

**RECORD OF THE 2/4TH BATTALION,
AUGUST 1914 TO 31ST JULY 1915.
EXTRACTED FROM THE REGIMENTAL CHRONICLES OF
THE OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY**

The following account of the raising and training of this Battalion has been contributed by Colonel W. H. Ames, T.D. :—

Within a very few days of the mobilization of the Territorials each Battalion was asked to volunteer for Active Service. A very good response was made to the invitation, but in every case there were a number of men who were, either from age or other reasons, at that moment unable to volunteer. As soon as the services of the various units had been accepted for Foreign Service, the problems arose as to how they were to be brought up to the strength necessary for Foreign Service, how they were to be maintained at that strength, what substitute should be provided for them in the scheme of Home Defence, and what use should be made of those men who were unable to volunteer.

On August 31st the War Office issued a letter to County Associations solving these problems by ordering the formation of a replica of each unit of the Territorial Force. Major Ovey had been detailed to proceed to Oxford to raise the necessary recruits, about 400, to bring the General Service Battalion up to strength, and these were obtained in the course of a very few days. The County Association entrusted the task of raising the new Battalion to Colonel W. H. Ames, who had previously commanded the Territorial Battalion, and on 14th September 1914 that officer began to enrol men in the new Battalion,

Headquarters were at Exeter College, and the services of Colour-Sergeant T. V. Wood, who had retired on a pension about nine months previously, were obtained to act as Sergeant-Major. On the first day about 130 recruits were obtained, and by the end of the week there were considerably over 300. Fortunately the services of some experienced regular N.C.O.'s were secured, among them Colour-Sergeants Moore and Williams and Sergeant Gee, of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry ; Colour-Sergeant Waldram, of the Durham Light Infantry; Sergeant Howland, of the Rifle Brigade ; and Colour-Sergeant Bassett, of the Gloucester Regiment. For officers the Commanding Officer had to rely on the services of gentlemen who had had little or no previous military experience beyond what they had acquired in some cases in the O.T.C.

The Battalion was organized in 8 companies as a replica of the First Line Battalion :

A, B, and H were Oxford Companies;

C and G. Banbury and district;

D, Henley and Culham ;

E, Chipping Norton ;

F, Witney and Bicester.

The greater number of men came from Oxford and overflowed into G Company. A considerable number of National School teachers, who had formerly been members of the Culham College Detachment, joined up and brought other teachers with them, and they overflowed into E Company. At first men were accepted either for Home Service only or for Foreign Service, but towards the middle of October a change was made, and men could be accepted only if they undertook the Foreign Service obligation. By the beginning of the third week in October the Battalion had been recruited up to the necessary strength. The Home Service men from the first line Battalion were retained with that Battalion until about the middle of November, on the ground that they were trained men and were required for the Defence of the Coast. About the middle of November they returned to Oxford, and the Battalion was complete.

It is obvious that training had to be from the very beginning. Officers and men were started together at Squad Drill, which gradually developed into Company Drill. After about a month or six weeks of this work a series of daily Battalion Drills in Close Order were undertaken on Port Meadow, which greatly helped in developing the Battalion into an organized unit. Colonel Waller (late R.E.) instructed both officers and men in the elements of trench digging on the ground behind the Headquarters in St. Cross Road.

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There were weekly route marches in the country surrounding Oxford, which gradually increased in length until, just before Christmas the Battalion successfully covered a march by Nuneham, Culham, Abingdon—a distance of quite 20 miles. The men were of course without equipment or rifles, but were trained, in accordance with the traditions of light infantry, to march somewhat beyond the regulation pace; and, in fact, coming through Bagley Wood, towards the end of this march, they were covering the space between each milestone in a few seconds under the quarter of an hour. Training in the open was carried out at first on Benman's Farm, on the Eynsham Road, by the courtesy of the tenant, and afterwards chiefly in the Elsfield district, where companies learned the elements of outpost work, working across country, and trench digging, and also night work.

