

Volume 2 Section 352

Prisoners of War

German Prisoners

In this section we deal with Germans who were captured by the Royal Berks or who were imprisoned in Berkshire.

German Prisoners in Berkshire

The possibility of the need to accommodate prisoners was realised from the start. By 29th August 1914 preparations were well underway to transform Newbury Racecourse into a POW Camp. By the 19th September no fewer than 1500 prisoners were being guarded there by the Newbury Battalion of the Berkshire National Guard [RM 29/8/14 & 19/9/14]

Initially the prisoners were aliens being interned. These were all removed to prison ships, ie liners anchored offshore, at the end of 1914. A number of allegations were made about ill-treatment and these were used as the justification for the brutal treatment meted out to British POWs in Germany. However the allegations of British ill-treatment were later proved to be false. (B&W 1/44)

Philberds

One of the camps for Officers was at Philberds a large house near Maidenhead. This housed over 100 officers and 40 other ranks who acted as their servants. The camp was guarded by Territorials from the Devon Regiment. Early in 1915 the prisoners took suddenly to gardening and eventually the adjutant, Captain Armstrong got suspicious and called in workmen to lay some unneeded drainpipes. While they were digging their picks struck a tunnel 8-12 yards long and 2' square. It was cased with wood and had pads for elbows to rest on. The Germans had cut through the concrete foundations of a high wall and would probably have escaped had it not been for the adjutant. [RM10/4/15]

Two confused Prisoners

The Berkshire Mercury of 23rd March 1917 had an interesting snippet recording the recapture of two escaped prisoners at Twyford.

Two prisoners of war, Jano Chylanzi an Hungarian and Karl Perus, an Austrian, escaped from the Yates Labour Internment Camp, Glos on Wednesday. On Saturday evening P/S Pierce observed two men proceeding along the road at Twyford, and suspecting they were aliens, detained them. He communicated with Supt Goddard and it was subsequently discovered that they were two men who had broken away from the encampment. Neither offered resistance. The men stated that on escaping they walked to Cirencester, their object being to make their way to London. They continued journeying thinking that they were making good progress towards their destination traversing a distance which they put at 25 miles, greatly to their astonishment they once more found themselves in Cirencester. Their next procedure was to take the train for Reading, where on their arrival they set off to walk to London, but as already stated, they were stopped by P/S Pierce who is to be complimented on his smart capture. The men purchased their food in shops and slept rough for the three nights they were at large. [TX01250]

Germans on Trial

A number of Germans managed to commit civil offences whilst in captivity. These cases were reported in local papers. It seems strange that so many were allowed to roam around.

A serious assault charge

From the Berkshire Chronicle of 1/11/18

GERMAN PRISONERS ACQUITTED

At Reading Barracks on Wednesday three German prisoners of war, Ptes D Schneider, H Triebel and L Müller were charged before a military court with a serious assault on a girl aged 16. According to the evidence for the prosecution the prisoners dragged the girl into a barn. The guards however said that when they saw the girl afterwards she was perfectly calm and normal and made no complaint. Inspector Halfacre corroborated this. The prisoners were discharged. Triebel admitted the other offence of being outside his billet as did Schneider. Müller was found not guilty of this charge.

A fourth man Pte G Weinburger Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment was charged but was seriously ill with pneumonia.

The court was composed as follows:- President Colonel Sir C Culyer Bart OBE Commanding Depot Oxon and Bucks LI. Members Major W L Arm Mc attached Pioneer Depot Reading; Capt R H Peters of the Depot Royal Berks Regiment Capt J Cotton Garrison Adjutant Reading; Lieut J F G Froes Remount Depot Shirehampton, Lieut N J Lewis Dorsetshire Regiment attached Southern Command Depot Sutton Coldfield. Mr Patrick Sutherland-Graeme DJA was the Judge Advocate while Major D Matthews appeared to prosecute and Mr A T Settle was counsel for the defence. [TX00116]

Letters Home

Many of the war diaries contain numbers of prisoners taken either by the Royal Berks or by the Brigade they were serving in. Occasionally one gets snippets of information gleaned from them. However all German prisoners were interrogated and many of them were quite willing to disclose a lot more than name rank and number. Perhaps more revealing was the contents of letters sent by them to their relatives. The following extracts were translated from letters sent by men who were captured

The letters were written generally before they were captured and found on them unposted. They give a good insight into German morale and the effects of allied action.

