

***BASED ON EXTRACTS FROM THE REGIMENTAL WAR CHRONICLE OF THE  
OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY VOL I 1939/1940***

**GENERAL MOBILIZATION TO 31st OCTOBER 1939**

The Battalion had returned from its annual training at Lavant, near Chichester, on Sunday, the 21st August, 1939, and companies had dispersed to their home stations. The permanent staff were employed in checking their stores and clearing up after the training when, on the 24th August, orders were received to call up the key parties, who were to prepare for the embodiment of the Battalion. As the 5th Battalion was also embodying at St. Cross Road, the two battalions combined for many purposes, and Lieutenant Barlow, the quartermaster of the 5th Battalion, took all the available transport to Tidworth to collect accommodation stores.

By the 27th August all key parties were complete and work continued until the 1st September, when the order to embody was received by telephone. Notices were immediately dispatched to all members of the Battalion, and by 0830 hrs. on the 2nd September officers and men had started to report.

Companies were accommodated in drill halls and requisitioned buildings: H.Q. Company was in the Old Cowley Road cinema and at the Drill Hall, St. Cross Road; A Company in the Drill Hall and other buildings in Henley; B Company in the house recently taken as a headquarters at Goring and in the village hall; C Company in the village hall at Nettlebed; and D Company in the Clarendon Press Institute, Walton Street, Oxford. By 0900 hrs. on the 3rd September thirty officers and five hundred and sixty-six other ranks had reported. The outlying detachments at Kidmore End, Thame and Dorchester had joined their respective companies, B, C and D.

On the afternoon of the 3rd September the colours of the Battalion were handed over to the safe keeping of the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and were eventually hung on a pillar in the Regimental Chapel, not far from the pillar on which they were hung during the First World War, 1914-18. An escort of fifty rank and file, under the command of Captain M. C. Wiggins, with the band and buglers, was provided by H.Q. and D Companies.

By the morning of the 4th September thirty-four officers and six hundred and ten other ranks had reported. The whole of the embodiment had worked very smoothly, thanks to the practices which had been held in the previous years, when the company staffs had gone through the whole procedure.

Preparations now started for the move to the concentration area, and the medical officer was busy with the examination of the Battalion.

The advanced party left for the concentration area on the 11th September, followed by some of the heavy baggage, which was conveyed in motor-coaches stripped of their seats.

By the 13th September the full scale of anti-tank rifles had arrived and the carrier platoon had now three carriers. Transport was still very short, and it was necessary to order back the trucks which had taken the advanced party to the concentration area in order to convey the cooks when the Battalion finally moved on the 14th September.

The Battalion left its peace station on the 14th September at 0800 hrs. and moved to the concentration area south of Newbury. The distribution of the Battalion in the area was;  
Battalion Headquarters and H.Q. Company: Burley House, a large empty house with plenty of out-buildings.

A Company: Harwood Stud Farm (the home of "Gainsborough," the winner of many classic races).

B Company: Woolton House.

C Company: Battledene Wash Common (nearly three miles from Battalion headquarters).

D Company: Tile Barn.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

All the houses except Battledene were in Woolton Hill village and by midday all were settled in, and work was started on improvements to the accommodation which was much handicapped by the total absence of R.E. stores.

Before the Battalion left Oxford all duties, such as the guard at divisional headquarters, were taken over by the 5th Battalion.

Training now began in earnest. A brigade school, which took half the company commanders and half the subalterns at a time, made the training of the companies most difficult to organize. A junior commanders' course was started under R.S.M. Broderick and Serjeant Burton for twenty non-commissioned officers and selected privates and proved a great success.

The chief difficulty at this time was the shortage of latrine and cookhouse accommodation due to the shortage of R.E. material. A sequel to this was a visit from high officials of the Thames Conservancy complaining of an overload on the local drainage system. Fortunately, with the large kitchens in many of the houses and the co-operation of the local baker, some of the cooking troubles were surmounted.

Weekly route marches of increasing length showed a great improvement in march discipline and the fitness of all ranks. The control of these marches presented a problem on the narrow roads in the district, as it was impossible to pass the column in a car, and, of course, horses were not available for the commanding officer and adjutant. Bicycles solved the problem.

On the 26th September the G.O.C. 48th Division, Major-General F. G. Roberts, V.C., D.S.O., O.B.E., paid a short visit to the Battalion and inspected H.Q. and A Companies' billets. So ended the first month of the war.

October saw a general improvement in the accommodation and the improvised cookhouses were more satisfactory. Each company now had provision for hot baths. Training continued within companies and the route marches were lengthened. Digging began at Snelmore Common on a system of trenches that was to be used for training in trench warfare, but it turned out that the whole common was water-logged a foot or so below the surface, with the result that every trench filled with water as soon as it reached a certain depth. An enormous drainage trench was constructed which affected the local water supply. In the end little was learnt about the construction of trenches, and the whole thing became a pure fatigue, in which all interest was lost.

On the 11th October the first draft arrived from the Infantry Training Centre at Oxford. This draft, which consisted of eighty-five of the Militia called up in June, was of a very good type.

