

Section 146

The Labour Battalions

The Labour Corps

Formation

When the Labour Corps was formed it acted somewhat like an ordinary Army Corps in that it had no permanent allocation of men. Rather it had allocated to it a number of Labour Battalions from many Regiments. The Headquarters merely exercised general supervision and allocation of those Labour Battalions and whose day to day work tended to be directed by the town commandants where they were allocated.

However in February 1917 a new Director of Labour was appointed. He was Brigadier General E Gibb and he set about re-organising the Corps and taking more direct control. He formed the battalions into Groups and appointed his own Group commandants. Col Balfour of the 10th Royal Berks became Group Commandant of 15 Group at Rouen on the 2nd March.

The battalions were taken away from their regiments in May 1917 and redesignated as Companies of the Labour Corps. The men were all given new Labour Corps numbers and thereafter had little to do with their former regiment. Typically a Labour battalion was split into two Labour Companies and while initially the pairs of companies from one battalion worked alongside each other, it was not long before individual companies went their own way.

This is not the place to produce a history of the Labour Corps, however it is interesting to follow the subsequent careers of the eight ex Royal Berkshire Companies plus a few other companies with a large contingent of ex Royal Berkshire men

158 Company

They began with men from the 10th Battalion who were renumbered between 94201 and 94800. They became part of 15 Group of the Labour Corps working mainly in the Rouen area, based at Grand Quevilly from the 13th July 1917. Their duties revolved around the port, the Base Supply Depot, the Petrol Depot, the Ammunition wharf and timber work. They worked two shifts, from 07:00 to 18:00 and 18:00 to 05:00.

They gained two significant commendations - on the night of 5/6th June 1917 they unloaded 100 tons in 15 hours from SS Harbourne and then surpassed this with 300 tons off loaded in 2 hours from SS Alton on the night of the 4th/5th June.

On the 6th July 1917 they moved to the Straffem

Railhead to join 32 Group within XIV Corps. The next day they moved on to Proven and then on the 10th to Ondank where they worked at the Royal Engineers dump.

They left XIV Corps on the 17th September moving to VIII Corps and then in quick succession to X Corps then XIX Corps.

159 Company

They began with men from the 10th Battalion who were renumbered between 94801 and 95400

160 Company

They began with men from the 11th Battalion who were renumbered between 95401 and 96000

161 Company

They began with men from the 11th Battalion who were renumbered between 96001 and 96600.

162 Company

They began with men from the 12th Battalion who were renumbered between 96601 and 97200

163 Company

They began with men from the 12th Battalion who were renumbered between 97201 and 97800.

164 Company

They began with men from the 10th Battalion who were renumbered between 97801 and 98400.

They were at Villers Bocage and Poulainville on the 27th June 1917 when they were noted as 'wanting discipline' by 4th Army.

On the 2nd June 1917 they were allocated to support the tanks of the Heavy Branch of the Machine Gun Corps.

They were at Poperinghe on the 4th July 1917 supporting the tank Corps within XVIII Corps.

They were part of 28 Group which also included 32, 72, 73, 91, 121, 141 and 144 Coys on the 10th July 1917.

By the 4th Sept 28 Group consisted of 25, 70, 72, 75,

106, 121, 184, and 171 Coys. Their chief employment in the forward area was road maintenance, loading and unloading ammunition, drainage and ditching.

They were released from working in support of the Tanks Corps units of XVIII Corps on the 16th Sept 1917 and eventually transferred to 67 Group which then comprised 58, 74, 8?, 101, 164, 165 and 184 Coys.

This didnt last long and they moved on the 27th October to II Corps within 4th Army on light rail duties.

By 6th December they were back with 28 Group, then consisting of 66, 164, 72, 144, 13, 17, 171 and 41 Coys. They were noted as 'not doing well, system needed'

165 Company

They began with men from the 10th Battalion who were renumbered between 98401 and 99000

184 Company

Their basis was a number of Kitchener men from several Royal Berks Battalions who were renumbered between 109801 and 110400

629 Company

This was a Home Service Employment Company based at Portsmouth. Men from the Royal Berks were renumbered between 281901 and 282208