

THE HEREFORDSHIRE REGIMENT

Their First World War 'Story' – September 1914

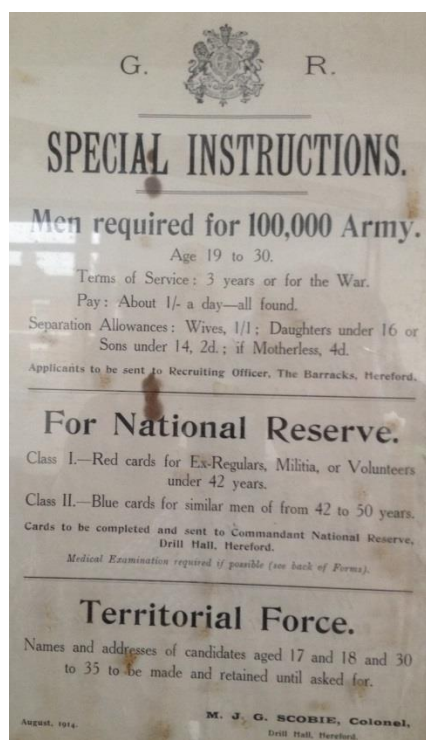
The 'Bigger' Picture

The Battle of Mons in August had been the first encounter between British and German forces on the Western Front. The BEF had landed at the French coast from 16th August and advanced to the area of Mons and on 22nd had clashed with German patrols. The next day, the German's launched a massive attack at a strength of over two to one in their favour. The British managed to hold up the Germans, inflicting heavy casualties by the superior rifle fire from the highly trained British soldiers. However due to the much greater German force, the British ordered a retreat from Mons and found themselves fighting a rearguard action during their long and arduous withdrawal.

By the end of August the French border had been crossed in several places and the German Army continued to advance towards Paris. By 3rd September the BEF had crossed the Marne river in a retreat to the south and was in a position east of the capital. It was now that the German commanders varied from the master Schlieffen Plan, allowing the French Armies and the BEF to carry out successful counter-attacks.

In mid September the German Army began to 'dig in' on the high ground of the Chemin des Dames ridge on the north bank of the river Aisne. This was the first of the entrenched positions which would spread all across the front and create deadlock. Over the period late September to the end of November the Allied and German Armies attempted to outflank one another to the North, responding to each other's moves; this became known as 'the race to the sea'.

The first British Casualties had been taken, with the wounded being evacuated to England.



The morale of the population remained high, but the more astute individuals, including Lord Kitchener were beginning to realise that the war was not 'going to be over by Christmas' and that it could last years; more troops and equipment would be required and the famous Kitchener recruiting campaign, and poster were launched for men for the 'New' Armies' . The target was 100,000 men and were known as 'K1'. Col Scobie of the Herefordshire Regiment 'signed' a recruiting poster covering the New Army, The National Reserve and The Territorial Force.

The 'Herefords'

The Herefordshire Regiment was one of only 4 Regiments in the British Army that did not have a regular Battalion and thus its Territorial Battalion was the First Line Battalion and termed the 1st (or 1st/1st) Battalion. In most Regiments the 1st and 2nd Battalion were Regular, the 3rd Special Reserve and the 4th Territorial. If a second (or third/fourth/fifth!) Battalion was formed in any of these categories they became known as the 5th/1st, 3rd/4th etc respectively.

Septmber 1914 effectively saw the split of the Herefordshire Regiment into 2; the 1st Battalion was mobilised and under training, and at the Depot in Hereford men were recruited, undergoing 'recruit' training and held awaiting posting to the 1st Battalion.

1st Battalion

The 1st Battalion were beginning to shake out and settle into a routine. A new Commanding Officer was appointed and officers confirmed to their appointments as well as Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs) appointed to make up for the loss of soldiers to the Depot.

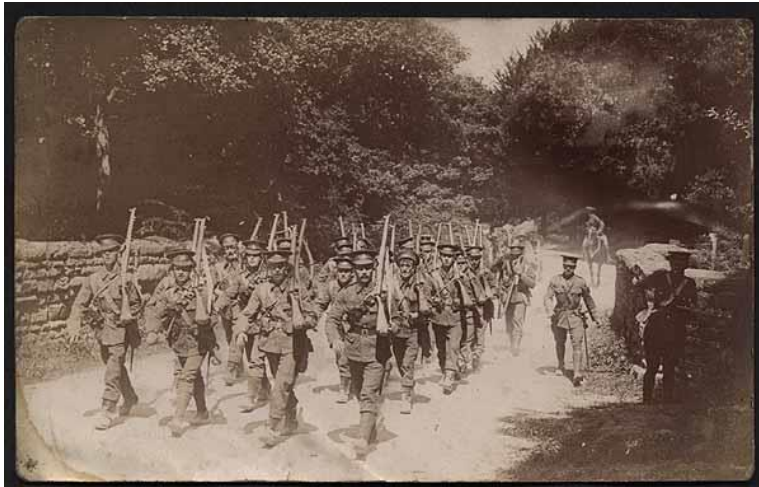


The new Commanding Officer – Lieutenant Colonel Gilbert Drage

After initial deployment to Pembroke Dock the Battalion had moved to Oswestry in late August to join up with the rest of the Brigade; they were billeted under canvas, in what later became Park Hall Camp¹. In early September they moved to Northampton where 53rd Division was concentrating. Here

¹ - Now Oswestry show ground

training started in earnest, with regular route marches of increasing distances, sometimes involving an overnight 'camp', musketry and 'tactical' training, and 'schemes' at company and battalion level.