At this time all men under 19 years of age on the 1st January, 1940, were posted to the 5th Battalion and were replaced by an equal number of men from that battalion over that age. To deal with this exchange, a reinforcement company under the command of Lieutenant Holden was formed.

Entertainment for the troops was difficult, but, thanks to the kindness of the people of Woolton Hill, the village hall was placed at our disposal, and a committee of ladies organized a canteen and club there. In addition, we had visits from concert parties. This canteen was most successful, and the work of the padre was invaluable. Later the N.A.A.F.I. opened a canteen in a requisitioned building.

At this time some football grounds were available and an inter-platoon competition was run. In addition, some matches were played against outside teams.

On the 18th October a visit was paid to the Battalion by Major-General Sir John Hanbury-Williams, the colonel of the Regiment, who saw some companies at training and took the salute from H.Q. Company, including the carrier platoon, on their way back from training.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

The 145th Brigade Anti-Tank Company had been formed and the platoon from the Battalion.

A new divisional commander, Major-General A. F. A. N. Thorne, who came from commanding the London District, had been in 1918 the commander of the 184th Infantry Brigade, in which the 2nd/4th Battalion served.

**1st NOVEMBER TO 31st DECEMBER, 1939**

November saw the arrival of the full scale of transport. The commanding officer's car, the company commanders' trucks and the 15-cwt trucks for platoons were military vehicles. But the three-tonners were a mixed collection of requisitioned lorries, many in poor condition and some quite unsuitable, and all without any covering. These civilian vehicles gave trouble from the time they arrived and were a never-ending worry to the transport officer.

Training, interspersed with inoculations, continued during the month, with one or two special exercises. The first was set by the brigade, in which the Battalion was called upon to carry out a move by mechanical transport before occupying a defensive position. This exercise took place a few days after the arrival of the W.D. trucks. Additional vehicles had to be borrowed from the 1st Bucks and 4th Royal Berkshires to eke out the number of troop-carrying vehicles. Hardly any drivers had had practice in driving in convoy previously, and the exercise showed only too well the wisdom of the saying that "you must not try to run before you can walk."

Following this, the brigade arranged a transport exercise with full road control arrangements, which went off very well and the times throughout were good.

A draft of fifty-three specialists arrived from the Infantry Training Centre on the 15th November and another draft of sixty-five joined on the 23rd November to form the first reinforcement, when R Company.

The increase in the strength of companies made reorganization of the billeting area necessary. B Company moved from Woolton House to Starsgrove, and H.Q. Company took over Woolton House for the carrier and mortar platoons. R Company occupied accommodation at Hollington. The moves of B and R Companies further increased the area over which the Battalion was spread, but there was no other accommodation available.

Orders were received that officers would no longer wear "a brace to their Sam Brownes." It was argued that the Regiment wore two straps, not one brace, and therefore the order did not apply. But it was not so.

The end of November was notable for two breaks with the past: on the 27th orders were received that "T" should no longer be worn by officers and other ranks, marking the first step in the loss of the Territorial designation, and by the end of the month all those unfit for service overseas had left the Battalion, including many who had given years of devoted service to the Battalion and the Territorial Army.

The new 1937 pattern web equipment was issued on the 1st December. The carrier platoon was now at full strength, but driving still left something to be desired.

A new trench system was dug under divisional arrangements at Woodsend, between Hungerford and Marlborough on the chalk downs. Unfortunately the ground did not allow a very satisfactory siting of the trenches.

On the 11th, 12th and 13th December the Battalion occupied the divisional trench system at Woodsend, A and D Companies on the 11th and 12th being relieved by B and C Companies during the night of the 12th /13th. Battalion headquarters stayed for the full period.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

The weather was cold and wet, and the shortage of R.E. material made it difficult to make satisfactory headquarters and fire positions in the trenches. But everyone learnt much about arranging for the comfort of the troops and the difficulties of bringing up food. The weight of the new type of food container, which is a two-man load, gives carrying parties much trouble in bad going.

The move of companies to and from the trenches was carried out by mechanical transport and went very well. During the exercise an attack by the carrier platoons of the brigade was carried out against the trenches held by the Battalion and the 1st Bucks on the left. Some sharp fighting took place in B Company's area.

In the divisional boxing competitions held during December the Battalion won the light-weight and the heavy-weight.

From the 18th to the 28th the Battalion was on embarkation leave, two officers remained with the maintenance party of about forty other ranks.

After return from leave firing began on Churn range under very wintry conditions. This was the first opportunity the Battalion had had of firing since mobilization.

**1st JANUARY TO 9th MAY, 1940**

On the 2nd January an inspection of the 145th Infantry Brigade was held by His Majesty The King. The Battalion started from billets at 0710 hrs., and marched on frost-covered roads to Newbury race-course, where the brigade was formed up in a hollow square facing outwards. The arrangements for the inspection were unusual, as the troops paraded unarmed and there was no march past. Although the band played the Battalion to and from the parade, it was not allowed to play during the inspection. It can only be assumed that this was due to security reasons. The Battalion was the only one to have a band on parade, and on this His Majesty commented and asked whether the band was going overseas with the Battalion. The divisional commander indicated that he hoped that it would, and to this His Majesty assented. So when the time came the band embarked with the Battalion for overseas.

