

## Volume 12 Section 348

# The Armistice and Beyond

## The 8th Battalion

### A Remarkable Find

In October 1996 a rather unique record came to light. It was the log book of the 8th Royal Berks which contained copies of the daily orders together with full details of all movements of men. It covered the period from 4th November 1918 to 12th Feb 1919. This appeared to have been retained after the war by one of the officers; whom we assume was Capt C H J Walls who was the Adjutant at the time.

This section of the account is based almost entirely upon that log book, although for the period between 12th Feb 1919 and April 1919 when the Battalion was disbanded and merged with the 3rd Battalion, and for the subsequent period until the cadre of the battalion returned home to Reading to lay up their colours in St Giles Church, we must look into alternative sources. However as far as we were aware no similar document for any other battalion has survived. It was with great surprise therefore that two similar books for the 1st/4th Battalion appeared from an entirely different source.

The details in this document however could have applied to many other battalions, as many of the orders emanated from higher command and the War Office as military restrictions were gradually relaxed.

### Battalion Movements

The 8th Battalion's final engagement had been when it called a halt on the 'Red' line in Mormal Forest on the 4th November 1918. According to the War Diary it retired to Hecq on the 5th November and to Le Cateau on the 6th November where it stayed until the Armistice came in to effect. On the 12th November it moved to Premont and on the 4th December to Beaurevoir.

Interestingly the Log does not record many of these movements. It records that on 10th November they all marched off to a training area and on the 11th they had to parade at 0930 in Salles des Fetes in Le Cateau for an address by the Commanding Officer before repeating the training march. On the 12th the Battalion was ordered to participate in a ceremonial parade but this turned out to be a practice for a parade on the 13th at which French Interpreters were to be presented with British medals. On the 14th it notes that *'The range will be at the disposal of A Coy'*. On the 15th it orders *'The Battalion will parade on Battalion Parade Ground in Mass as strong as possible'* However the Sunday parade on the 16th was evidently at Premont as the Non-conformist

service was to be held at *the 'RAF Cinemas (North end of Premont)*

The Commander in Chief (Field Marshall Haig) issued his Special Order of the Day on the 21st November and this was read to the battalion. This was followed by a translation of a similar order issued by Marshall Foch.

A few days later on the 23rd the log records an exchange of congratulatory messages with the Mayor of Reading:

Dear Sir

On behalf of the Council and the citizens of the County Borough of Reading I tender to you and the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the 8th 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

to which the CO replied

Dear Sir,

In the name of the Officers, Non-commissioned officers and men of the 8th Battalion I wish to tender to you and the Council and citizens of the County Borough of Reading our heartiest thanks for your message of congratulations.

The certain knowledge that the thoughts of those at home have been continually with us has always cheered and heartened us to persevere in the fight for justice and right.

It is a source of great gratification to all ranks to know that our small part in the great victory is so highly appreciated by our fellow citizens of the Royal County whose name we are proud to bear

Yours faithfully

N B Hudson Lt Col

Commanding 8th Bn Royal Berks Regt

It would appear that orderly officers were using their duty as an excuse for not attending parade, but this was stamped on in an order issued 22nd November.

There was a Divisional Review on 28th November. There was a practice the day before and on the day the battalion assembled at 0930 and there were special, extra training sessions for arms drill before they set out for the march past preceded by the Battalion band. Company Commanders had to report the next day on the exact

numbers of men who took part. Another Divisional Review occurred on 2nd December when Major Gen R Phee commander of 18th Division took the salute. This time however the cyclists had to leave their bicycles behind and march with the rest of the men. Lt Col Hudson congratulated the men on their turn out the next day.

It was the Battalion's turn to mount ceremonial guard at Divisional HQ at Serain on 3rd December and a Sergeant, a Corporal and six other men were detailed. The 8th Battalion band would play while the ceremonial hand over took place.

On the 29th November two platoons were sent off to Beaufort to clean up billets prior to the Battalion moving there. This was obviously insufficient as on the 2nd December each company had to send a platoon.

