

# WOLVERTON & THE TERRITORIAL ARMY 1920-1947



**1920** with the formation of the Territorial Army the Buckinghamshire Battalion was reformed. Only one company was formed at Wolverton, this being “D” Company.

**1929** D (Wolverton) Company was absorbed into B (Aylesbury, Chesham & Wolverton) Company.



*The Wolverton Detachment 1937*

**1938** B Company became B (Aylesbury & Wolverton) Company and also had Number 5 (Pioneer) Platoon at Wolverton. .

**1939.** With the threat of war looming the Buckinghamshire Battalion was once again doubled this time into 1st and 2nd Bucks Battalions, with headquarters at Aylesbury and Slough respectively. The original Battalion had companies at Aylesbury, High Wycombe, Slough and Marlow, with detachments at Wolverton, Chesham, Princes Risborough and Woburn. When the duplication was completed the 1st Battalion covered the northern area of the county, with companies at Aylesbury (B Company), High Wycombe (HQ & D Companies), Wolverton (A Company) and Princes Risborough (C Company). Therefore in the main, apart from some later reinforcements and drafts the battalion was made up of a great many local men from what is now the Milton Keynes, Wolverton and North Bucks area.

The Territorial Army was embodied on the 1st September 1939. The 1st Bucks were mobilized and went to Newbury where they were billeted on the racecourse and carried out their training in the neighbourhood of Greenham Common.

**1940.** The Battalion embarked for France in January 1940 still being part 145 Brigade of the 48th (South Midland) Division, as it had been since its early days. The other battalions in 145 Brigade were the 2nd Glosters and the 4th Battalion, The Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (TA).

On 18th January 1940, the 1st Bucks landed at Le-Havre. The Battalion entrained en route to the Lillebonne district about twenty miles from Le-Havre, A company along with B billeted at Gruchet-la-Vallasse, most men in open barns.

Four days here and the Battalion moved to the forward area, to a place called Wahagnies in the centre of a mining district. They detrained at Libercourt and marched to their billets, A company in Wahagnies itself in schools and houses.

The enemy invaded Holland and Belgium on Friday 10th May. After several postponements and days of waiting, the Battalion left for Belgium, the 48th Division congratulated by General Viscount Gort, C in C of the BEF, on their good traffic discipline. At first light on 15th May, the Battalion was machine-gunned from the air. The Battalion assembled at the Brussels-Waterloo road junction and went into position in a southern suburb of the town with the Lion Mound but half a mile away.

