

Isle of Wight Rifles

Introduction

There are many war memorials on the Isle of Wight, and most of the names inscribed from the Great War belong to men who served in The Isle of Wight Rifles. In doing some research for a walk to commemorate the start of the Great War, I was amazed, and honoured, to discover many incredible stories of the 1914–18 War, including some of the great marches that the Rifles took part in.

Brief history of IOW Rifles

(with extracts taken from *The Isle of Wight Rifles*, by D. J. Quigley)

A volunteer force was first formed on the Island in 1859, to counter the possible threat of French Invasion. Six independent corps, or detachments, were raised: two at Newport, and others at Ryde, Nunwell, Ventnor and Sandown. The force went through various name and organisational changes, until in 1885 the unit became 'The 5th (Isle of Wight, Princess Beatrice's) Volunteer Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment'.

The South African War

During the South African War, twenty-one men from these detachments were given special training and sailed from Southampton on the 11th February 1900. Although never in the thick of the fighting, they did perform a number of important escort, supply and communication duties, and on 11th July, the Island men took part in a thirty-five mile march from Pretoria to Uitvlie Nek – a record march for the Boer War. The men returned to Southampton on 6th May 1901, and the Regiment was awarded the battle honour 'South Africa 1900-01'. Sadly, two of these men died shortly after returning home, from illnesses contracted at the front.

After the South African War, the battalion reverted to its normal part-time role, holding regular weekend camps and their annual two-week summer camp. Following the 1907 Territorial Army Act, they became 'Princess Beatrice's Isle of Wight Rifles, 8th Battalion the Hampshire Regiment'. Recruits were entitled to army pay whilst in camp, and an annual bounty of five pounds – a small fortune in those pre-war days.

The Great War

The battalion mobilised at the outbreak of war on the 4th August 1914, and relieved the Royal Fusiliers of duties in the Island Forts. On mobilisation, men from the Ventnor and Shanklin detachments were sent to their respective towns to arrest any German waiters who were still working in local hotels.

Large numbers of men flooded into recruiting offices, and a second battalion was quickly formed – including a number of 'oveners' from High Wycombe. In May 1915, the 1st Battalion was sent to St Albans and Watford to receive active service training. At Bury St Edmunds, this battalion had their first taste of enemy action, when they witnessed a Zeppelin raid on the East Coast.

On 30th July 1915, nine hundred officers and men of the 1st Battalion of the Rifles joined over seven thousand other members of the 162nd and 163rd Brigades, and 54th Divisional Headquarters, leaving Liverpool on board the *Aquitania*. On the 2nd

August they passed Gibraltar, and four days later they arrived at the port of Mudros, near to their intended destination of Gallipoli

Gallipoli

On the 8th August the battalion transferred to smaller ships and moved to Imbros, an island just off the coast of Gallipoli.

The Isle of Wight Rifles landed at Sulva Bay, Gallipoli, on 10th August 1915. As the nine hundred Rifles landed, over two thousand men, many seriously wounded in previous attacks, were waiting to go back to Mudros, and the Aquitania for home, and this sight cannot have inspired the new arrivals on the beach.

On the 12th August, together with other members of the 163rd Brigade, the Rifles were ordered to advance and occupy a ridge of hills in front of them, and in doing so, cut off the Turkish armies in the area of Anzac beach and cape Helles, and to dominate the Dardenelles straits. **During the first attack, eight officers and over three hundred men of the Rifles were reported killed or missing.** On the 15th August the Islanders took part in an attack on the left flank of Sulva Bay, supported by naval gunfire. During the first few days of fighting, the Rifles suffered almost fifty per cent casualties, as they repeatedly attempted to cross open country in daylight, against well-positioned Turkish defenders, many of whom were female snipers.

In September, the tattered remnants of the battalion were eventually evacuated to the reserve trenches at Anzac Cove, where one of their duties included transferring supplies from the beach to the front line – often less than a cricket pitch distance from the Turkish positions. This was a hazardous duty, as it often involved exposing themselves to Turkish snipers. After a brief move to Hill 60, they witnessed and smelt the carnage remaining from previous Australian (Light Horse) attacks (featured in the Mel Gibson film, Gallipoli). In November, the weather deteriorated and a violent thunderstorm battered and drenched the Gallipoli forces, and then turned into a raging blizzard of blinding snow! Two nights of severe frost followed, and thousands of cases of frostbite were reported – to add to the ever-increasing injury woes. The surviving Rifles were finally evacuated from Gallipoli on 3rd December 1915. Most of these men were suffering from dysentery and were very thin and weak. Despite numerous reinforcements during their time at Gallipoli, less than two hundred Islanders finally arrived back at Mudros.

After Gallipoli

In Mudros, a large quantity of clothing from the Isle of Wight Gift Fund awaited them, and this helped with the men's rapid recovery. After two weeks at Mudros, the battalion headed for Alexandria in Egypt, where they spent Christmas 1915. After weeks of recuperation near the great pyramids, the re-formed Rifles occupied positions near the Bitter Lakes on the Suez canal.

In February 1917, the 1st battalion took part in an epic march across the Sinai Desert as part of an attack on the German-commanded Turkish positions at Romani. In one twelve-day period, they covered one hundred and forty-five miles of scorching desert – in full marching order! The following month, the Rifles took part in the first battle of Gaza, where several men of the Rifles were killed and wounded. In April 1917, the same men took part in the second battle of Gaza, where they were

supported for the first time by a few tanks. The Rifles, once again sustained very heavy casualties, with only two officers and ninety men answering roll call that evening – out of the eight hundred who took part. The Turks had captured a large number of the missing men.

Re-formed once again, the 1st Battalion remained in Palestine throughout 1918, and in 1919 demobilisation started in Cairo, but this was stopped when severe rioting broke out in Egypt, and the Rifles joined General Allenby's peacekeeping force. After a period in the army of occupation of Sudan, the very few survivors of the original 1915 1st Battalion finally arrived back on the Island on the 24th March 1920.

The 2nd Battalion

The 2nd battalion of the Rifles had a totally different war experience to that of the first battalion, for they stayed on the Island until August 1916, and then in September 1916, they joined other forces embarked for India. From Quetta in India, they moved to Basra and Baghdad, and in 1917 they moved into Persia and on to Russian Turkestan. The 2nd Battalion saw no major actions, but were constantly involved in minor skirmishes with the enemy, and finally returned to the Island in early 1919.

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