and got back to Scots Post by 00:15.

B Coy relieved D Coy at Mala-Beresnik on the 23rd and two days later Lt E C de Vitre relieved Lt W S Mackay. Number 14 Platoon and took over the guard of the advanced base at Beresnik while the other three platoons returned to Archangel on 26th July. D Company (less the one guard platoon) (Royal Berkshires) left for Archangel, and was subsequently stationed at Konetzbok on the Omega road. On the same date A.H.Q., which had been at Beresnik, also moved to Archangel.

Thence they were sent towards Onega to guard against a possible attack by the enemy on the right flank of the main force during its withdrawal. The three platoons held a series of posts near Tabari, but, beyond sending out patrols, they had no adventures; for the enemy was never within one hundred miles of them.

On 27th July the 3/4th North Russian Rifles (H.Q. and two companies) arrived at Ust Vaga, and became part of the Vaga Column. Hitherto, this column had been directly under A.H.Q., but now came under Dwina Force. This arrangement was necessary in the circumstances, but it was most unfortunate, as the battalion received little consideration from early in August till finally embarking at Beresnik.

All the battalion's heavy baggage was sent down on 8th and 9th August, and on 10th August Dwina Force under General Sadler-Jackson commenced operations which were to prove most successful. The original plan embraced operations on the Vaga in addition to the Dwina, but the former had to be cancelled owing to the heavy rain, which rendered the tracks impassable.

Had these operations taken place during the settled weather, there is little doubt but that the enemy forces both on the Dwina and Vaga would have been completely dispersed.

On 20th August Meade and three platoons of C Company (Devonshires) left for Beresnik and the Seletskoe front, thus reducing the Battalion to nine platoons.

## **Hanging On**

**22nd August to 13th September 1919**

On 22nd August they dismantled their 60-pounder, and sent it off on rafts down stream. Their artillery was now reduced to four old 18-pounder guns, and were unable to reply to the enemy's long-range fire.

On 29th August they made a successful demonstration to draw the enemy's attention to the Vaga front during the Russian initial operations on what was known as the Railway front. The enemy shelled Mala Beresnik heavily from 13:15 to 17:30 on 31st August with 6-inch, 4.2-inch, and 3-inch guns, several thousand shells being fired. The casualties were one man slightly wounded.

September 1st was an exciting day, and what might have proved a most awkward situation was converted into a severe repulse for the enemy. Ust Vaga (the base of the Vaga Column), with a perimeter of some 5,000 or 6,000 yards, was held by one platoon of C Company (Devonshires), some details of Machine Gunners and Trench Mortars (under Capt Carr), and H.Q. and one company 3/4th North Russian Rifles, the whole under Major Northcote (Devonshire Regiment). The patients in the hospital were also called upon to hold the defence. The Russians were on the perimeter and the British troops were more or less concentrated in reserve.

About 03:00 the village was entered by a force of about 200 of the enemy without opposition and from three different points. The leader of the enemy was a local man, and it was afterwards ascertained that he had been in the village for some days arranging matters. The houses in which the British officers and men were known to be were surrounded. The first evidence of an attack came with the throwing of bombs into the Signal Office guard room, and other rooms known to be occupied, together with the opening of machine-gun and rifle fire on the houses. The Russian troops took practically no part in the action and disappeared into the woods, and it was left to the small British garrison to deal with the enemy

By 09:00 the village was cleared, after hard fighting and innumerable exciting personal incidents. The enemy lost 14 killed and 8 prisoners, besides some 15 wounded which he got away. Our losses were 5 killed, 12 wounded, and 1 missing.

About 09:00 the same day the enemy attacked Mala

Beresnik in force, but was repulsed at once with, considerable casualties. Had they been in a position to counter-attack, they might have inflicted a severe defeat on him; as it was they buried 16 dead and took two prisoners, losses being two men of B Company killed.

On 3rd September all the Russian troops, including the artillery, left for Beresnik, as the Russian authorities had decided (for the moment) to defend a line lower down the Dwina. The next day the Battalion received two 3-inch Russian guns manned by British personnel, with a very limited supply of ammunition, much of which was bad.

On the 7th the enemy again shelled Mala Beresnik heavily, from 09:00 to 15:30.

On the 9th Col Marriott-Doddington made the following entry in his rough diary

"We have now been ordered to move on 15th August, 30th August, 3rd September, 7th September, 9th September, 10th September. Still here !

Orders for the majority of these moves were got out and issued, and all arrangements made for evacuation, only for a wire to be received at the last moment that the move was postponed. Those who had to arrange details know what trouble was caused by these postponements. Further, the enemy was growing bolder, and the men were perpetually on duty, which gave some anxiety as to what might happen if he really induced his men to attack.

13th September was another anxious day. Enemy patrols were active early in the morning, and he shelled Mala Beresnik from 06.30 to 18:00. The Battalion were able to get machine-gun fire on to certain parties which were seen, causing some casualties. At about 18:15 a complete company of the enemy's 161st Regiment surrendered at Nijni Kitsa (122 all ranks).