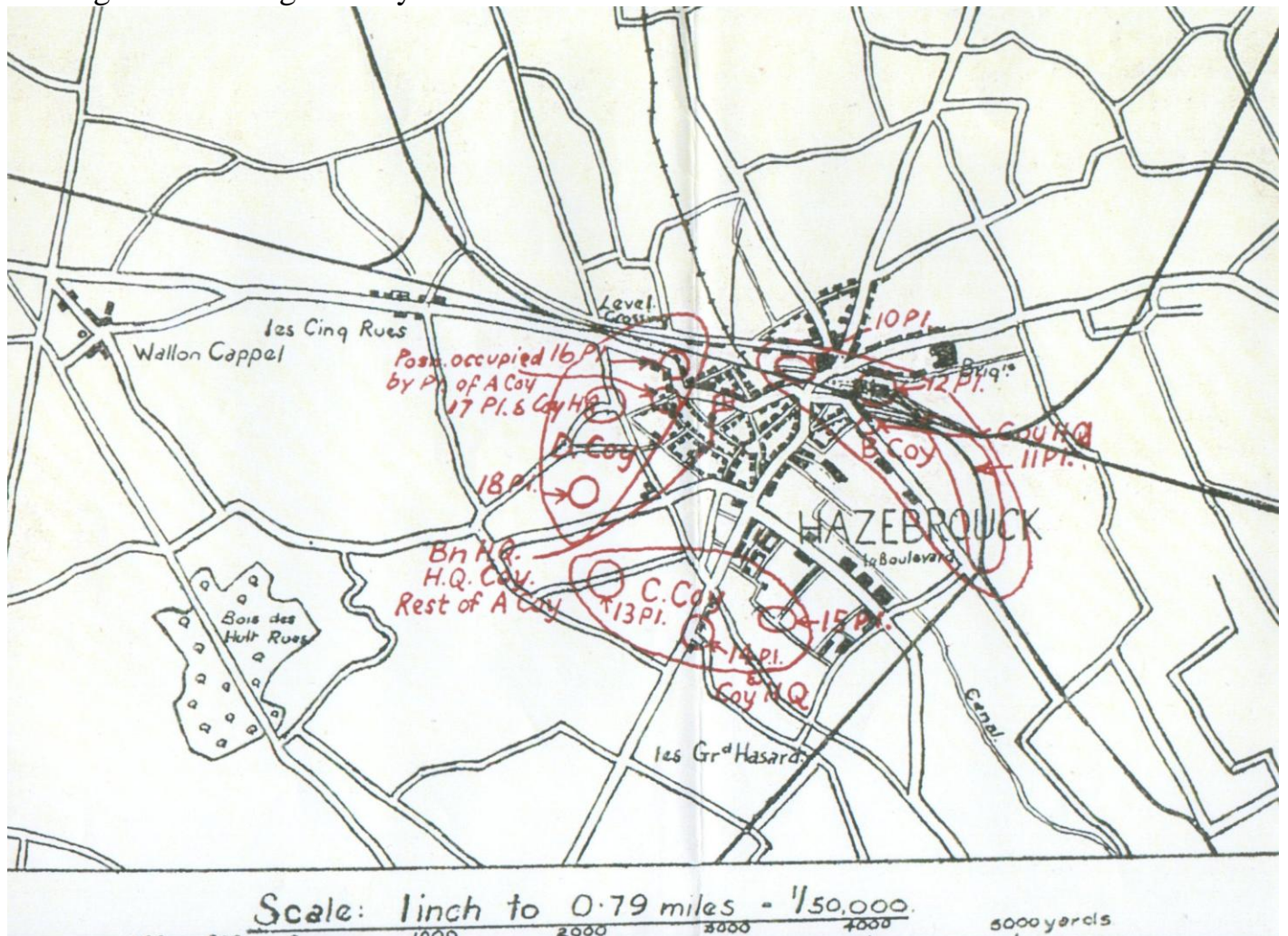
After a march of nine miles on 16th May, the Battalion reached Joli Bois, three miles from the enemy. During the morning they were attacked by dive bombers, and during the day French horse-drawn transport retreated through their lines. The next day they withdrew under sporadic artillery bombardment. During this withdrawal A company lost touch with the main body (one platoon failing to rejoin until after the survivors were back in England). Enemy aircraft were strafing the column and the road was congested with refugees.

On 18th May B company and some of A reached the area of Ath, took a rest and feet were washed in the river and a meal started. The rest of the Battalion arrived at intervals including some of the missing men of A company who had not been seen since Waterloo. Chances of a good rest were soon dissipated. At 23.59 hours the Battalion was ordered to move again.



On the 24th May 145 Brigade were given the task of holding the town of Cassel (approx 15 miles from Bergues) but on the way to Cassel the Brigade was also given the task of defending the important road and railway junction town of Hazebrouck (approx 6 miles South of Cassel). As the Bucks were the rearguard unit it was easier to detach them and they were given the task of defending Hazebrouck.

The 1st Bucks arrived in Hazebrouck on the 25th May and during the day were greeted by strafing and bombing raids by the Luftwaffe.



On the morning of 27th May the battle for Hazebrouck started. All the Rifle Companies were engaged by midday. The battalion had to contend with tanks, artillery, mortars and further strafing and bombing raids by the Luftwaffe along with enemy infantry assaults. At 2030hrs enemy infantry supported by tanks broke through D company's position and managed to push towards the town centre and battalion HQ. The general picture then became one of a series of platoon battles as the Germans managed to infiltrate between companies and then platoons until by nightfall the Rifle Companies had been effectively overrun albeit at heavy cost to the enemy in infantry and tanks. Some sections and platoons managed to extricate themselves and withdraw under cover of darkness.