On the 1st December all spare ammunition was ordered returned to stores although each man carrying a rifle had to retain 60 rounds of SAA. This too had to be turned in on the 22nd December.

The King made a tour of 18th Division's area on the 4th December. The planned route started at Montigny (dep 1140) and took in Clary, Marez, Serain, Elincourt, Selvigny and Caullery. 53rd Brigade were detailed to line the road from Estrees to Marez and everyone who had not already gone to Beaufort would attend from the 8th Battalion. They had to ensure they were in position by 1145 and not to be *'strung out along the road'*

An outbreak of measles in Premont in January prompted a number of houses in the town being put out of bounds to troops. One might have one's suspicions as to what the houses were being used for.

The Battalion was on the move again at the end of January. C Coy and billeting parties set out for Bertry on the 31st together with blankets and officers valises using two General Service waggons. They were followed almost immediately by the rest of the battalion who had to march on the 1st Feb with the rest of the stores being carried by the motor transport section who followed along behind with a water cart. However men who were due for demobilisation had to stay behind. The church parade the next day was cancelled to allow the men to settle into their new billets.

Finally on the 12th April 1919 the Battalion was reduced to cadre.

## Medals and Awards

Throughout this period the log is full of notifications that medals had been awarded. Every so often there would be a medal presentation at a battalion parade, but it appeared that most men preferred to have their medals presented to them whilst on leave so that their family and friends could attend. While this was in itself not frowned upon, the battalion were getting very upset

that the men were making the arrangements through the officers in charge of home records. This had to stop and on the 19th November the men were ordered to make application through their company commander before going on leave. The subsequent procedure seems so complicated that one wonders if any of the men did actually receive their medals as they wished.

On the 15th December it was announced that Soldier 691 J B Escalier of the 190th Escalier du Train and attached to the 8th Royal Berks was to be awarded the Military Medal.

Men who had been awarded the VC, MC, DCM, MM MSM, Albert Medal or Edward Medal were granted a special 'Kings Leave' of four days to be added to leave already entitled to.

## The Postal Service

The Postal Service had been one of the star performers of the war. Its efficiency had been a major factor in maintaining the men's morale. However mail from the front was subject to rigorous censorship, especially after British Intelligence captured a large volume of German mail earlier in the war and were able to piece together almost the whole of the German dispositions. There had been many lapses and a severe reminder was sent out on the 8th November. Of particular concern were references to military matters incorporated into letters sent under cover of a 'green envelope' which were being sent to friends in other parts of the front. These were especially liable to be captured by the enemy. The matter had become so serious that consideration was being given to withdrawing the green envelope system entirely. Green envelopes were used for correspondence which need not be censored at a regimental level, although spot checks were done at Base Post Offices. The envelope bore a declaration reading:-

I certify on my honour that the contents of this envelope refer to nothing but private and family matters.

This declaration had to be signed. The system had been introduced in 1916 to alleviate the task of unit censors, who could often be inundated with mail home. However the issue of envelopes was severely rationed. Two extra envelopes were issued to each man before Christmas.

Field Service postcards were widely used to allow a man to send a brief standard message home to re-assure his family that he was alive and well. Basically all he was allowed to do was to fill in the address, give his rank and serial number and cross out any messages that did not apply. What was beginning to happen was that men added messages or tried to communicate by code. In addition some men were sending picture postcards home, often showing where they were located.

Two particular items were especially forbidden, that was the disclosure of a man's location or of his unit's higher formations. Addresses to the men had to be no more than their rank, name, regimental number and battalion.

The postal service sorted out where each unit was.

Censorship began to be lifted on 28th November when troops were allowed to say where they were and describe their surroundings. However they must not mention place names in addresses as this would severely disrupt the postal system. Similarly they were no longer required to erase place names from picture postcards and were allowed to send complimentary cards home. These were official recognitions of men's conduct in battle. Also restrictions on the taking and sending of photographs through the mail was relaxed.