A Lieutenant writing from Rheims, 11th September 1914

My Dear

As you see I have been away from my Regiment for several weeks engaged in a very bloody battle which has lasted since Sunday. I have been wounded. My Regiment which started with 60 officers has now only 5. More than 2000 men are hors de combat, with the result that my gallant regiment is only a fraction.

It is the same with the gallant Saxons fighting at our side.

I beg you not to speak of our great losses which can only lead to useless rumours being spread. To speak candidly the army to which I belong has passed through terrible experiences during the last four weeks. Let us hope it will soon be over.

A Lieutenant of the 26th Regiment of Field Artillery

For the last five weeks we have undergone colossal fatigue, lack of sleep and desperate combats. The Xth Corps has been constantly on the move since the first day of the campaign. My battery especially is always with the advance guard. Our horses are for the most part worn out; we are now using Belgian and French horses. There are moments which they simply cannot go on, then they just lie down - add to that the numerous wounds which they receive, From 5 am in the morning to 8 pm at night we are under the enemy's fire without being able to eat or drink - I was so tired I could not keep on my horse even at a walk.

Towards mid-day our battery was literally plastered with the enemy's shrapnel and shells. We could not make the least movement behind our guns without running the risk of being shelled.

There was a murderous battle which lasted from Sunday the 6th to Wednesday, 9th September. The 10th and Guard Corps were the chief sufferers. Let us hope that we shall soon have a decisive battle and so end these masses of carnage - even in bivouac at night the troops are not safe.

Out of one battery of our brigade an aviator dropped four bombs on the cantonment. Three of these were effective with the result that 20 horses were killed, 10 wounded, 4 men killed 8 wounded. We no longer get any letters, the Post Office motor car of the 10th Corps has been burnt.

A second letter from the same officer read.

In the 10th Corps some infantry companies which started out 250 men are reduced to 70.

Some officers of the Guard who have fought by the side of our corps told me yesterday that some infantry companies of the Guard "Augusta" Regiment are commanded by one year volunteers because no officers are left.

We occupy a new strategic position. Let us hope the French will not push forward for if they do they will occupy Rheims.

He would seem to have been part of the German 2nd Army advancing towards Paris from the north east and describing the battle of the Marne.

A prisoner from the 74th German Infantry Regiment in X Corps wrote:-

I have just been living through days that defy imagination. I should never have thought that men could stand it. Not a second has passed but my life has been in danger, and yet not a hair of my head has been hurt. It was horrible, it was ghastly. But I have been saved for you and for our happiness and I take heart again, although I am still terribly unnerved. God grant that I may see you again soon and that this horror may soon be over. None of us can do any more, human strength is at an end. I will try and tell you about it:-

On the 5th September the enemy were reported to be taking up position near St Prix (NE of Paris). The X Corps, which had made an astonishingly rapid advance, of course attacked on the Sunday.

Steep slopes led up to heights which were held in considerable force. With our weak detachments of the 74th and 91st Regiments we reached the crest and came under a terrible artillery fire that mowed us down.. However we entered St Prix. Hardly had we done so than we were met with shell fire and a violent fusillade from the enemy's infantry. Our Colonel was badly wounded - he is the third we have had. Fourteen men were killed round me.

The 7th 8th and 9th September we were constantly under shell and shrapnel fire and suffered terrible losses. I was in a house which was hit several times. The fear of a death of agony which is in every man's heart, and naturally so, is a terrible feeling.

What I suffered in that terrifying battle which extended along a front of many miles near Montmirail, you cannot possibly imagine. Our heavy artillery was being used for the siege of Maubeuge; we wanted it badly, as the enemy had theirs in force and kept up a furious bombardment. For four days I was under artillery fire - it is like hell, but a thousand times worse. On the night of the 9th the order was given to retreat, as it would have been madness to attempt to hold our position with our few men and we should have risked a terrible defeat the next day. The First and Third Armies had not been able to attack with us, as we advanced too rapidly.

Our moral was absolutely broken.

In spite of unheard of sacrifices we had achieved nothing. I cannot understand how our army, after fighting three great battles and being terribly weakened, was sent against a position which the enemy had prepared for three weeks, but naturally I know nothing of the intentions of our Chiefs. Our first battalion which has fought with unparalleled bravery is reduced from 1200 to 194 men. These numbers speak for themselves.

Again he was part of the German 2nd Army which was held up on the Marne by the French 9th and 4th Armies. They had bypassed Maubeuge but had left their artillery behind

Bibliography

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Berkshire Chronicle