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The Armistice and Beyond

The 5th Battalion

The End of the War

On Armistice Day the 5th were at Vieux Cond, and then retired to winter quarters at Erre near Valenciennes.

Private Harding had become detached from his unit

"By mid-October I was in a convalescent camp and was there when the Armistice was signed. Being anxious to rejoin my regiment I asked to be transferred. I was moved to the Infantry Base Depot at Rouen where I was medically down-graded. Three years with a line battalion had taken their toll. Directed from the base to Douai, having to change at Arras where civilians with loaded dog-drawn carts, old people and children with bundles trudged along seeking their homes. Walking over the bridge to Ronville along the war-torn miles to Monchy-la-Proux, thinking of the many of my 5th Royal Berks comrades who had paid the supreme sacrifice on that journey, I could not locate the wrecked tank so much a feature of our journey from the road to the communication trench. Across the road Fosse Farm was unrecognisable. Back at Arras, making tracks for the cemetery, I was stopped by military police (ten days adrift) and put on a train for Erre where the Battalion were in the first stages of demobilisation. On the principle of first in first out I could have gone home, but decided, as one of the originals to finish my service with the cadre." [ref 17]

By Christmas 1918 the 12th Division was stationed in the Douai area. The 5th Battalion was billeted at Somain, some 8 miles east.

At Somain the Pioneers built a large shed, regarded by many as a fire hazard, as a hall to accommodate 400 people and a cinema unit was brought in from home. They showed silent films every night and on two or three nights a week the local inhabitants were allowed to attend which they did with great enthusiasm. Charges were made for admission and all the costs were paid off after only two weeks of operation. No one ever did find out what happened to the excess profits. [China Dragon 1934]

The Mayor of Reading made an appeal for decorations for this cinema in the Berkshire Chronicle of 13th December 1918:-

Sir: The 5th Battalion of the Royal Berks regiment has come to rest for the winter in quarters abroad and the officers have to think of means of interest and amusement to be provided for the men during the long evenings. A cinema recreation hall is being built out of materials left behind by the Germans and I shall be glad if any of your readers who have any decorative material such as bunting, flags red or coloured cloth or shields to spare will send them to Major H L Goodland, 5th Royal

Berks regiment BEF France. Any such gift will be gratefully received and used to the best advantage.

Yours very truly

Stanley Hayward

Mayor

The 12th Division football tournament was played just before Christmas. The 5th had reached the final by beating Brigade Headquarters 2-0, Royal Sussex 2-0, Machine Gun Corps 3-0 and the Royal West Kents 3-1. In the final the 5th Royal Berkshires were defeated 0-3 by the 9th Essex in a hard fought game played before 8000 spectators. The Royal Berks team was : Pte NG Upfold, Pte P Malchy, 2Lt F Lee, Cpl Jones, Capt Woodward, L/Cpl A Vale, 2Lt Weeks, 2Lt Ashby, Major JL Carr, Pte E Andrews and Sgt A Trinder. The GOC presented medals and then the officers gave a dinner in honour of the players. [China Dragon 1931 and 1934]

Demobilisation started on the 1st Jan 1919 and on 14th Feb they were presented with their colours at Erre by HRH the Prince of Wales.

Private Harding continues

"With the departure of all the troops except the cadre, we settled down to the happiest six months of my life. A few days were spent at Dunkirk, our cadre being a microcosm of the largest British army ever assembled. We had achieved victory in what was understood to be the war to end war." [ref 17]

Return Home

The remainder of the battalion returned to England, sailing from Dunkirk on 15th June to Southampton, arriving at Reading by train from Southampton on the afternoon of Wednesday June 18th 1919 where a civic reception awaited them. On their arrival home they were greeted by their original Commanding Officer, Col FW Foley who had been severely wounded in December 1915. The band of the 2nd Royal Berks played as they got off the train and there were welcoming speeches outside the station. They then marched through the streets to be greeted by the Mayor at the Town Hall.

Demobilisation was completed at Reading immediately afterwards and the Battalion was disbanded.

Laying up the Colours

The King's Colour had been presented to the 5th Battalion by HRH The Prince of Wales at Erre in France on 14th Feb 1919. On disbandment they were laid up at St Laurence Church Reading.

Sources

China Dragon 1931 and 1934

Reminiscences of Pte Harding

History of the Royal Berks Regt (Petre)

Berkshire Chronicle 13/12/18