On the 5th January a visit was paid to the Battalion by Major-General Sir Robert Fanshawe, chairman of the Oxfordshire Territorial Army Association, Colonel W. H. Ames, T.D., the honorary colonel of the Battalion, and Lieutenant-Colonel A. J. N. Bartlett, D.S.O., the secretary and a former commanding officer. The Battalion was on a route march and was wearing the 1937 pattern equipment for the first time. General Fanshawe took the salute on the return of the Battalion, which went past at 140.

The advanced party had left on the 30th December. So began the preparations for the move overseas. The transport left on the 11th January, when a very severe frost froze the water as it was put into the radiators of the lorries. Finally, to add to the trouble, a three-tonner broke down in the gateway to the transport lines, with the result that there was considerable delay in dispatching all the vehicles, but after a bad start the convoy reached Southampton without further mishap.

At this time the advanced party which was to take over billets arrived. They were equipped with W.D. pattern three-ton and 30-cwt. lorries, whereas the Battalion had to take overseas a mixture of very poor civilian vehicles, many of a most unsuitable type which gave nothing but trouble.

On the 17th January the Battalion entrained in two parties at Woodhay, a small wayside station with a narrow platform not long enough to allow the whole troop train to load at once. A, D and R Companies went by the first train, which left at 0700 hrs., and the remainder of the Battalion, including Battalion headquarters, left at 1000 hrs.

Owing to the influenza epidemic there was a number of last-minute casualties.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

At Southampton, which the Battalion reached at 1130 hrs. Embarkation on H.T. St. Helier was completed by 1330 hrs., and with the band playing on deck the trooper put out into Southampton Water and anchored near Spithead to await the formation of the convoy after dark. The Battalion was lucky to have the whole ship to itself, although conditions were rather crowded. The weather was still very cold and all the cranes on the docks were frozen, which made it necessary to man-handle the baggage on board. The water supply on board was also frozen, so that no tea could be made until the ship's engineer had unfrozen the supply pipe with the help of a blow-lamp.

At 0200 hrs. on the 18th January the convoy sailed, and after an uneventful voyage the St. Helier berthed at Havre at 0830 hrs.

As soon as the Battalion had disembarked a meal was served and at 1230 hrs. the Battalion entrained, arriving at Bolbec at 1445 hrs. under the same severe weather conditions. The billeting area was around St. Romain and about seven miles from Bolbec. The companies had a trying march owing to the state of the roads, and by the time all companies were in it was getting dark. Consequently, it was difficult to ensure that everyone was comfortable in scattered and rather poor billets. A good supply of straw, however, made them bearable.

On reaching France an increase in the establishment of the Battalion was authorized. Owing to casualties due to influenza, the whole of R Company was absorbed into the Battalion and was distributed among companies.

The Battalion remained at St. Romain until the 22nd January. On the 21st January the transport started for the new area by road. Conditions were still bad. A road control party went to help the move of the divisional road parties.

On the 22nd January the Battalion was conveyed to Bolbec station by the divisional R.A.S.C., whose driving of lorries on very bad roads was most praiseworthy. Indeed, by its handling of a difficult job the divisional R.A.S.C. created in all a feeling that, come what might in the future, it could be depended upon to succeed. This certainly proved to be true.

Entrainment was completed by 2030 hrs. and many made their first acquaintance with Chevaux 8, Hommes 40. Plenty of straw made things fairly comfortable. The carriers were on a separate train, and the drivers had their first experience of driving from truck to truck. Although there were some anxious moments, there was no actual mishap.

The train left Bolbec at 2100 hrs. and in the early morning arrived at Arras, where tea and some breakfast were available. The journey was continued to Libercourt, where the Battalion detrained at 0830 hrs. Packs were dumped at the station (to be brought on by the transport) and the Battalion marched to Attiches over snow-covered roads. The Battalion's billeting area was somewhat scattered, with Battalion headquarters, H.Q. Company and C Company in Attiches and the remainder of the Battalion in Petit Attiches. Most of the billets were farm buildings and a great effort was needed to make them habitable. As few troops had been in the area before, very little had been done to build cookhouses, etc. All the transport had arrived except one truck, which after breaking down on the journey had lost its way. The transport was busy carrying out necessary repairs, and recourse to disintegration of some vehicles was unavoidable in order to make good the shortage of spare parts and keep the rest on the road.

On Monday, the 29th January, training and work on the defence sectors began in earnest. The Battalion was allotted two separate sectors: one the "maintenance sector," which was supposed to be kept in repair and would be occupied in the event of active operations, and the other the "works sector," where the Battalion was to be employed in making the anti-tank ditch and constructing pillboxes. The two sectors were some distance apart and also some way from the billeting area. The maintenance sector followed the line of the Seclin Canal from Seclin to Ancoisne. The works sector at first was near Tourmignies, but was changed several times.



RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

As there were no maps showing the very large number of posts that had been partly completed, much reconnaissance had to be done by the intelligence officer. Much of this work was wasted, as there were constant changes in the allotment of the various sectors. Often the commanding officer and second-in-command would return from a reconnaissance to find that while they had been away the sector on which they had spent much time had been allotted to some other battalion, with the result that they had to start work all over again on another sector.

The Battalion was living under hard conditions but was much fitter, and the influenza epidemic was ending. Every officer except the commanding officer had been off duty for a day or more since it started.

The ground had been too hard up to now for any football, and owing to the snow it was no easy matter to estimate where it would be possible to make grounds. In fact, when the snow melted it was found that there were few suitable fields in the area.

The thaw started on the last day of January and the country became such a quagmire that digging on the work sector became most difficult and further reconnaissance of the maintenance sector very slow. The padre, helped by the quartermaster, organized a canteen which proved so popular that it was nearly sold out the first day.

At this time many T.E.W.Ts. were organized by the brigade in different areas, which kept the commanding officer, adjutant and company commanders fully employed while the companies were working on the works sector. Some very good work was put in making fascines.

Voluntary church parades were held each Sunday morning and were very well attended. On most Sunday afternoons parties were taken to visit the battlefields of the 1914-18 war, especially Vimy Ridge. These outings were so popular that it was necessary to limit the numbers for each.

At this time a change took place in the composition of the 145th Infantry Brigade. The 4th Royal Berks left the brigade and their place was taken by the 2nd Gloucestershire Regiment. At one time the 43rd were to have joined the brigade, but "they went to the 143rd Infantry Brigade instead. This was disappointing, as it would have been a great thing to have had a light brigade. The 2nd Gloucesters were most helpful; and an interchange of visits was arranged with them and with the 18th Field Regiment, R.A., to which the Battalion was affiliated.

As some improvised ranges were available, it was possible to carry out more firing with all weapons. One good football field had been made in C Company's area and all companies had a ground of sorts.

On the 26th February an assault-Boat exercise was carried out on the Seclin Canal. The Army cinema staff came to take an official film, with unknown results, as no one ever saw it. This was not the only occasion when the Battalion had to perform for the cinema staff. On another day they took shots of a route march, driving their car in the middle of the column. The band was playing and the troops were called upon to sing so that a record could be taken.

On the 6th March Lieutenant-Colonel R. F. Symonds relinquished command of the Battalion and was succeeded by Major G. W. Kennedy, M.C., East Surrey Regiment.

With the 43rd in the division, an inter-battalion football match was arranged which resulted in a draw of 1—1.

The quartermaster had organized a concert party. They produced their first show on the 7th March, which was a great success.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

Work continued on the various trench systems and blockhouses, and C Company, working in continuous shifts, completed a blockhouse in record time.

The Battalion left Attiches and moved on the 8th April to Leforest, where it was accommodated mainly in empty miners' cottages. Battalion headquarters were in the local chateau.

The usual training and digging were continued during the month and guards were found for bridges in the Douai and Cantin area.

**FROM 10th TO 17th MAY, 1940**

**10th May.**—News received that Holland and Belgium had been invaded during the night.

The Battalion, quartered at Thumeries, was put on two hours' notice to be prepared:

- (a) To control the rush of Belgian refugees expected to come across the frontier through Orchies; or
- (b) To move into Belgium with the rest of the 48th Division as I Corps reserve.

**14th May.**—Orders received to embus in lorries supplied by the carrying company, R.A.S.C., and to enter Belgium.

The Battalion marched out of Thumeries at 1000 hrs. and embussed by companies in the lorries waiting concealed in the Bois de L'Offlarde. The journey into Belgium was carried out without hindrance. A number of enemy aircraft was sighted and engaged by the anti-aircraft guns posted along the route, at least two of the aircraft being destroyed.

The route taken was Thumeries—Orchies—Tournai—Ath— Enghien—Hal—Alseberg, the Battalion arriving late in the evening at Alseberg, where it went into billets.

**15th May.**—There was a tremendous outbreak of firing at 0600 hrs., when every man opened up with some weapon on nine enemy bombers which were flying over the town at about two thousand feet. One bomber subsequently came down, the crew being captured by the 1st Bucks, but the cause of the crash was never definitely established. The only certain result of the firing was that every electric light and telephone wire in the town was cut.

During the morning a report was received that the French armoured division—acting as cavalry screen—had been in contact with the enemy and could no longer be considered a fighting force.

All day heavy artillery fire could be heard to the east and occasional enemy planes were observed. During the afternoon a report was received that D.I.N.A.P.— a French Moroccan division—had been heavily attacked and would not stand a further attack.

At 2100 hrs. the companies received orders to stand by ready to move up to the front at 2330 hrs. The Battalion moved out of Alseberg with orders to relieve the Moroccan division on the Dyle, and joined the remainder of the 48th Division en route. The band instruments and all surplus baggage were dumped at Alseberg.