The enemy's plan was apparently to attack Mala Beresnik with two battalions of the 156th Regiment and Nijni Kitsa with two battalions of the 161st Regiment, another battalion being held in reserve. Both attacks failed to mature, as the men could not be induced to close with the defence.

## **Evacuation**

**14th to 23rd September 1919**

On the 14th all preparations were complete for the evacuation next morning, when the usual wire was received that the move would not take place unless further orders were received. Happily the move was confirmed, and at 06.30 on the 15th they commenced the evacuation. The first thing to do was to destroy the bridges at Scotts Post and Verkni Konetz were destroyed. These were the two main bridges on the Ignatovshaze to Vaga road. As well they destroyed all the boats and laid booby traps around in the woods. By 09:00 the whole column was on its way to Ust Vaga,

which was reached without incident at 12 noon. The column left nothing whatever for the enemy; ammunition which had to be retained to the last in case of attack was destroyed.

On the 16th they continued the withdrawal to Beresnik, and embarked in troop barges by 13.30. The Vaga column were carried in one barge, the Ennesee departing at 18:00. The enemy entered Ust Vaga almost immediately they had left, but did not interfere with the march. He did, however, cause some casualties to the Dwina Force while withdrawing down river; and a platoon of A Company (OBLI) under 2nd Lt C A Sawyer, together with a gun, was sent out from Beresnik to deal with a party of the enemy near the mouth of the Vaga.

On the 17th they passed Emetskoe but joined the rest of the convoy grounded on the Emtsa bar. They eventually got free and tied up downstream awaiting the rest of the convoy freeing themselves. They moved on again in the afternoon of the 18th arriving at Siskoe just before dark. D Coy were now reported as having a strength of 7 officers and 191 other ranks.

They arrived opposite Archangel on the 20th and disembarked at Bakharitsa next day. Here they found D Company (less one platoon) (R Berkshires) had already arrived and this platoon arrived from Rikasikha at 19:00.

On the 23rd they were joined by 3 platoons of C Company (Devonshires) and the remaining platoon of D Company under Lt Dennis de Vitre which arrived from Beresink.

## **The Voyage Home**

### **24th September to 4th October**

It was crucial they they got out before the White Sea froze over again for the winter. Their first orders were that the Battalion should embark in the Transport "Schleswig," but as this ship did not arrive these were cancelled and they embarked in the "Czar" on the 26th. It did not arrive until 16:00 and most of the 1st OBLI plus 239 men from the Trench Mortar battalion embarked at 17:30. When it arrived the Czar was already full of naval personnel and accommodation for only 400 men was offered. This was totally insufficient and after protests some adjustments were made. At 18:00 officers were posted to guard the gangways of the Czar.

D Company (Royal Berkshires) did not embark but furnished the shore pickets taking up positions all around the Bakharitza compound and did not embark until the following day.

At 06:00 on the 27th, the Czar left its moorings and moved to mid-stream opposite Archangel Prieston. D Coy meanwhile were marching there from Bakharitz as the promised train had not materialised due to the

collapse of the Russian railway service. At Archangel-Prieston they embarked by tug with Generals Grogan and White and were ferried to the Czar.

While lying in midstream the Czar had been passed by several other tugs carrying Jackson's Brigade en route to Lyavia where they were to act as rearguard. After embarking D Company, the Czar steamed down-stream to a rendezvous in the White Sea just outside the bar. The troops were confined below decks from 13:00 to 14:00 but no trouble ensued. Twenty-eight officers and their batmen had embarked in the Transport "Braemar Castle," there being no room in the "Czar." owing to the shortage of accommodation. Their move released space and the troops were relatively comfortable from then on with 719 ORs and 10 officers left on the Czar.

The White Sea was calm and the Czar made good progress passing other ships of the convoy. However when they got out into the Arctic Ocean the seas turned rough and many of the troops suffered sea-sickness. They paused at 20:30 on the 29th to let General Grogan tranship to Murmansk in a tug. By 21:00 they were underway again. It was still rough by next morning with early flurries of snow. The last of the Norwegian coast disappeared in the evening.

They arrived without incident at Liverpool on 4th October, to find the great Railway strike going on.

The Battalion disembarked by tug in the afternoon and was quartered in Knotty Ash Camp. En route they formed up at St. George's Hall, where the Lord Mayor was good enough to receive and address them. All attached officers and men were got away to their respective depots by 11th October, and on the 13th the residue of the Battalion moved to North Ripon. Strength, 7 officers, and 109 other ranks. Except for the Cadre, under Whittall, who arrived from the Depot, everyone went on leave pending the reconstruction of the Regiment in December.

So ended their little adventure in North Russia, where the Composite Battalion had suffered the following casualties: 1 officer and 15 other ranks killed; 5 officers and 41 other ranks wounded; 5 other ranks missing.

The whole expedition is described by an officer of the Royal Berks as a "glorious picnic" in which there was practically no fighting.

## **Sources**

Petre pp 113-115

Berkshire and the War p 924

Reading Mercury 24/5/19

OBLI Regimental Chronicle (extracts from the diaries of Lt Col Marriott-Dodgington)

2nd Battalion Digest of Service

2nd Battalion War Diaries

1st OBLI War Diary

*This concludes the account of the 2nd  
Battalion*