During the Hazebrouck action A Company was initially kept in Reserve in the old GHQ building just across the road from Battalion HQ. Two platoons of A company were dispatched to help D Company to the North West of the town whilst a third platoon remained in the GHQ Building.

On the evening of the 27th, while extricating his platoon from a perilous position in houses in Hazebrouck, Second Lieutenant Shewell showed great personal bravery and determined leadership and disposed of several snipers. At one point the platoon was split in two. By using his head Private W. Ray led the detached party past several German posts to rejoin his platoon commander. Second Lieutenant Shewell was awarded the MC and Private Ray the MM, the first men from the Wolverton company to be decorated in the war.

This now left Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company and some of A Company to continue the fight from their positions around the "Orphanage" the next day.

From first light on 28th May the enemy continued to infiltrate the remaining Bucks positions, by early afternoon tanks were shooting at virtually point blank range into the buildings held by the Bucks Battalion but the defenders held on through a major attack at 1300 until at 1430 a lull in fighting ensued. During this lull it was agreed by the Command element of the battalion that with the Rifle Companies now overrun and that the remaining elements of the battalion were no longer holding up the German advance that the survivors should attempt to breakout and head for the Coast that night. At 1630 heavy artillery started to rain down along with mortars and very soon the BHQ buildings were ablaze and collapsing. The remaining members of the battalion took to the gardens, but with tanks and infantry now upon them the survivors had little choice but to surrender. The defence of Hazebrouck was over.

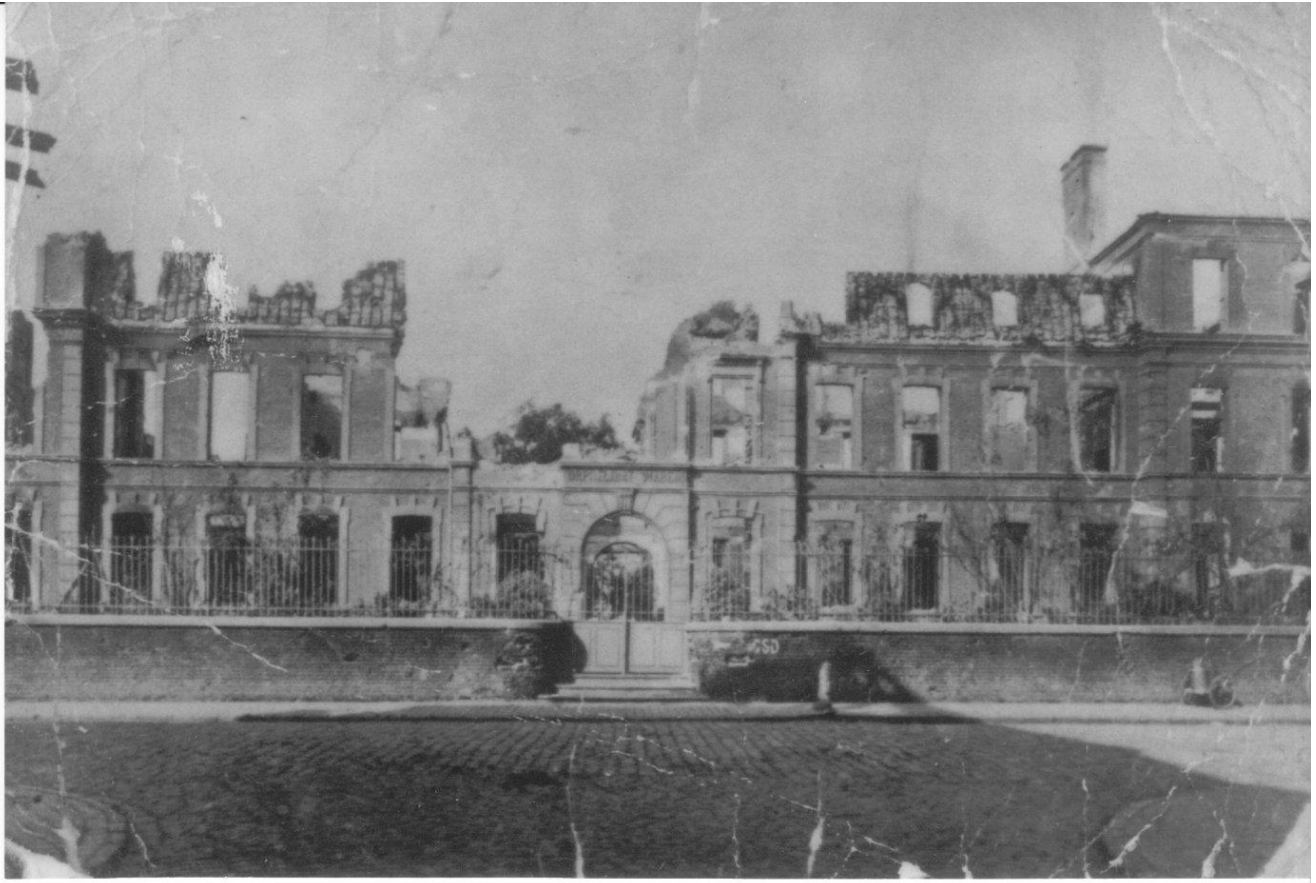
Of the battalion who fought at HAZEBROUCK, ten officers and around 200 Other Ranks' succeeded in getting back to England, of the remainder, 70 were killed in action, died of wounds or died as Prisoners of War, 10 officers and around 226 Other Ranks became Prisoners of War.