**16th May.**—Shortly before dawn news was received that the Moroccan division that we were to relieve had already retreated from the Dyle and was re-forming on a new line, and that the 48th Division was to form a defensive flank joining the right of the British position to the left of the new French line. There was, at first, some confusion, as none apparently knew what position was to be taken up or in what direction we were supposed to face. These were eventually decided, trucks were unloaded and the Battalion moved off through the 1st Bucks into the Foret de Soignes. It was there that the Battalion came under fire for the first time, a number of Messerschmitt 109's repeatedly diving and machine-gunning, but there were no casualties and the enemy planes were eventually drawn off by a Lysander which by extremely clever flying also escaped.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

The Battalion moved through the forest and took up a position along the eastern edge, A and D Companies in advance, B and C in reserve. This position was to be held to the last man and last round. During the afternoon a battalion of Warwicks which had been forming a screen in front withdrew through us, leaving the Battalion in the front line. Throughout the day reports were received of the enemy advancing in our direction, but no actual contact was made. There was some bombing by Heinkels, fortunately very wide of our positions, and a slight amount of shelling, to which our own batteries replied.

That night companies were withdrawn into the forest, where a position was taken up behind a line of lakes and behind a previously prepared iron anti-tank obstacle. During the night rumours circulated that enemy troops had actually entered the forest, but no contact was made with them either by our patrols or by our main forces.

**17th May.**—At 0300 hrs. on the 17th May the Battalion received orders to withdraw across country to Hal, where a position was to be taken up behind the canal, the reason given for the withdrawal being that the enemy had broken through on our right and that we had to race them back to the next anti-tank obstacle.

Shortly before dawn the Battalion moved off, marching in single file, leaving D Company to cover the withdrawal. After about an hour's march two enemy bombers were sighted near us flying very low, and troops were immediately deployed. Shortly afterwards, as we were passing the village of Waterloo, heavy light-machine-gun and rifle fire was opened on A and B Companies from houses about two hundred yards to our left. To our right was a deep ravine, which we reached with only five casualties, and from there prepared a counter-attack on the position from which fire had been coming. Before the attack could be developed the fire ceased, and the march was continued.

Apart from slight bombing, which caused no casualties, the march to Hal was accomplished without incident, the bridges over the canal being blown as soon as we had passed. From Hal the Battalion continued to Herffelingen, where late in the evening a hot meal was prepared—the first since leaving Alseberg—and all ranks went into excellent billets. Half an hour after reaching billets, however, orders were received stating that the enemy had already crossed the canal and that the Battalion was to take up a position along the Hal—Enghien road. The position was prepared and occupied by 2300 hrs. and was held throughout the night with no interference from the enemy except for occasional scattered shots. There was, however, considerable shelling of Enghien and other villages behind us.

#### FROM 18th TO 30th MAY, 1940

At 0300 hrs. on the **18th May** some form of breakfast was issued, the officers of one company having a hard-boiled egg each and a bottle of whisky between them, cooking arrangements at that time being made entirely by brigade; and at 0500 hrs. orders were received to evacuate the position at 0600 hrs. and march to the next anti-tank obstacle, which was the Charleroi Canal at Ath.

As Enghien was still under heavy shell fire, a detour was made, after which the march to Ath was accomplished without incident, though there was abundant evidence along the road of enemy bombing and machine-gunning of both troops and civilian refugees. As we approached Ath considerable difficulty was experienced in keeping the troops together, as the road became entirely blocked, partly by the retreating Moroccan division and partly by refugees.

It had been promised that on arrival at Ath the Battalion would go into rest billets in reserve, but on arrival in the town we were given orders to take up a position near Bouvignies behind the canal. This accordingly was done and, although extremely tired and very hungry, the men dug themselves in and some kind of meal was issued. At that stage the whole of that section of the line was being held by the Regiment, the 1st Bucks being on our right and the 43rd on our left.



RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

During the night there was a certain amount of sniping from the far bank of the canal and some shelling, and enemy patrols were sighted and engaged. A report was also received that approximately a company of enemy troops had been landed behind us by plane, but no direct contact was made with the enemy.

At 2330 hrs. orders were again received that the position was to be evacuated at 0200 hrs. and that all troops were to be clear of Ath by dawn. The objective was a point eight kilometres from Ath where lorries were to meet us to carry us the rest of the way.

**19th May.**—By dawn all troops were well clear of Ath, our withdrawal being covered by tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, but at the point given in orders there was no sign of any transport. The troop-carrying company had been bombed on the way to the rendezvous and it was not until we had marched fourteen kilometres that transport eventually arrived and then it was totally inadequate, the men being packed like sardines. All went well, however, until the outskirts of Tournai were reached, when the leading lorries came up against an obstacle in the road. As they drew up to try to find a way round, a sapper major—subsequently shot as a fifth columnist—ordered all following lorries, tanks, carriers, etc., to pack in and find a place somewhere. The result was that for a mile the road was blocked with all types of transport packed five deep across the road, the gaps being filled with refugees. Almost immediately nine Heinkel bombers appeared and dropped their load. All lorries that could be warned in time were emptied, but the bombs landed where the lorries were still full of men. At least two troop-carrying lorries packed with men, a petrol lorry, two ammunition trucks—one being loaded with 3-inch mortar bombs—and various platoon trucks were hit and all went up in an enormous blaze. After this bombing forty-eight men of A Company alone were missing, but the total number of casualties was considerably greater.