Regimental censorship was withdrawn on 2nd Jan but men were reminded that the regulations still applied and letters were liable to be censored at the Base Post Office. If it was found that particular units were not obeying the rules then the threat of re-imposition of Regimental level censorship was made. Green envelopes were discontinued forthwith. Censorship of parcels and telegrams remained in force.

Christmas mail arrangements were announced on the 9th December. The last date for posting letters from home was 16th December and 14th for parcels. For the BEF the posting days were 18th for letters and 16th for parcels with an extra day allowed for deliveries in London. Christmas cards or postcards with pictorial illustrations were forbidden to be posted to enemy or neutral countries.

## Prisoners of War

Few details had emerged during the war of Prisoners of War. While the families of many men had been notified through the Red Cross nothing had been communicated formally to the battalions. On 29th November the 8th Battalion received a long list of men who were POWs including 27 from A Coy, 45 from B Coy, 33 from C Coy and 56 from D Coy. 5 had been repatriated, one had died in Germany and one had been interned in Holland.

A further list of 48 names of men who had been repatriated was released on 7th Jan. Also 4 more from the Battalion who had died in captivity. 20 more were notified on the 2nd Feb with three deaths.

## Crime and Punishment

The first Court Martial reported on the 4th November was of 44556 Pte J Howarth of B Coy who was tried on 15/10/18 for throwing a live round of ammunition into a fire causing a comrade to be wounded. He was found guilty and sentenced to 14 Days of Field Punishment no 1.

Looting was especially frowned upon and a stern order was sent out on 7th November reminding troops that they were not to remove furniture from empty houses to

make their billets or dugouts more comfortable. as *'this would bring into disrepute the fair name of the British Army'* The warning had to be repeated when they went into new billets in Beaufort in early December.

Although the war had not yet ended there were some remarkable acts of leniency which would have been almost unthinkable only a few months before. For example 36789 Pte J Penny was accused of absence without leave and the Divisional Commander directed on the 21st October that he should not have to stand trial in view of his previous gallant service. An even more serious charge of desertion was similarly dropped by the GOC Fourth Army in respect of 18480 Pte J W White.

18923 Pte F Reynolds was awarded 7 days PP1 on the 14th November for using obscene language to an NCO. This should be compared with the treatment given on 25th November to 44621 Pte W Leadbeater who got 7 days FP1 and 41592 Pte L Rock who got 10 days for *'hesitating to obey an order'*

Notice of a Field General Court Martial for 41655 Pte J H Ford was issued on November 21st. 203353 Pte W Bladen was ordered to attend as a witness. He was charged with looting the body of a dead British Soldier and found not guilty. Strangely the trial was stated to have been on the 17th November before the notice had been issued.

A Regimental Court of Enquiry was convened on 29th November to enquire into the circumstances whereby three men of A Coy received injuries from gas burns.

45131 Pte W Lawson was tried by Field General Court Martial on the 13th December for wilfully disobeying an order - he got 28 days FP1. 200127 Pte A E Allen on the same day got 70 days for striking his superior officer.

On the 30th December the Battalion was notified that the sentence of one years hard labour awarded to 18937 Pte R Richens had been remitted.

43361 Pte H Bee was acquitted on a charge of wilful defiance on the 17th Jan but 18837 Cpl E E Martin was reduced in the ranks on the same day having been found guilty of *'conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline.'*

## Sports and Pastimes

The 18th Division had a Soldiers club in the square at Le Cateau which was open daily from 1000-1230 and 1400-1900. There were reading and recreation rooms and the men could purchase cups of tea.

A Regimental barbers shop was set up at 16 Rue Neuve in Beaufort on 9th December. Haircuts for the men were free but officers were charged 1 franc. Other charges were Shampoo for officers 50c, Shampoo and brush up for ORs 30c, shave for ORs 10c.

There was a Divisional Cinema in Le Cateau which was

open alternate afternoons and evenings. Afternoon performances were at 1430 and evening ones at 1730. At Premont the cinema was run by the RAF. Concerts were held from time to time and one for Divisional Officers was held at the Hall in Premont on 25th November.