The Battalion received a rare compliment from the enemy themselves. In a German broadcast it was stated that: *"the defenders of HAZEBROUCK not only delayed the advance, but resisted in a manner truly worthy of the highest traditions of the British Army"*

Further praise came from the Chief of Staff of the opposing German Panzer Division: - *"They were tough all right - group after group did their utmost to hold their positions - they were men of steel"*

During this action members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Buckinghamshire Battalion gained 1 DSO, 3 MCs, 1 DCM, 8 MMs and 12 MIDs.





*The Orphanage after the battle*



*1st Bucks Battalion Memorial on the site of the Orphanage at Hazebrouck.*

*Compiled by Steve Berridge [www.lightbobs.com](http://www.lightbobs.com) 24/06/2014*

The Battalion reformed at Hereford and trained mainly in the South West of England.

**1942** In December 1942 the Battalion finally left 48th Division and was transferred to 54th Division in Suffolk where it took up defensive positions along the coast.

**1943** In 1943 the battalion was selected to form the nucleus of a "Beach Group", this new formation was designed to land vehicles and stores across open beaches in the early stages of a seaborne landing.

The role of a Beach Group, consisting of parties from numerous corps all centred round an infantry battalion, is indicated by its title, though the complexity of its task and the nice timing and use of manpower can be realised only by those whose responsibility it was. Suffice it to say that the work was well and truly done in spite of all those hazards of war which so regularly upset the most careful calculations.

In April 1943 the battalion moved to Scotland for training in this new role.

The Battalion eventually became part of 101 Beach Sub Area of No 6 Beach Group part of 3rd British Infantry Division who were to land on Sword Beach on D Day.

**1944.** D Day Marshalling for the Battalion began on 1 June, and the Battalion embarked at Southsea and arrived at 19-00 hours, 6 June ('D' Day) off the Normandy Coast at Le-Breche.

