

ERNIE WARD – WW1 MILITARY SERVICE

As re-constructed by his son Bob and Grandson Tim. (undated but thought to be circa mid '90s)

'I had for years regretted not asking my Dad about his contribution and this year was determined to find out more for myself. Son Tim suggested I should do some research first. Then we decided to go to Mons in July to follow the route of the retreat and see what happened next.'

Ernie was a member of the 2nd Battalion that served in Gibraltar (1907), Bermuda (1910) and South Africa (1912) embarking for the UK on August 27, 1914.

On Feb. 13, 1913 110 NCOs and men were prematurely transferred to the reserves and sent home having completed 7 years of service and it is believed that Ernie was one of them.

The 1st Battalion came home from N Ireland at the beginning of August 1914 and, having been augmented by all available reservists, landed at Le Havre on August 16, 1914. They were sent to defend the Mons-Conde Canal. In the opening engagements their rate of fire and accuracy was such that the Germans thought they were using machine guns. They were well trained regulars!

August 24, 1914

At 12:30 the men were baffled and angry when they were ordered to retreat as fast as they could march as the French to the south were crumbling. I remember Dad saying that at one point one man dropped out and sat on a milestone but in seconds a revolver was in his ear and he was ordered back in line.

The Archivist at Bedford produced the Regimental 'diaries' which were sheets of paper tagged at one corner literally recording the day by day happenings. It was truly incredible documentation. He gave me the name of another helpful man who specialized in tracing records. All I had to do was to look on the back of the medals and there I found '8461 Pte E Ward 1/BedF.R'. That was the key together with the certificate of Demob. Dated March 7, 1919 from the Royal Air Force! It appears the army records were destroyed in 1940 but the RAF records survived and from them personal records of service and injuries were traced.

Tim and I landed at Calais and drove to Dunkerque (sic), not much to see, then on to Ypres. We stayed at a small hotel and found in its garden the remains of the Hooges Crater that resulted from the enormous explosion below the German trenches. Now it is a relatively small pond

with a few pieces of brickwork fortification remaining. We witnessed the playing of the Last Post by local firemen. This takes place at 8 pm every night and was very moving as it echoed within the arch of the Menin Gate, inscribed with the names of 58,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who had died defending Ypres. The ceremony was very well attended.

Next day we were off to Mons to start our adventure.

The 16th Regiment of Foot (The Beds and Herts) kept 8 battalions in the field throughout the war at a cost of 20 Battalions. They went by train to Le Cateau then marched 30 miles to Mons. After a week they were marching back the way they had come via Malplaquet, Bavay, Foret de Normal to Le Cateau (D932) in 36 hours. Here they took up a prepared defensive position, very well sited, and fought all day with 2 m/c guns and 2 batteries against greatly superior numbers, then slipped away in the evening having covered the withdrawal of the 15th Brigade. They marched almost non-stop another 36 hours to catch up at St. Quentin. Here the brigade was lying on the grass but they had to continue a further 13 miles to Eaucourt. Next day they marched on the D932 via Ham and Noyon to Compiègne then south on the D332 to Crepy en Valois where they bivouacked. They continued south circling east of Paris until they reached Touman on the N4 on the 5th of September. 140 miles marching plus fighting in full kit in a matter of 12 days!! They bivouacked in an orchard on a pleasant evening 'a dirty scraggly lot with boots cut open and puttees tied round their feet'. An orderly arrived with an order from Brigade HQ which read 'The British Army will advance tomorrow'. Would you believe it – they all cheered!! Apparently the Germans had over-reached themselves. Von Kluck had lost his nerve! For this they received the Mons Star, and I think they earned it. By 6 am the next morning they were marching back singing and whistling up the D402 over the Petit Morin, then north over the Marne to Montreuil-aux-Lions on the N3 and over the Aisne east of Soissons (Missy). September 18th saw them in trenches on Soissons-Sermoise Road. Then north to Chivres and Vregny. Relieved on the 1st of October they went back to Corcy 18ks south of Soissons. And on October 5th were at Fresnoy 3 miles north of Crepy en Valois. On to the west through Pont St. Maxence to Creil N330. Then some relief as they travelled by train to Abbeville and marched NE to Millencourt. October 9th they were in billets at Genne-Wergny and on the 10th they went by bus through St. Pol (still NE) to Thieuloye. October 11th they were marching again to Bethune to defend Essars.

We stayed at Holnon near St. Quentin and Gosney near Bethune. Time forced us to miss out much of the to-ing and fro-ing and we were unable to trace some of the tiny villages mentioned in the records. We visited a number of cemeteries around Bethune and at Gorre we found graves of some 20 or so Beds and Herts comrades.

They were in and out of action until the end of October at Festubert, Le Plantin, Violaines and Rue D'Ouvert. Rested at Gorre – some forever. November 5th they marched to Locon. On the 6th they boarded London buses with London bus drivers to Lestrem, Estaires, Bailleul to Dikkebus N325 near Ypres. They had met the 2nd Battalion at Locon and renewed old friendships. Marching on through Ypres via Hooges to Gheluveit on Menin Road. So we were back very close to our first stopover and Dad had completed a huge horseshoe, halfway on foot, back into Belgium again. November 28th they marched to Wulvergham south of Ypres. On November 30th Dad received a gunshot wound to the neck (that was close) and transferred to hospital at Rouen. On December 10th at the Convalescent Camp Rouen, not sure how long he was there, but he told me that the MO examined him and said 'you're alright. You go and have another go at them'. Such was a soldiers life!

At Christmas 1914 all the men received a commemorative brass box containing tobacco and cigarettes from HRH Princess Mary. We still have Dad's as he received it.

December 28th – skirmishing. December 29th resting at billets at Bailleul. January 4th back at Wulvergham in trenches just 30 yards apart in places. Feb. 1st Reserve at Bailleul and 13th back in the trenches at Wulvergham. In and out of the trenches on Wiltschate Road. March 3rd they marched to Ouderdom and on the 16th marched on to Viamertinge west of Ypres. April 12th to 16th they were preparing trenches for new troops being brought in for attack on hill 60. On April 18th they joined in to mount counter attack (over 400 ORs killed). April 21st rest at Reningeist. April 22nd at Ouderdom Dad received severe shrapnel wounds to his left shoulder. I remember terrible scars on his back. He was taken to hospital at Boulogne. On May 11th he was at hospital in Ipswich. On May 1st the Germans had first used GAS!!! Difficult to believe that Dad was actually lucky, he was still alive, although mentally shattered. He did not go back and was transferred to the Suffolks, then the Labour Corps, then the RFC. His ambition to become a pilot was not fulfilled! He had been released from hospital on September 24th 1915 and transferred to the Reserves on March 7, 1919 and was discharged on April 30th, 1920.

He received a disability pension for the rest of his life and retired from the Post Office in 1949 at the age of 60 on health grounds. He died 4 days after his 89th birthday in 1978.