

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

**FIFTH BATTALION
GENERAL MOBILIZATION TO 31ST OCTOBER, 1939
By Colonel M. W. Edmunds, O.B.E., T.D.**

In March, 1939, an astonished Territorial Army world awoke one morning to see that it had been doubled (on paper) by Mr. Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War. I was asked to take on the new battalion, consisting at that time of Bertram Long and myself.

By forming new companies and platoons at suitable places in the county, Ralph Symonds, the commanding officer, and Joseph Thorne, his adjutant, of the 4th Battalion, helped us to raise the men. Meanwhile, nearly all the eligible young men in the county applied to Ralph Symonds or myself for appointment as officers, and we spent much time interviewing and choosing. Men having been enlisted in suitable numbers, the next task was to divide into two battalions. It was settled by Lieutenant-Colonel Bartlett, T.A. secretary, Ralph, Bertram and myself. The decision was to split the county in half, with the 4th Battalion taking the southern half and the new battalion the northern. This meant three of the old five companies remaining with the 4th and two (Banbury and Witney) passing to the new battalion. Two new companies then had to be raised in the Oxford area and one in Chipping Norton with a detachment at Charlbury.

For adjutant we were allowed a second lieutenant from the 43rd Light Infantry and were very lucky to get John Mogg, who proved to have on his young shoulders a wise head full of the teaching and tradition of the Regiment. Acting on Joseph Thorne's advice, Barlow, then R.Q.M.S. at the Quetta Staff College, was chosen as quartermaster, and we had to wait for his return from India. For serjeant-major W. Older, lately serjeant-major of the 1st Bucks Battalion, was the choice.

The next work was the split between the two battalions arranged for Asiago Day, June, 1939, the day which commemorates the gallant fight of the 4th Battalion in Italy in 1918.

Then came the numbering: it was difficult to decide between "2nd/4th" and "5th," two battalion numbers whose prototypes had had outstanding records in the 1914-18 war. For simplicity's sake "5th" was decided upon.

H.Q. Company (Oxford and around)

A company (Oxford)

B Company (Witney and Burford)

C Company (Banbury and Deddington)

D Company (Chipping Norton and Charlbury)

In this order we went to camp at Lavant, near Chichester, on the Sunday before August Bank Holiday. All officers and about five hundred and fifty other ranks went to camp. The training for this vital fortnight was most carefully planned by Joe Thorne and myself for the two battalions. We decided on basic training for non-commissioned officers and men, while officers, particularly the many new ones, were instructed by tactical exercises without troops. This involved beforehand careful negotiation with higher authority, then the 145th Infantry Brigade.

The 4th and 5th Battalions lay side by side in a particularly muddy field in which they were visited and inspected by Colonel W. H. Ames, T.D., the honorary colonel, and also by most of the War Office.

RECORD OF THE 5TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY
MARCH 1939-JUNE 1940

Immediately after camp the talk of war became more pronounced. About a week before the 3rd September those in responsible positions studied the mobilization scheme even more carefully than usual. When Brigadier C. St. Q. Fullbrook-Leggatt, D.S.O., M.C., commanding the 184th Infantry Brigade of the 61st Division (2nd Bucks, 6th Royal Berks and ourselves), paid us his first visit at St. Cross Road and found me discussing the details of mobilization with Bertram Long and John Mogg, I was amused when he called on me for a six-month training programme (peace conditions!). On zero minus 6 days I was authorized to embody any officer I wished and called up myself, Bertram Long, Dick Flower, the intelligence officer, and one or two more. On about the 31st August I was ordered to send platoons to guard various aerodromes and vulnerable points, and John Mogg and I hared round North Oxfordshire to give the orders. By Saturday, the 2nd September, we were fully embodied without a single casualty occurring, a tribute to the mobilization scheme and the Regular officers, who were mainly responsible.

The position then was:

Battalion Headquarters: St. Cross Road, Oxford.

H.Q. Company: Masonic Hall, New College Pavilion and various billets in Oxford.

A Company: at the Methodist Hall, Oxford.

B Company: at Abingdon and Brizenorton aerodromes.