**1944** The Battalion landed in Normandy on D-Day, June 6th 1944.

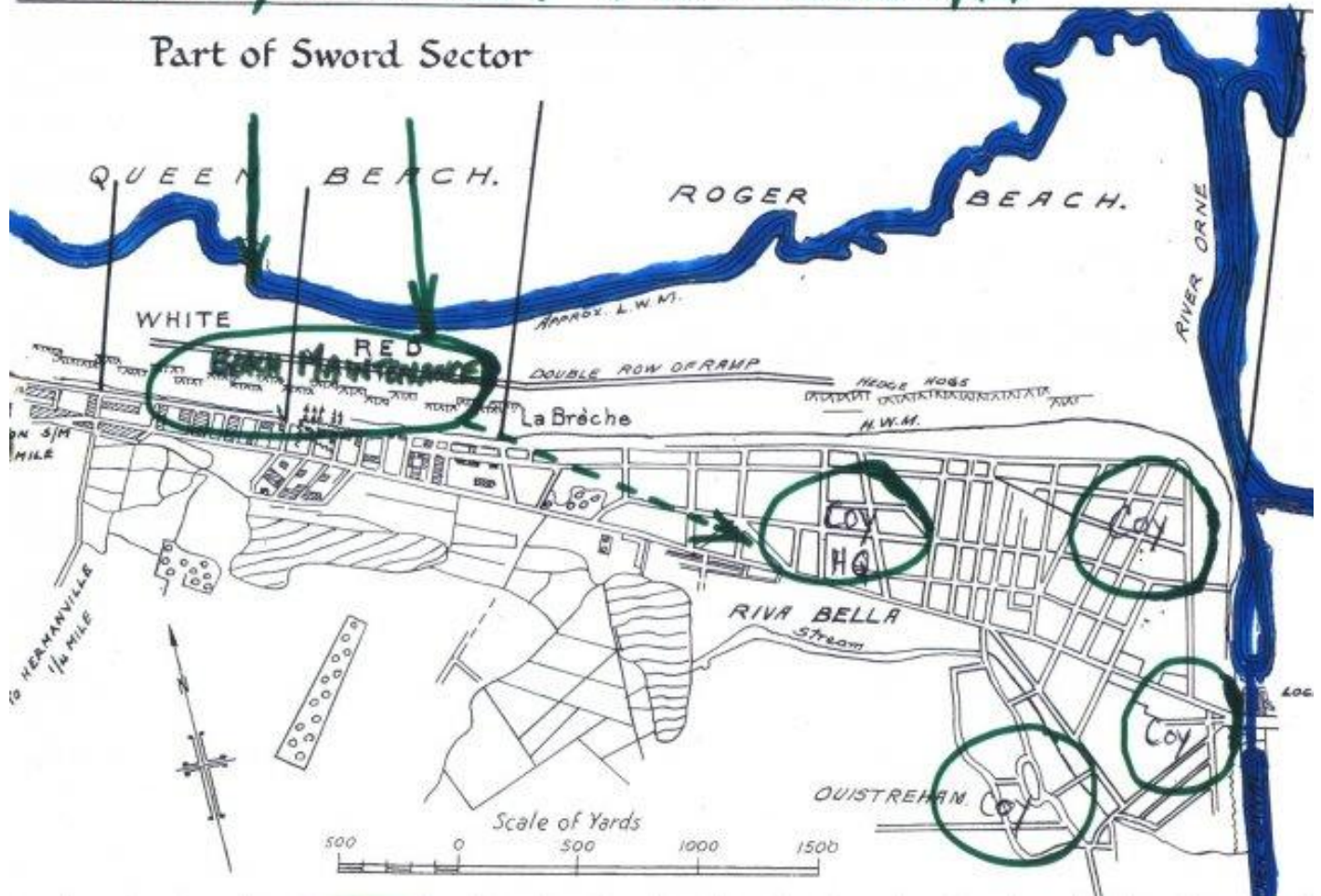
The Group sailed at 9 a.m. on " D " Day and went ashore that evening, the work of unloading and establishing dumps etc., beginning at once. The arrangements as planned were however upset by an enemy strong-point at Lion-Sur-Mer which until it was captured two days later made the setting-up of the Beach Maintenance Area impracticable. It was at this period that a bomb dropped by enemy aircraft had set fire to a petrol laden DUKW, and this started a whole series of fires and explosions of terrifying proportions. But under the influence of the Commanding Officer, who was very soon severely wounded, and after three hours superhuman efforts the fire was got under control.