The journey was continued as rapidly as possible and early in the afternoon the Battalion crossed the Scarpe Canal—a continuation of the River Escaut—and took up its new position behind the canal around the village of Bleharies, A Company, now reduced to a platoon and a half, being detailed to hold the bridge until the sappers arrived to blow it up.

Throughout the afternoon, until the bridges were eventually blown, there was an endless stream of refugees crossing the canal and going back through our positions. There was also a certain amount of air activity. At one stage four Heinkels were attacked by three Hurricanes. One Heinkel was shot down by anti-aircraft fire, another by a Hurricane and the other two made off with smoke pouring from them. One Hurricane was shot down, the pilot landing by parachute.

This was the only time that we saw our own planes in action. At 1900 hrs. the dispositions of the companies were changed, A and D Companies being ordered to hold the line of the canal, B and C being in reserve, with Battalion headquarters in the village of Bleharies. A Company, being extremely short of men, was given the help of a section of Bren carriers. As, however, the position was on an island reached by a single wooden bridge which was in full view of the enemy, the guns had to be dismantled and the carriers sent back.

As A Company was on the right of the position it was detailed to make contact with the French—who were supposed to be on our right—and establish an international post. The French, however, were never, with one exception, where they were expected to be and the establishment of an international post was always problematical.

The men by this time were becoming rather exhausted and no digging, except shallow pits, was done that night. No contact was made with the enemy except that occasional enemy patrols were sighted in the bright moonlight and engaged with rifle fire.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

**20th May.**—The following morning was also quiet and the time was spent in forming a more definite line, making contact with the French on our right and establishing an international post.

At 1300 hrs. B Company relieved A Company, but, as the latter was making its way to the rear, a report was received that some enemy had succeeded in crossing the canal on our left and were establishing themselves in the woods behind our front line. There was also a rumour of enemy paratroops having landed behind us. C and D Companies were ordered to clear the woods and counter-attack as far as the canal, A Company to cover the exits from the woods and give covering fire. The counterattack was carried out, supported by carriers, but the report appeared to have been exaggerated, as only three of the enemy were seen on our side of the canal. As the attacking companies approached the canal, however, they came under fire from the far bank, but the only casualties were three men of D Company killed.

Meanwhile, a heavy artillery duel was in progress, the enemy shells falling in the village of Bleharies or round our own gun positions, but, although the noise was terrific, we were not actually bothered.

Towards evening a fresh disposition of companies was made and a new line formed behind a subsidiary canal. A, B and D Companies were again ordered to take up positions on this line and to dig in, C Company being in reserve, with Battalion headquarters and H.Q. Company in the village of Bleharies. As the companies moved into position the enemy sent over some shrapnel, but there were no casualties.

That night nothing was seen of the enemy, but once again the noise was terrific, as the Cheshires—a machine-gun battalion— had orders to keep up a continuous fire all night whether they saw a target or not. At the same time, the French heavy machine gun on our right also kept up a fairly constant fire, there were sounds of a battle on our left, and there was also an occasional artillery duel.

**21st May.**—The next day was, from our point of view, entirely peaceful. The weather was wonderful and after spending the morning improving the weapon pits the men were able to rest for the remainder of the day. Throughout the day there was considerable artillery activity on both sides, the enemy gunners concentrating their fire on our batteries and on the village of Bleharies, whilst ours shelled the roads for eight miles behind the enemy lines and villages nearby. Our mortars, too, were concentrating their fire on villages known to be occupied by the enemy. During the course of this shelling the village of Sin, just behind the enemy lines, entirely disappeared.

Throughout the day, too, enemy aircraft were continually passing overhead and one reconnaissance aircraft kept perpetual watch on our positions and movements while keeping just out of range himself.

**22nd May.**—During the night of the 21st/22nd May the positions were further improved and on the morning of the 22nd May C Company relieved A Company on the canal, A Company going back to rest billets in Bleharies. Shelling was still considerable and Bleharies itself was shelled regularly by two batteries for ten minutes in every quarter of an hour throughout the day.

By this time food was becoming very scarce and A Company was ordered to take a truck round the village and collect all food that could be found in the houses.

Towards evening the shelling decreased in intensity, but there were sounds of a battle along most of the line of the river.

That night we again got orders to withdraw from the position, the leading company (A) to leave Bleharies at 0030 hrs.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

**23rd May.**—Accordingly, in the early hours of Wednesday, the 23rd May, (23rd May was a Thursday) we moved out of Bleharies, leaving what we considered to be an excellent position, even at that time not knowing the reason for our continual withdrawal. At the top of the hill A Company halted to allow the other companies to pass through, A Company taking up position as rearguard to the Battalion. After marching for ten kilometres we crossed back into France and into the Gort Line, where the Battalion was allotted a number of pillboxes and section posts.

We remained in these positions throughout the day with no more interference than sporadic shelling which caused no casualties, though waves of enemy fighters and bombers were constantly passing overhead and we were perpetually kept under observation by the usual reconnaissance aircraft.