Lectures were popular and some of the Dominion troops were anxious to recruit postwar immigrants to their countries. On 29th Nov Sgt Hunter of the New Zealand Infantry gave a lantern lecture in the RAF Cinema in Premont, seats were limited and each Coy got only 18 places each. A veiled hint was issued to ensure that while the lecture was voluntary all the places had better be filled. Another lecture entitled '*Under Big Ben*' was given by Mr Harry Turtle at the Beaufevoir Hall on the 7th December. When it came to the lecture on Australia on the 10th December it was ordered that special consideration should be given to men intending to emigrate.

On Sundays there was a Battalion or Brigade parade at 1100 for the C of Es. Roman Catholics could go to a Mass at the Lancashire Lads Hall and Presbyterians and Non-conformists to the Protestant Church in Rue La Republic in Le Cateau. These were compulsory but in addition there were voluntary services of Holy Communion for the C of Es at 0730, 0815, 1130 and 1830 in the Church Army Soldiers Club or an evening service at 1730 in the Cinema Theatre. The RCs and NCs also had voluntary evening services.

Every few days the rate of exchange between British and french money was fixed. For example on 7th Nov the rate was 5 francs for 3s 10d. This rate was reconfirmed for December. There was a Field Cashier office in Le Cateau at 54 Rue Charles LeDoux open from 0930 to 1230 and 1400 to 1630. When they were at Premont the Cashier used to visit Divisional HQ at Serain and troops had to go there. There was also German money in circulation as on the 6th December the rate was fixed at 1 mark to 70 French centimes. However this did not apply to Belgium as the Belgian Government were using a higher rate to help Belgian civilians left with marks by the German forces of occupation. Thus battalions were ordered always to settle contracts in Belgium in Francs rather than Marks.

The first inter unit football match after war was held on the 16th November between the 8th and the 7th Royal West Kents. While the team was listed the result was not given. There was also an inter-company competition but a warning was sent out that all battalion footballs had to be collected from and returned to the Sergeant Shoemaker (Sgt F Baker) Boxing gloves could also be obtained as well as sports shorts and other kit, but it all tended to get 'mislaidd' and frequent reminders and notices were sent out.

An inter-platoon football competition was won by 1 Platoon, A Coy who beat 1 Platoon HQ Coy by 1-nil on the 17th. Each man on the winning side received 5

francs credit in the regimental canteen. There must have been almost non-stop football going as as there was also a Brigade level inter-company competition. For once the log gave a table of results for the 21st November:

C Coy R Berks	2	C Coy R West Kents
	1	
D Coy R Berks	4	B Coy R W Kents
	0	
56 Field Amb.	3	79th Coy RE
	0	

Further results were given later. The final for the 53rd Brigade competition took place at Ponchaux where the 10th Essex were based, on the 13th December between C Coy of the 8th Royal Berks and 56th Field Ambulance.

The inter-battalion competition final was between the 8th Royal Berks and the 10th Essex. The game was drawn so they had to replay on Jan 6th One presumes that as the result was not given the 8th lost. Another very similar competition called the Divisional Inter-Battalion Football Competition was also being held. The Brigade final of this was played on 9th Jan between the 8th Royal Berks and the 18th MG Battalion. Again the result was a draw so the match was replayed at Premont on the 13th Jan. This time the 8th were victorious and the cup they won was on display at at concert given by 'The Explosives' Concert Party on the 16th-18th Jan at Beaufevoir. The Divisional Final was against the 2nd Bedfords at Seligny on 18th Jan.

The officers too had their inter-company competition which kicked off on the 7th November with Lt Col Hudson playing centre forward for the HQ Coy against B Coy. It would appear that there were not enough officers around willing or able to take part as both sides had 3 ORs playing for them.

On December 5th there was to be a Battalion boxing competition and the winners of each weight section would compete in the Brigade competition on December 10th. The winners from these would go to the Divisional competition at Elincourt on 4th/5th Jan.