No. 6 Beach Group now moved to Lion-Sur-Mer and its whole efforts were concentrated in the administration of the Dump Area, which by 16th June was running sufficiently smoothly to be taken over by a Pioneer unit, and the battalion was moved to Ouistreham to protect the Locks, this bringing to an end the short operational existence of the Group.

After fulfilling their Beach Group roles on SWORD Beach on 30th July the Group was officially dissolved and the battalion came under the command of the 1st Canadian Army and 6th Airborne Division for operations.



1 BUCKS, 6 BEACH GROUP. 6 JUNE - 12 AUG 1944



Almost at once the position of the battalion, belonging to no brigade and supernumerary to the normal infantry complement of a division, began to give rise to anxiety as to its future, particularly as it was known that the reinforcement position was none too good.

The Commanding Officer embarked on a round of desperate lobbying and attempts were made to have the battalion absorbed into 6 Airborne Division. However news that the Beach Battalion of No. 5 Beach Group had been ordered to disband threatened the worst, and although disbandment was avoided, it was decided that the battalion should be used for draft finding, and so on 12th August after a brisk period of service with 6th Airborne Division the dismal business of drafting began. Every effort was made to send whole companies or platoons and the fact that most of these went to 51st Highland Division, a famous Territorial Division, softened the blow. Reports from their new units spoke of these drafts in the highest terms.

The battalion now settled down as a dump for the unwanted and rapidly gathered a quite astounding collection of "crocks". By continual importunity however the worst of these were removed, and it slowly became possible to build up again a presentable unit, which at the end of October moved to Brussels where the Headquarters of 21st Army Group was located.

Here they carried out all those duties that fall to a Garrison Battalion, but always building up the old esprit-de-corps, and almost surreptitiously taking every opportunity for training just "in case."

**1945.** In February the battalion became one of the ' T ' Force Units of 21 Army Group whose task broadly was to seize and guard a number of technical installations of all sorts in enemy territory, in order to prevent their destruction or the removal of any vital parts.

For this purpose the battalion was divided with two Companies with the First Canadian Army and two Companies with 2nd British Army, operating over a wide area of Holland and Germany as far as Cuxhaven and Bremerhaven.

After the Armistice the battalion continued to carry out ' T ' Force duties, until the task was completed.

After VE day the Battalion was stationed at Menden, Germany.

The 2nd Bucks Battalion remained in the United Kingdom throughout the war.

**1946** In June 1946 The 1st Bucks Battalion was placed into “suspended animation” and finally disbanded on 7th August 1946.

**1947.** In March 1947 the Territorial Army was reformed and the 1st and 2nd Bucks Battalions were amalgamated, converted and transferred to the Royal Artillery as:

**645 LIGHT ANTI AIRCRAFT REGIMENT, ROYAL ARTILLERY**

Retaining their own Bucks Battalion Cap Badge and Black Buttons.

However no part of this formation was raised in Wolverton.

**Post war** the Wolverton Drill Hall became home to units connected with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) T.A. and Army Cadet Force (A.C.F.) until sold off in 1969.

The cadets of the Buckinghamshire Army Cadet Force (ACF) formed in 1942 wore the Buckinghamshire Battalion badge for a while, but when the TA was reformed in 1947 and the Bucks Battalion lost its infantry role and converted to Royal Artillery, the Bucks ACF seems to have adopted the “Bugle Horn” of the regular Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. It was not until 1974 when the Buckinghamshire ACF affiliated to the Royal Green Jackets that the old Bucks Battalion cap badge was again taken into use, although only until 1979 when the badge of the Royal Green Jackets was adopted.





## **SOURCES**

Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry War Chronicle Vol 1 1939-1940.

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Bill West – The Railwaymen

Ian Beckett – Call To Arms

Col P A Hall – A Short History of the units administered by the Buckinghamshire Territorial and Auxiliary Forces Association.