C Company: at Heyford and Bicester aerodromes.

D Company: at Little Rissington and Bicester aerodromes, and Islip petrol dump.

Officers of Battalion headquarters, H.Q. Company and A Company, and company headquarter officers of B, C and D Companies were in billets in Oxford, of the undergraduate lodging-house type.

When the declaration of war came things had settled down, and when the brigadier came to see us in the morning I was able to report everyone in position with only an odd absentee or two caused by normal holidays. Each of them came back within a day or two.

We spent a month in Oxford. The officers took over the University Air Squadron premises for a mess, and the men's feeding was at first run on the subsistence system with culinary and financial success. Training was very much limited by lack of expedients, and office work was difficult through lack of plant and material. We started our Friday march, which everyone available attended, and our Saturday T.E.W.T., called in its most elementary stage a "tactical walk." These, with the work on the vulnerable points, which was good training for night work and which also inculcated a sense of responsibility and care of men among the young officers, were about all we could do at first

At the beginning of October we were turned out of one of our billets in Oxford which held a full company. No system of requisitioning had been started, and it was "get what you can." Local knowledge proved useful, and we got Wykham Park easily, Red House, Bodicote, with some difficulty, and "Green-hill," Adderbury, with great exertion. Regimental headquarters and H.Q. Company, with the company staffs of the companies on vulnerable points, lived in baronial style at Wykham and the rifle company not on vulnerable points at Red House. So we remained for a few weeks, with inter-company reliefs, cadre classes and occasional night patrols for officers after dinner.

FIFTH BATTALION
1st NOVEMBER TO 31st DECEMBER, 1939
By Colonel M. W. Edmunds, O.B.E., T.D.

At about Christmas the brigadier rang up one night and said that we should move to the South Coast early in January, a very good thing. After hearing the scheme, Bertram Long and I went off to reconnoitre Portsmouth, where we had to relieve a brigade. Before we moved, Roger Ames joined the brigade as brigade major, a pleasant addition to an understaffed headquarters. We decided to have a dance before we left Wykham.

B Company had to go first to the Isle of Wight. The rest followed on a Sunday in two trains, the rifle companies to Fort Fareham for the night, and Regimental headquarters and H.Q. Company to Clarence Barracks on Southsea Common, with a mess at Gun House, next door to brigade headquarters. At this time John Mogg gave up the adjutancy to John Mulgan and took over A Company.

Our dispositions were:

B Company, Isle of Wight, in two detachments at Cowes and Ventnor;

H.Q. Company found guards at Southsea Castle and other unsuitable places in Portsmouth;

A Company in the Fareham area;

C Company in the vulnerable points north of Portsmouth;

and D Company in the Havant neighbourhood.

This was a stupendous task, involving about five hundred and fifty out of six hundred on duty each night. The weather was vile, being cold and snowy. It is doubtful whether an untrained battalion should have been given so much to do and it nearly destroyed us, but the amazing esprit de corps which had begun to take shape carried us through.

Sickness nearly overwhelmed B Company on the Island, and that commanding officer's nightmare, cerebro-spinal meningitis, gave us an occasional visit. The vulnerable points guards lessened and we were able to send our signallers, under John Robertson, to Fort Fareham to be trained; likewise, some chosen non-commissioned officers to form a musketry cadre in preparation for the basic training we longed for. One platoon, John Ruck Keene's, was detailed to make what is believed were the first experiments of the Army with landing craft, now so well known to all. At about the end of March we were relieved and after a week's leave to all by companies, which saved health and reason, basic training became possible. The four rifle companies were at Butlin's Sunshine Camp at Hayling Island and H.Q. Company at Havant, leaving the signallers in splendid isolation at Fort Fareham. The usual individual and section training was carried out, varied with visits to the range on Southampton Water, a big T.E.W.T., and ceremonial parades for the brigadier and for the honorary colonel, Colonel W. H. Ames, T.D., father of our brigade major and whilom commanding officer. This latter parade was followed by sports, won by C Company, and a concert, and the next day a forced march of sixteen miles was tried out with success.