As the men were raised they were billeted in the various colleges. Exeter, Wadham, Balliol, Keble, Magdalen, Oriel, and Brasenose—all came forward and placed their accommodation and their kitchens at the disposal of the Battalion, but by the end of September provision had to be made for the return of the undergraduates, and the Battalion was billeted in the neighbourhood of Holywell, Broad Street, St. Giles, Wellington Square, and Beaumont Street, chiefly in the University lodging-houses. These were certainly the most luxurious billets that the Battalion was destined to occupy. Clothing and equipment proceeded very slowly, as naturally the troops for Foreign Service had to take precedence, but by Christmas most, if not all, of the Battalion had received their uniform. The equipment took longer, but most of it had been obtained by the end of January. As to rifles and bayonets there were none, but by the kindness of the County Association 100 rifles and bayonets, which were kept in store for the National Reserve, were available for use, and each company in turn were grounded in the elements of musketry and the handling of arms.

After Christmas these newly raised units were formed into Brigades and Divisions, an exact replica of the First Line forces, and it was about this time that the title of the Battalion was changed from the 4th Reserve Battalion to the 2/4th Battalion Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, and it became a unit in the 2/1st South Midland Brigade of the 2/1st South Midland Division. The Marquis of Salisbury was appointed to command the Division, and Colonel Ludlow, C.B., who formerly commanded the 8th Battalion of the Royal Warwick Regiment, was made Brigadier.

Shortly after the New Year the four-company system was applied to the Territorial Force, and the Battalion was reorganized as follows :

A and F became A Company,
D and H became B Company,
E and G became C Company,
B and C became D Company.

Inoculation and influenza interfered considerably with the training during the first part of January, but the Battalion took its part in a Recruiting March round the streets of Oxford in company with the 7th and 8th Battalions, who were then also billeted in Oxford. At the end of January the Division was concentrated at Northampton, and the Battalion moved thereby the London and North-Western Railway on January 31st, and in a few days received their first transport in the form of seven riding ponies and two mules. The Battalion was billeted in the neighbourhood of Abington Park, with Battalion Headquarters in Billing Road; the officers' mess was in the museum in Abington Park.

During their stay in Northampton the Battalion was trained in Platoon and Company Drill, elements of Trenching, and Open Order work. Japanese rifles were served out on the arrival of the Battalion at Northampton, and were taken into use, and a preliminary course was fired on Harbottle Range. General Sir Ian Hamilton, then commanding the Central Force, inspected the Division, and was much interested in recognizing the "young eagles," whose birth he had predicted in his speech at the Town Hall, Oxford, which attracted at the time considerable attention during the first year of the formation of the Territorial Force.

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While the Battalion was marching past him in fours, he remarked on the excellence of the band, and added "a trifle fast even for light infantry." Towards the end of March the first-line Division went overseas, and the Reserve Division moved into Essex to take over their quarters.

The Battalion was quartered at Writtle, where it took over details left behind by the 1/4th Battalion. On the expiration of ten days the Battalion; with the exception of a few details, was moved to Hoddesdon and Broxbourne, and there employed on digging London defences. The move was made partly by train and partly by march, 620 men marched the 25 miles into Hoddesdon, and not a single man fell out. The remainder of the Battalion went round by train Zeppelin scares were frequent during the three weeks' stay at Hoddesdon, but otherwise there was no incident. On May 7th the Battalion moved back to Broomfield, in the neighbourhood of Chelmsford. Those considered fit to do so marched, and there was considerable emulation among the men to take part in the march; 686 men marched 29 miles to Broomfield between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. on that day, and only three fell out.

From May until the first week in June the Battalion remained at Broomfield, and commenced a Musketry Course at Boreham Range; but, with the old rifles that were then in possession of the Battalion, not much good was done.

About June 10th the Battalion moved to Epping to camp at Wintry Park Farm, where Battalion and Brigade Training were carried out until the middle of July, after which the Battalion marched back to Broomfield.