

## Sherwood Foresters – World War I



The history of the Regiment in the First World War is very much the story of the men of the counties of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

When war was declared, The Sherwood Foresters consisted of eight battalions and a depot in Derby. During the war the Regiment expanded to a maximum of 33 battalions, of which 20 served overseas. Altogether, some 140,000 men, nearly all from Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, served in the Regiment - 11,409 of whom did not return.

The 2nd Battalion was part of the British Expeditionary Force which landed in France in September 1914 and went straight into the bitter fighting on the Aisne. On 20 September (the anniversary of the Battle of the Alma - a previous battle honour of the 95th) the Battalion carried out a counter-attack to plug a gap in the British Lines. The casualties were almost identical with those at the Alma; 17 out of 22 officers and 214 out of 930 other ranks. Reinforced, the Battalion fought another major battle in October at Ennetiere, on the way to Ypres, holding a vastly superior German force for 48 hours and losing 16 officers and 710 other ranks in the process.

The 1st Battalion was in India at the outbreak of war and was sent to France in November 1914 without any chance to adjust to European conditions. As a result it suffered badly in its first four winter months of 'Trench War'. The Battalion took part in two major battles in 1915 - Neuve Chapelle and Loos - and suffered severe casualties. Private J. Rivers and Corporal J. Upton were awarded VCs for bravery.

Both the 1st and 2nd Battalions continued to serve in France until after the Armistice on 11 November 1918 and, overall, were the most heavily committed of all the battalions in the Regiment. The 3rd and 4th Militia Battalions were embodied at the outbreak of war, but remained in the UK as holding and reinforcement units. The Territorial Army was immediately mobilised on the outbreak of war and the original four Sherwood Forester Territorial Battalions, the 5th, 6th, 7th (Robin Hoods) and 8th, formed the 139th (Forester) Infantry Brigade in the 46 (North Midland) Division. In September, the Territorial Army was doubled and almost overnight the 2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th (Robin Hoods) and 2/8th Battalions of the Regiment were formed from the original battalions and were made up into the 178th (Forester) Infantry Brigade of 59th (North Midland) Division.

In February 1915, the 139th (Forester) Brigade had the distinction of being part of the first Territorial division to land in France. By the end of the year they had been engaged in heavy fighting and Captain C. G. Vickers of the 1/7th (Robin Hoods) had been awarded the VC.

This Forester Brigade served in France for the remainder of the war and suffered severe casualties. In particular, it gained special recognition for its valour on the opening day of the Somme Battle on 1 July 1916, where it suffered 80 per cent casualties, and its magnificent part in the breaking of the Hindenburg Line and the final defeat of the German Army in the autumn of 1918. Lieutenant Colonel B. W. Vann MC the Commanding Officer of the 1/6th Battalion and Sergeant W. H. Johnson of the 1/5th Battalion being awarded the VC for conspicuous bravery in the latter action.

In 1916, the 178th (Forester) Brigade, although only partially trained, was despatched to Dublin to suppress the Easter Rebellion. This operation was completed successfully, although at some cost in casualties, especially to the 2/7th (Robin Hoods) and 2/8th Battalions.

In 1917, the Brigade moved to France and took part with distinction in the latter part of the 2nd Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) suffering heavy casualties, and also at Cambria later in 1917. The Brigade continued to fight in France until 1918.

As the new Kitchener Armies were raised in 1914, the 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th (Service) Battalions were formed, followed by the 15th (Bantams), 16th (Chatsworth Rifles), 17th (Welbeck Rangers), 18th (Bantams), 19th and 20th Battalions.

The 9th Battalion took part in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign in 1915 and gained a name for its stubborn fighting qualities similar to those of the 45th Foot some 100 years previously. The Battalion arrived in France in August 1916 and fought through the remaining Somme offensive; the bitter drawn-out battle of Passchendaele in 1917 where, in October, Corporal F. Greaves was awarded the VC; followed by the German breakthrough in the spring of 1918 and the final successful allied offensive later in the year.

The 10th Battalion went to France in July 1915 and moved almost immediately into the notorious, bloody Ypres Salient. In 1916, it took part in the first ten days of continuous fighting on the Somme, returning for a second time into the grim battle in August and yet a third time in October/November. In 1917, the Battalion fought magnificently throughout the 2nd Battle of Ypres suffering further heavy casualties and, like the 9th Battalion, continued in the forefront of battle throughout 1918 to the end of the war.

The 11th Battalion arrived in France in August of 1915 and within the month was engaged in a minor role in the Loos Battle. It took part in the opening day of the Somme offensive on 1 July 1916 and suffered such greivous losses it was relieved that night. It returned to the bitter struggle in late July and again in October for the final attempt to break through the German rear position. In 1917, the Battalion was heavily engaged in the second Ypres Battle for Passchendaele Ridge.

In November, it moved with its Division to Northern Italy to assist the Italians in their struggle against the German/Austrian offensive and won further renown for its successful stand at Asiago, where its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant

Colonel C. E. Hudson DSO MC, was awarded the VC for outstanding bravery and leadership. In October 1918, the 11th Battalion was returned to France and took part in the final offensive.

The 12th Battalion arrived in France in August 1915. The following month it took part in the Battle of Loos and from then onwards was engaged in most of the major battles until the end of 1918. Although its primary role was that of a Divisional Pioneer Battalion, it was drawn into the fight in times of crisis and gained recognition for gallant action on several occasions, notably the Battle of Loos in 1915 and the final German offensive in 1918. This Battalion, under the editorship of Captain Roberts MC, created and published what must be the most famous wartime news sheet of all - 'The Wipers Times'.

The 15th (Bantam) Battalion, made up initially of men who although fit were below the normal minimum service height of 5' 3", moved to France with the 35th (Bantam) Division in 1916. The Battalion fought with great distinction and heavy casualties throughout the 1916 battles on the Somme. However, at the end of 1916, the problems of finding 'Bantam' reinforcements in sufficient numbers became too difficult; the 15th Foresters was redesignated a normal 'service' battalion and fought as such until the end of the war.

The 16th (Chatsworth Rifles) and 17th (Welbeck Rangers) Battalions arrived in France in late April 1916 and played a prominent part in the Somme Battle, from August to the bitter end in November 1916. Their losses were heavy. These Battalions were also engaged in the 1917 offensive and again in the great German offensive on the Somme and Lys in the Spring of 1918, after which they were reduced, through severe losses, to cadre form to train the newly arriving American forces. Their finest hour, and certainly the period of their heaviest casualties, came in the 2nd Battle of Ypres and particularly the grim fighting leading to Passchendaele. It was for outstanding bravery during this battle that Corporal E. A. Egerton (16th Battalion) was awarded the VC.

All other battalions filled the vital role of reinforcement and training units combined with home defence, attempting to keep pace with the heavy losses over the four years of the war. However, towards the end of the war, the high rate of casualties necessitated the amalgamation of weakened battalions and, as with other regiments, Forester Battalions started to disappear from the order of battle.

Throughout all the fighting, officers and soldiers alike, displayed the same selfless courage that had won The Sherwood Foresters so many battle honours in the past. After the war, no less than 57 honours were added to that list. For outstanding acts of bravery, nine members of the Regiment were awarded the Victoria Cross including Captain A. Ball VC DSO MC Royal Flying Corps, who was previously a Robin Hood. Over 2,000 more received other decorations, honours and distinctions.

The cost was high as shown on the War Memorials throughout Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. There can hardly have been a village or city street that did not produce men to serve in The Sherwood Foresters - 11,409 of whom did not return.