

PRIOR DUNKIRK

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To many people, Munich is the landmark signifying that commencement of frenzied activity which emerged naturally into war, but to the Regiment it meant something more. For years the Batteries had striven for a high standard and when the crisis came in 1938 it meant a stock taking of the effort already applied, and increased tempo from the analysis of the results. In these days, which now seem very far off 229 Battery was armed with 4.5 flares, and the other Batteries with 18 pounders. Extra rifles and service guns were drawn and personnel spent ever more time at the Drill Hall. As things seemed to quieten down as far as the public were concerned, life became all the more full for those in the Regiment, and the Drill Halls were seldom empty. More men than we had equipment for was an ever dreamed of luxury and training based on the new organisation of Pamphlet 10 went ahead. The long summer evenings were spent with the gunners hard at drill on the grounds of Terryside Farm, while the specialists and signallers spent many pleasant hours wrestling with their problems on Geldridge Park.

As the spring and summer of 1939 came, personnel were selected and became known as Key Parties, and it was their duty to be called prior to general mobilisation to prepare all that is required when a Regiment prepares for war.

One afternoon during late August the call came, and these men, the first of the Regiment left their work and assembled at the Drill Halls, where the first of many uncomfortable nights were spent sleeping on the floor, with meals supplied by local caterers. By day various works scheduled in the mobilisation schemes had to be carried out and this proceeded until Sept 3. On that fateful day the Prime Minister broadcast at 11 o'clock and was heard not without emotion, especially when the Air Raid siren went a few minutes later. On this A.A machine guns were manned, in Eastbourne in Geldridge Park, surrounded by the guns and ammunition. Officers and men gradually reported and that night and for some nights to come slept at home.

Meanwhile, large empty schools were requisitioned in Granville House, Gaudick Road, and Stanley Street, Meads Eastbourne and here the Regiment concentrated towing its guns there by very miscellaneous civilian transport, and in those early days meals were cooked by the 12 (Sussex) ATS which had been formed by the Regiment. This company left soon afterwards as it was itself mobilised and went to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps at Shorncliffe, leaving the Regiment to the mercies of its embryo cooks.

The Regiment was now in a state of "growing pains" large parties of recruits were taken in and many under 19 went away to AA at Dover. Every individual soon began to find out how uncomfortable life could and was likely to be with training with such equipment as was available by day and rest on the underlay boards at night in houses in there was no blackout available for the windows and a town suddenly unfamiliar in its shroud of darkness.

At the end of September a small party under Captain S M Smith and Sergeant C F Best (originally WO1 of 229 Battery Key Party) suddenly and inconspicuously left and after a painful night spent in an empty house near Divisional HQ at Sevenoaks, found themselves at Bridport in Dorset. HQ for this party became the Drill Hall in Bridport, left of the previous night by the outgoing Infantry Brigade. Here the party was fortunate to be given excellent billets in South Street, and each day was spent in a reconnaissance of the area in preparation for the arrival of the Regiment and its stay for the winter. Originally HQ was to be in Bridport with Batteries at Charnmouth and Chideok, but the latter place was quite unsuitable for the severe winter that was expected and in desperation the village of Walditch was reconsidered and after a struggle 229 Battery eventually went there with 230 at Charnmouth and in - the Regiment moved in.

The Regiment now that it was away from its home area was now to start some of the most strenuous training of its career. Gradually the threads of its uncertain existence were broken and it settled down to a routine of Drill Orders by day and night, training at all hours, and the gradual reception of equipment and participation in larger schemes and the passes and penalties of "Orderly Rooms"! The weather was cold, with snow at times and always the winds over the bleak town, yet somehow it would be true to say that the men became part of the life of their village a not very easy matter bearing in mind the overcrowding. Xmas was spent in the traditional manner of the Army and was a landmark looked back on by many in later days with pleasant recollections. Leave also was given and large parties from Batteries went at a time.

During this period the BEF had moved to France and were occupying a section of the line, and these Divisions were to be reinforced by the TA Divisions in the spring of 1940.

As a preliminary a reconnaissance party was sent out from the Division. This consisted of an Officer and NCO from each Regiment in the Division and Captain Elliot and WO III Best left in the early hours of a January morning. WO III Best was the senior WO of the party and his adventures would make a book in themselves. The party left Yeovil on a cold and snowy morning, conditions with which they were to become very familiar in the weeks to come.

They sailed from Southampton during the night and landed in Le Havre on the following morning in a snowstorm. From Le Havre, in a train (unheated MK1 with ice inside and out) the party eventually arrived on the Belgian frontier. Here the various syndicates were split up and Captain Elliot and WO III Best were attached to 16th Field Regiment at Ruault where a survey of their battle positions was made. Here AP shot for 25 yards was seen for the first time, and this was being continually viewed by other Regular units in the neighbourhood. A fortnight was spent here during which one of the barns full of ammo caught fire. A very smart modern Fire Brigade arrived but on finding out about the barns content, hurriedly produced his maps and found out that the barn was not in his area and departed!

There were none of the elaborate traffic arrangements of later years in those early days, and after a ride of twenty eight hours in a train with no rations the party arrived in the south of France in an area near to Le Mans where the Division was to concentrate, to ready billets, vehicle parks etc. Adventure pursued the wanderers and many anecdotes could be included of this period, suffice to say that they attached themselves to an RE Field Company in order to obtain rations and accommodation, WOIII Best (an old Sapper) taking the Sappers for Field Works. By luck chance (as much as anything) the party arrived home from Cherbourg to Southampton and rejoined the Regiment (the Regiment having been warned for Norway in the meantime).

Meanwhile in Dorset equipment had poured in on the Regiment which was now in possession of 24. 18/25 pounders and full MT, the Regiment consisting of two Batteries (229 and 230) each Battery comprising three troops, each of four guns A, B and C = 229, D, E and F = 230.

CO was Lt Col Blacker; Deputies were Major D Goodchild and Major H B Dyer.

Drill orders of a more and more elaborate character with firing on Salisbury Plain Ranges and schemes of every character were the order of the day until when quietly the vehicles and guns and a road party disappeared, to be followed a few days later by the Regiment, which sailed from Southampton and disembarked at Cherbourg, one of the finest maritime exploits. Perhaps it is just as well to recall that in those days our FSMO comprised all the additional gear associated with the words Ante Gas, which added greatly to our individual bulk and discomfort.

From Cherbourg, the Regiment entrained and eventually alighted at - . Here the road party regrouped with all the guns and vehicles.