We still had no idea of what was happening. We had had reports and rumours of enemy behind us for some days, and the wireless told us that small isolated parties of the enemy had got into France with a certain number of tanks, but that these were being so rapidly surrounded and mopped up that we could see no cause for immediate alarm in that direction.

That evening a French regiment of Spahis came up and took over the line from us. It looked as though the position was to be held at last, which was encouraging, and at 2330 hrs. we left the position and marched back eighteen kilometres to Nomain, where we were presumably to get some rest at last as corps reserve.

**24th May.**—It was at Nomain that we first definitely learned the full seriousness of the situation. The Channel ports were in danger and we were ordered to stand by to move at 1030 hrs. by bus to join in the defence of Calais.

We had a meal and some sleep, disturbed by enemy bombing which, however, caused no casualties to the 4th Battalion, while we waited for the lorries to arrive. In point of fact, the lorries did not arrive until 2200 hrs., when we embussed not for Calais but for Cassel. It appeared that the position of Calais was hopeless and that embarkation was now taking place at Dunkirk. A ring of strong points was being established round Dunkirk, Cassel forming one point in this ring, and it was to be held to the last man and last round to enable the rest of the B.E.F. to get away.

**25th May.**—On our route through Lille, Armentieres and Steenvoorde our drivers were constantly losing their way, but fortunately none of us ran into the enemy, who were known to be quite close. In the early hours of the morning we reached Cassel, a delightful town on a hill surrounded by flat country stretching to Lille on one side and to Dunkirk on the other, and with excellent possibilities for all-round defence. On arrival we found the town already partially in ruins from bombing the previous day and there was a considerable number of dead men and cattle still lying about.

At that time the town was still inhabited; but it was evacuated the same evening except for some civilians, who remained hiding in their cellars.

Immediately on arrival we had to prepare hasty positions, as enemy armoured fighting vehicles were expected at any moment, but during the afternoon company dispositions were changed and the men had to dig in again. That day, however, there was no sign of the enemy except for the usual aircraft overhead and the thoroughly hated reconnaissance aircraft, which, at a height of about two thousand feet, described a large swastika in black smoke in the sky above us.

Our main trouble at that time was food. Rations were extremely meagre and, although they were supplemented by what we found in the houses, the men could never be given full meals. They became smaller and smaller as time went on. There was no bread at all, and, although a considerable quantity of flour was discovered in the house used as A Company headquarters, it was not until our last day in Cassel that arrangements could be made to turn it into bread and then the whole lot had to be abandoned.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

**26th May.**—The night was quiet and the following morning was spent in improving our positions and resting. Neighbouring villages had been heavily bombed and Dunkirk and many other places could be seen blazing furiously, but we were still left alone.

At 1200 hrs. company dispositions were again changed—in most cases for the last time—and the troops again had to dig themselves in. Facing eastwards the 2nd Battalion of the Glosters held the right half of the town and the 4th Battalion the left as well as the Mont de Recollets—a small hill to the north of, and adjoining, Cassel. A Company held the eastern side of the town, C Company the western side and D Company the Mont de Recollets, B Company being in reserve in the centre of the town. Battalion headquarters was in a house overlooking the Dunkirk road.

During the afternoon the East Riding Yeomanry took over the position of D Company, which moved across to the right, where it took up a forward position in the village of Bavinchove. During the night there was some shelling and machine-gun fire, but otherwise it was fairly peaceful.

**27th May.**—The following day the enemy attacked. The attack was heralded by continuous and heavy shelling which was at first directed mainly at all our company and Battalion headquarters, causing us strongly to suspect some of the civilians of treachery. After an hour or so of this heavy shelling and mortar bombing—which was extremely accurate—the enemy attacked with tanks and infantry. All our guns, including the 25-pounders, were sighted for anti-tank work. Firing over open sights, they beat off the attack with the loss of about thirty tanks to the enemy. Simultaneously, a column of tanks, preceded by a number of motor-cyclists, was seen to approach from Les Trois Rois in the direction of Bavinchove. D Company put up a strong resistance but was badly mauled before it withdrew into Cassel itself to a position facing the Mont de Recollets.

The defence against infantry was made more difficult by the woods which, in places, came to within thirty yards of our positions whereby the enemy could approach under cover almost up to our positions; but all their attacks were beaten off and they never succeeded in reaching our positions.

Carriers did the same excellent work as they had done during the whole period of the withdrawal from Belgium and the mortar platoon also put up a very good show.

The attack lasted the whole day, during which we had a number of casualties and, it is believed, inflicted fairly severe casualties on the enemy. The whole of one of our mortar crews became casualties, but the mortar itself was undamaged and was eventually recovered.

It proved very difficult to serve any kind of hot meals to the troops, as the concussion of the shells was perpetually extinguishing the petrol cookers and no means of counteracting this could be found. Consequently, it was necessary in some cases to make wood fires.

Towards evening enemy activity decreased, but shelling continued until 2000 hrs., after which we were left in peace. The town was rapidly becoming a shambles and a number of fires had been started which, fortunately, soon burned themselves out.

Throughout the night patrols were sent out every two hours, but only one enemy patrol was encountered.