Troops of the Herefordshire Regiment on a training 'route march'.

The soldiers were sorting themselves out. Getting to know their fellows and forming friendships that would be proved in the months and years to come and endure, in many cases a lifetime.

Many soldiers wanted to take advantage of the patriotic fervour, and had portrait photographs taken to send to mothers, sisters, wives and sweethearts! Many of these still exist, but unfortunately in many cases the subjects are unknown.



Corporal J Hincksman
C (Ledbury) Company



An unknown family(?) group



An unknown family group (from Leominster(?)).
The 'father' has the Herefordshire Regimental capbadge in his breast pocket button hole.



The Jessett brothers from Ledbury

Hereford 'Depot'

The build up of numbers at Hereford continued, with men being 'returned' from the 1st Battalion and a strong inflow of volunteers keen to join the County regiment.

As a single Battalion Regiment, the Herefords had no Depot or draft finding battalion, although these functions had been assumed by the Battalion Rear Party that remained in Hereford. This situation was recognised by the War Office, and the formation of a 2/1st Battalion was authorised in late August. The 2/1st were to be commanded by Lt Col J H Gilbert-Harris with Capt F T Carver as adjutant.

The small number of ex-members of the regiment who had rejoined, and those returned from the 1st Battalion were absolutely essential to the organisation, administration and training. There were no uniforms, or drill square – the recruits were drilled in civilian clothes on Castle Green, and took part in 'manouvres' on the race course, Wye Meadows and other local areas.



More recruits for The Herefordshire Regiment



Recruits 'drill' on Castle Green

All food and other supplies had to be obtained, and Percy Pritchard² remembered the good food that was served '*delicious food was produced in wellington clay ovens, whole carcasses were put in, great chunks of meat were served up, very crude but delicious*' – I suspect his appetite was 'sharpened' by fresh air and physical activity!



Volunteers in newly issued uniforms, receive their inoculations.

Looking at the Regimental records, some idea of the level of activity and numbers volunteering in August and September can be determined: Regimental number 1548 enlisted on 10 August and by the end of September number 2531 had been enlisted. In addition to these 1000 men who were recruited, there were probably a good number rejected for service.

The Regiment also suffered its first 'casualties'; 2 soldiers, both died of sickness: 1155 Private Sydney Arthur WRIGHT died, aged 18 on the 19 September and was buried at All Saints, Hereford and 1375 Private Samuel Reginald WOOD of Harold Street, Hereford, aged 17 died on 21 September and was buried at St Peters.

² - 2109 Pte Percy Pritchard of Pritchard Tailors Hereford.

Men also joined other Regiments; tradesmen (eg: waggoners, wheelwrights, farriers, blacksmiths) may have joined the Army Service Corps (ASC) or the Royal Engineers (RE (Sappers)), those with medical knowledge may have joined the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), as well as The Royal Artillery (RA (Gunners)). Many joined the local Regular Infantry Regiment – The King’s Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI). There were also other Territorial Force units in the County – detachments as part of the Welsh Border Brigade (WBB) of the ASC and RAMC at Hereford, elements of the Shropshire Yeomanry in the North of the County and elements of the Royal Gloucester Hussars in the East of the County. There is a story of the Herefordshire Regiment being unable to handle more recruits³ and a band of young men travelling to Newport, in South Wales and joining the Royal Navy⁴.



The shoulder title of the Welsh Border Brigade (Stretcher) Bearer Company RAMC



The shoulder title of the Welsh Border Brigade ASC Company

It is also perhaps worth looking at the wider impact that the war was having on the County’s demography. The population of the County, in 1914 was about 110,000, all souls, assuming 50% of these to be males and 50% between the ages of 17 & 40 (the target military ‘audience’), this would mean about 27,000 eligible males. Regular Reservists had taken about 700, the TF mobilisation another 1200, volunteers to the Herefords a further 1000, and perhaps another 500 volunteering for other regiments. This totalled some 3,400 men or 8% of the county’s ‘prime’ workforce; this was bound to have an immediate social impact on the county as well as to its economy and commercial efficiency.

³ - Perhaps supported by the Territorial Force recruiting notice earlier in this article.

⁴ - There would seem to be some verification of this, looking at the number of men from the County who perished serving with the RN during the Battle of Jutland.