There were many other competitions and activities to keep the men occupied. On 5th December a draughts competition was announced. On 15th December there was a Flat Racing meeting at a racecourse on the Beaufevoir-Serain road. The Divisional Cross Country run was held on the 2nd Jan, the leading man of the 8th Royal Berks was Pte Johnson who came 6th.

On the first of January 1919 the 10th Essex organised an Eisteddfod at Ponchaux. They also ran a debating society and on the 4th Jan the motion was '*That the European War had been beneficial to the Human Race*'

## Housekeeping and Routine

The daily routine was that Reveille was sounded at

0700. breakfast at 0800, sick parade 0900, COs Orders 1200, Dinner 1245 and Tea 1645. In between there was usually a daily parade for each company and the men were deployed on a wide variety of tasks. The number of men attending the sick parade for trivial complaints rose so fast that the Medical Officer ran a second informal sick parade at 1700 most days to deal with these.

On the 7th November an order was issued that all dead animals had to be buried if they were lying within 400 yards of the men's billets or bivouacs. On the 16th a more determined effort was made to clear their new area in Premont and each Company was allotted an area to clear plus their own billets. Ammunition dumps were established on the Premont - Becquigny and Premont - Bohain roads and the men were told that *'all war material, except shells in these areas will be salvaged'* The next day they had to spell it out that 'war material' included old clothing, all metal, and cartridge cases' and that trenches and shell holes were to be filled in. The position of shells had to be marked. Eventually the Royal Engineers turned up and each shell was marked either safe or dangerous. The CO complained to Company Commanders on the 21st November that many of the men were slacking and not *'showing enough keenness and energy'* The Coy Commanders were told to do something about it and have them shifting salvage if there was nothing else to do. The salvage work was still going on when the Battalion were preparing to move to Beaufort on the 2nd December Lt Chace was detailed to ensure the work was completed before the move did take place. In fact the amount of work was so huge that the men of the battalion were kept fully engaged wherever they were until the Battalion was disbanded. Sometimes enthusiasm got the better of them as there were numerous complaints about wood for fuel being taken from undamaged houses and on the 30th Jan they had to be told to stop cutting down German telegraph poles as the German system was still being used by the British Army and the felling of poles was causing serious breaches in communications.

Every so often warnings were sent out on various matters. For example on 2nd November one was sent out about German cartridges with wooden bullets. These looked just like British blank rounds but the charge was enough to cause severe injuries if fired at close range.

On the 23rd November there was a warning of German delayed action mines. Apparently the Germans had been wont to bury a delayed action mine at the bottom of a shell hole and cover it in before retiring. These were now beginning to explode and causing damage and injury.

An even more dangerous booby trap was noted on 25th November.

It consists of two bottles of some liquid wrapped in corrugated paper wired to a special stick grenade. This grenade has a red handle and the string for detonating it

is covered with a screwed cap and it is very sensitive. Presumably the string is meant to be attached to some article which on being moved detonates the bomb and breaks the bottles which probably contain some form of gas.

One can imagine that men released from the pressures of war would be prone to act in a high spirited way on occasions. The log records that considerable damage to farm buildings by fire and confusion to aircraft trying to land had been caused by the unauthorised setting off of fireworks and Very lights. This had to stop. Also the men were starting to look sloppy when walking out and they were ordered to smarten themselves up.

The Army had a Foden lorry which was equipped for delousing. It went around from unit to unit doing its work. It was the 8th's turn on 21st November. Each Company was ordered to collect all its blankets together and provide a detail to handle the blankets. A Coy were scheduled for 0900, B for 1030, C for 1200, D for 1400 and HQ for 1530. However reports as to the effectiveness of this treatment are mixed. Earlier in the war when uniforms were thus treated the lice were killed off but the eggs remained buried in seams, only to hatch when the clothes were next worn. Perhaps that is why at this time only blankets were dealt with.

