

Volume 7 Section 343

The Armistice and Beyond

The 1st/4th Battalion

The End of the War

4th-11th November 1918

When the war ended the 1st/4th were in Austria in hot pursuit of the defeated Austrian Army. They had crossed the border at Caldonazzo on the 3rd and hostilities ceased on the 4th. Their progress was stopped and they were withdrawn to Vigilzano on the 4th where they received a congratulatory message from the Divisional Commander. Here they remained for several days checking on kit and transport but under orders to move on 2½ hours notice. The Brigadier arrived for an inspection of transport on the 7th and baths were arranged, although only HQ, A and B Coys could be fitted in as the capacity was only 60/Hr. Also on the 7th the Battalion chaplain, the Rev H E G Aldridge held a thanksgiving service, the first service the Battalion had had on enemy soil.

The next day, the 8th they began their march south arriving at Caldonazzo on the border at about 12:00.

On the 9th the march resumed and when they reached Vezzena they found excellent billets in a former Austrian hut encampment at a Quartermaster's stores. There were large quantities of potatoes, flour, dried prunes and soda water and the battalion cooks made good use of it all.

They left Vezzena rather reluctantly at 08:40 the next morning and arrived at Val di Portule at 13:00. The accomodation here was decididly sub-standard although huts were available.

When armistice day came on the 11th they were back in their former front line trenches near S Sisto. These were reported as being *'none the worse for our ten days absence'* The battalion diarist remarked:-

It seemed quite uncanny to be there and hear no sign of war.

Novale

12th-19th November 1918

S Sisto was put behind them for ever on the 12th as they set out at 07:00 and marched down hill to Thiene, via the Grazzena to Mazze road and thence by a mule track. As they passed Divisional HQ at Granezza, the Divisional band played the regimental marches of each unit as they passed. the Divisional Commander who was taking the salute. It was quite a moving occasion.

There was a stop of an hour for a meal and they got to

Thiene about 16:30.

The next day they left at 09:00 and were back in Novale on November 13th having had a brief stop for dinner en-route.. It was noteworthy that not a single man fell out on any of the marches between the 1st and 13th November. At Novale they were to be billeted for several months.

On the 14th each company held a detailed inspection and the CO read out a series of congratulatory mesages he had received.

The following days consisted mainly of training in the morning and sports in the afternoons. A typical day consisted of a sharp walk from 07:15 to 07:25, a break for breakfast, section and platoon drill from 09:30 to 12:30 and then a break for lunch followed by football or other sports, often in competition with other units. Saturdays were for looking after kit and on the 16th November the diarist ruefully remarked that as no blanco was available the men had to put clay on their equipment - one can imagine the sergeant majors' frustrations. There was a church parade on Sundays at 11:00 and the rest of the day was free.

On November 27th the Battalion represented the 48th Division at a review of all British forces in Italy by the King of Italy which was held at Castel Gemberto. Each Division had to contribute one battalion and from the time they were first notified on the 18th November, the men selected were given special training. They were said to have been the smartest of the 9 battalions on parade.

Demobilisation started soon after and the men were also given the opportunity for further education and training to improve their chances in civilian life. For those not demobilised there was little to do, some were able to travel around and there were plenty of sporting events and competitions with other units.

The battalion war diary ends abruptly on the 3rd March. 1919

Return to England

Finally the orders were received for the return to England. They set out by rail via the conic tunnel reaching Le Havre on Friday 29th March 1919. Here they paused and a good time was has by all. On Sunday evening at 18.30 they began to board their ship which brought them to Southampton, arriving about 0500 on

Monday.

There was a feeling that they had been forgotten and rumours abounded that the Battalion was to be broken up and dispersed to several different demobilisation camps. After having been left in the open for several hours it was eventually announced that they would be returning first to Reading for a civic welcome. There were by this time only 50 men left to board the train, the remainder having been either demobilised or on leave.

The staff at the Depot at Brock Barracks were given very little notice but they responded magnificently and the band of the 1st Battalion were waiting on platform 4 of Reading Station. They were playing 'The Laddies who have fought and won' as the train steamed in at 14:10. They were greeted by the Mayor and by Col A F Ewen who had commanded many of them when they served as the Berkshire Volunteer Company in South Africa. There were speeches at the station. Eventually they formed up behind the band and marched off to Brock Barracks. Many former members of the Battalion tagged along behind and the whole procession was given an enthusiastic welcome by the people of Reading.

At the Barracks there were further speeches and eventually they were dismissed for dinner. Men whose homes were in Reading were allowed to return to their families after the speeches.

Sources

Reading Mercury 5/4/19

The Times History of the War Vol XX pp311-324

War Diary WO95-2758

Cruttwell: *The War Service of the 1st/4th Battalion*