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Prisoners of War

Support for Prisoners from Home

There were three quite distinct networks of support for men in the First World War. One concentrated on men at the front, one on the wounded and the other on men who had been taken prisoner.

The Berkshire Network

There were many schemes to enable POWs to receive parcels from home. It was not too bad when they had relatives who would put together parcels of things asked for in the cards home. But for many prisoners there was no-one to send parcels. Money collected by the various charities was used either to provide parcels which were sent to British POWs or, in the case of regimental charities, specifically directed to men from that regiment. At first most of the parcels were delayed and looted before the recipients could get them but after the Red Cross took a stern line the parcels began to get through and on the whole one can say that after the end of 1916 the POWs were better fed and clothed than their captors.

In Berkshire a Committee was founded called the 'Royal Berks Regiment Prisoners of War Care Committee' It was chaired by William Mount MP. This Committee organised the collection of money and built a network of contributors who assembled the parcels to be sent to the men. These parcels were then brought to a depot where an army of volunteers addressed them and looked after the administration and records.

Over the years it cared for over 1400 POWs but extended its scope beyond the Royal Berks Regiment to the Berkshire Yeomanry and any man who was or had been a resident of Berkshire. Naturally they could send parcels only to those men with a known address in Germany, usually this would be the name of the camp in which they were interned, however the Germans maintained a set of 'Registration Camps' such as Gustrow, Stendal, Limburg, Friedrichsfeld and Parchim. They were used as the designated addresses of men who had been sent to work in mines and factories and on farms. Parcels sent to them rarely arrived and after the war the Committee made a list of parcels sent and parcels acknowledged so that a claim could be made on the German Government for the missing parcels.

Every 28 days six parcels each worth initially 10s and later 15s, were sent plus three kilos of bread which usually came from a nearby neutral country such as Switzerland. Also each prisoner was sent a special pack containing a complete change of clothing as soon as his address was received and this was renewed every six months.

To assist communication and exchange of information a number of ladies looked after the different Berkshire Battalions. Mrs Mount of Wasing took on the 1st, 2nd, 5th and 8th: Mrs Hedges of Wallingford took on the 4th and 7th and Mrs Dowell of Colchester looked after the 6th. People whose relatives were missing or POWs were asked to make contact with the appropriate lady. [RM 8/7/16]

The number of prisoners increased dramatically as a result of the Spring Offensive of 1918. At the end of 1917 there were only some 200 on the books but by Armistice Day this had swelled to 1400 with 42 reported as having died. As a result the frequency of despatch and the amount of bread had to be drastically reduced.

At the end of the war there was £3401/11/1 left in the fund which was distributed to ex POW and disabled men from Berkshire or of the Royal Berks Regiment.

Fund Raising

Many events were reported during the war to raise funds for prisoners of war. This section contains just a selection

A street collection was organised to provide comforts for British POWs was held in Reading on 1st Jan 1915. All expenses were borne privately and the enormous sum of £550 was raised. Mrs LD Fullerton of Purley Park who was the organiser. [RM 8/1/16]

A concert was given in aid of POWs in Reading in March 1916. Half the proceeds were given to the Royal Berks, 10% for men who were serving with the Borough and County Police and the remainder sent to a central fund in London.

After the German Spring Offensive the number of men from Berkshire who were prisoners rose dramatically but the sources of funds remained the same. When the 4th anniversary of the start of the war came around it was decided to make a special national appeal for funds in church on August 4th with a substantial part of the proceeds going to the county prisoner of war committees. The Berkshire chairman, Mr W A Mount launched his appeal in the Berkshire Chronicle of 2/8/18. He pointed out that it cost £3 per month to support a prisoner. and that they had had over 2000 letters of grateful thanks from the recipients.

Receipt of Parcels

Letters and parcels for men who were prisoners were sent to Holland where the Red Cross effected the transfer between the British and German postal services.

Each parcel contained a card which the recipient was asked to sign and return, but many often enclosed letters of thanks. Some of these were reproduced in the final report.

Sgt Hemmings of the 1st Bn wrote from Saltau:

I hope you will excuse my writing to you like this but I thought I would like to write and let you know how much I and the other NCOs of this Regiment appreciate all you have done for us since we have been in Germany. I can safely say that no other regiment gets so well looked after as our own.

Sgt Summers of the 1st Bn wrote from Munster 2

I feel it is incumbent upon me to write my thanks to you and Miss Eastwood for all you have done for the NCOs and men of the regiment in Germany and most especially myself. I have always been proud of my Regiment but am now even prouder of all those ladies who work voluntarily for its physical comfort. I can assure you ladies that every NCO and man here heartily appreciates the splendid work of you all.

Cpl Innocent of the 1st Battalion wrote from Hameln:

I don't know what we prisoners would have done had there not been so many good Samaritans in the old country. I assure you the men appreciate to the full the efforts of their respective donors and distributors.

Cpl Shaw of the 1st Bn wrote from Switzerland on December 3rd 1917:

I have at last arrived in this beautiful country also Sgt Laing. How grateful we are to you Mrs Mount and all your generous-hearted people at home. Now I have a free hand to write I can tell you candidly that you great workers at home are savers of life; if it was not for the parcels sent to us in Germany we should now be in our graves.