Bathing facilities were in short supply and after all the salvage and clearance work no doubt many of the men smelt a bit. The Baths near the church at Premont had a capacity of 40 baths per hour and on 25th November this was allocated to A Coy whose CO was told to ensure that bathing got priority over other activities and to report the numbers of men who not bathed by 1315. Those that had not would be given access between 1100 and 1230 the next day. At Beaufort the baths had a slightly higher capacity, 30 men every 40 minutes. Clean clothes were provided, but men were ordered to wear greatcoats when they went. Whether some men were trying to avoid having a bath or whether someone was trying to do them out of a bath is not clear but on the 3rd Jan each Coy Commander had to certify in future that every man had had a bath and a clean set of underclothes.

## Leave and Demobilization

During the latter months of the war men were granted regular leave. Each departure and return was duly noted in the log book and men were reminded on several occasions that the first thing they had to do when they returned was to report to the Orderly Room and then their CQMS to make sure their return had been recorded. When they went on leave they were issued with a temporary ration card.

On the 14th November the CO noted *'with regret'* that many men were overstaying their leave and that in future such cases would be dealt with severely.

On 7th December each Coy Commander had to submit a return of names of men who had not had UK leave since

31st March. Rather than go to the UK however a number of men were opting for leave in the Channel Islands. Usually this was done directly via Le Havre but some could get there faster by going by Southampton as the direct sailing was often full.

The Battalion ran classes with an Educational Officer in each Company. On the 20th and 21st Jan they ran their own examinations in the Dining Hall and men sitting exams were excused duties that day.

A Demobilisation Enquiry Office was opened opposite the Battalion HQ Mess on 11th Jan.

Leather jerkins and fur undercoats issued to the troops had to be returned before men could go to England for demobilisation or leave. They had to be deposited either at Base Depots or left with the CQMS.

The first draft for demobilisation left on the 24th December and consisted of men who had gained employment as coal miners. 20 from the 8th were included. In the new year there were further drafts sent home for demobilisation.

In addition 5 men were demobilised whilst on leave in England in January. Once the Battalion had moved to Bertry the system changed and instead of being sent direct to England from the Battalion they were sent instead to XIII Corps Demobilisation Camp. Men continued to leave at a steady trickle until on the 12th April the Battalion was reduced to cadre and remaining men, including the Regulars were transferred to the 3rd Battalion for re-assignment.

Three men had opted for Ordination training under a BEF scheme and were struck off the Battalion's strength as they went to Ordination school.

## Last Orders

When the Battalion was reduced to cadre on the 12th April 1919 Lt Col N B Hudson issued his final *Order of the Day* which summarised the Battalion's achievements. It read:

On the occasion of the final reduction to cadre strength and imminent dissolution of the Battalion, The Commanding Officer wishes to place on record the magnificent work and immortal deeds of the Battalion throughout the Great War.

In September 1914 the battalion was formed at Reading of men from Berkshire, London and Birmingham, the majority from Berkshire. From September 1914 until August 1915 the battalion was training at Reading, Codford and Warminster.

On the 8th August 1915 the battalion landed in France and joined the 1st Brigade, 1st Division.

On the 28th September 1915 and the 13th October 1915 the battalion took part in the Battles of Loos and Hulluch, and, in spite of heavy losses and against almost insuperable odds, by its gallantry and devotion to duty first gained the reputation which it was never to lose throughout the war.

From October 1915 until July 1916 the battalion was engaged in holding the line in the Loos and Hulluch sectors. On two occasions during this period it had the opportunity of showing of what it was made. First on the 3rd May 1916, when it raided the well defended German lines on the Double Crassier with great success, and, secondly, on the 27th May 1916, when a determined raid by the enemy was met and repulsed with the greatest gallantry.

.....

Although the battalion has ceased to exist, its memory can never die. The record of a battalion, from the Battle of Loos to the Battle of a hundred days, is a story of victories, won by devotion to duty, and by an obstinate determination which overcame all. By their steady loyalty, by their untiring self-sacrifice and by their high courage, all Officers, NCOs and men have earned the undying gratitude of their Country and the County to which they belong.

## Sources

Log Book of the 8th Battalion

War Diaries

History of the Royal Berks Regt - Petre