**28th May.**—The following day we were shelled intermittently without much more damage being done, but the gunners suffered some casualties both in men and guns.

During the morning a battalion of Green Howards passed through in buses and for some reason halted in the town, although it was being both shelled and bombed at the time. Two lorries full of men which stopped in the square received a bomb between them and every man in the lorries was killed or injured.

RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

During the day some tanks approached our lines and a few were destroyed, but no serious attack was made.

Food by this time was very scarce indeed and ammunition was also beginning to cause some anxiety.

During the afternoon the enemy dropped leaflets telling us in French and English that we were surrounded, that further resistance was pointless, and that we might as well lay down our arms. The top half of the leaflet was a rough but accurate map showing just how we were surrounded.

**29th May.**—That night again was quiet, but the next day brought increased enemy activity on all sides and it became quite obvious that we were entirely surrounded. There was heavy bombing and shelling from which we had a number of casualties. Enemy tanks could be seen moving about throughout the day on all sides of us and infantry were also seen to be digging themselves in or preparing fresh gun positions. One or two guns were brought to bear on them, but they were too far away for results to be seen.

During the afternoon orders arrived that Cassel was to be evacuated that night. The order also contained the warning that "some enemy opposition may be encountered which will be swept aside with the bayonet." A route was given which was said to be free of the enemy, but subsequent reconnaissance showed that it was so strongly held that it was determined to attempt to escape across country in single file. Accordingly, at 2230 hrs. what was left of the Cassel force began to evacuate the town, abandoning everything except what each man could carry with him. Second Lieutenant Clerke Brown attempted to get his carriers out, but they were attacked by German tanks and obliterated. Second Lieutenant Clerke Brown was mortally wounded and died later in hospital.

At first the march went well—two platoons of B Company were lost but eventually retrieved—but, after a particularly long halt, it was discovered that the rear half of the column had lost contact with the front half. The night was so dark that there was no hope of contact being remade and from that time there were two main columns. As the march progressed other small parties also lost touch and disappeared in the dark.

The troops, very tired and hungry, were not in much condition for fighting. They had had very little rest since retreating from Brussels a fortnight before and had also been on very short rations throughout. However, when they did come in contact with the enemy they put up very stiff resistance.

First actual contact with the enemy was made at Wannervele, (Winnezele 3567) where the leading half of the columns came under fire. Major Graham was killed leading a successful bayonet charge which cleared a way for the rest of the troops.

The rear half of the column also came under fire near Wannervele, (Winnezele 3567) but escaped with only two casualties.

**30th May.**—Orders were received to march on a 50-degree bearing to Watou and thence due north to Hondschoote, where the canal was said to be held by our own troops (in point of fact it was not). The leading half-column passed to the north of Watou and got well on the way to Hondschoote before encountering a strong force of the enemy, to whom they were compelled to surrender after putting up a stiff fight. The rear half-column, finding Watou occupied by enemy tanks, attempted to make a detour to the south of the village, but soon found itself surrounded by a strong enemy force consisting of tanks, guns, mortars and motorized infantry in armoured troop carriers. Against these the only weapons that we had been able to take with us—rifles and Bren guns—were practically useless; but an attempt at resistance was made until the party was overwhelmed by the advance of heavy enemy tanks. As further resistance merely meant increasing the already heavy casualty list whilst serving absolutely no useful purpose, they too surrendered.

In this action against overwhelming odds every man acquitted himself well.



RECORD OF THE 4TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY  
SEPTEMBER 1939- JUNE 1940

Apart from most of the transport drivers who left Cassel on the 27th May, Lieutenant Wallis (of the brigade anti-tank company), Lieutenant Eley and a handful of men were the only members of the 4th Battalion who succeeded in returning to England.

After the fall of Cassel the remnants of the Battalion withdrew, roughly speaking, in two parties to Dunkirk. The first party consisted of Major Wykeham, Lieutenant Ely and about forty soldiers, who had been actively engaged in the fighting. Withdrawal proceeded uneventfully until it became necessary to cross a large open field, which was bounded by deep ditches. It was obvious that the Germans had this field under observation and that any attempt to cross it would be risky. It was decided, therefore, to attempt infiltration in smaller parties along the ditches, and Major Wykeham took one, the larger, down one ditch, while Lieutenant Ely took the smaller down another. When Lieutenant Ely was about half-way along his ditch he heard prolonged bursts of machine-gun fire and it was immediately obvious that Major Wykeham's party was in serious difficulties. None of this larger party escaped to the coast. Lieutenant Ely finally reached Dunkirk with three soldiers. These four reached England safely.

The second party consisted of about sixty soldiers, chiefly from the administrative portions of the Battalion. They withdrew in their vehicles towards the Belgian coast, and, after making the transport unusable, embarked at Dunkirk for England.

This very briefly tells the story of the Battalion's survivors. But there were others of the Battalion who were absent during the fighting at Cassel, either on leave, sick or on courses when the Germans attacked, and were unable to rejoin. Some served in improvised forces and others withdrew with the Regimental portion of the Infantry Base Depot through Cherbourg.