

Mountsorrel Territorial Soldiers

The Road to War - 1914

In the late 19th Century it was realised that the Militia system, that had served the country since the Napoleonic Wars, was no longer ideal for boosting the army in time of need and Rifle Volunteer units began to be formed. These were under the command of the Lord Lieutenants of the counties and supplemented the County Militia.

As the century progressed and the lessons of the Crimean War were learnt, parliament decided that military reform was needed and successive Secretarys of State for War pushed through reform legislation. The Childers Reforms of 1881 radically altered the army structure. Multi-battalion regiments were formed with each regiment having a designated regimental district and incorporating the local militia and rifle volunteers. Regiments of foot were no longer to have numbers, but were to bear a territorial title.

Accordingly the Leicestershire Regiment was formed on 1 July 1881 from the 17th Regiment of Foot with the Regimental Depot based at Glen Parva. The regiment consisted of:

- The 1st and 2nd Battalions (formerly the 1st and 2nd battalions of the 17th Regiment of Foot) – regular army battalions
- 3rd (Militia) Battalion (formerly the Leicestershire Militia)
- 1st Leicestershire Rifle Volunteer Corps, formed from amalgamating the ten separate Rifle Volunteer Corps in the county. This was re-designated as the 1st Volunteer Battalion Leicestershire Regiment in 1883

1st Volunteer Battalion Leicestershire Regiment

By 1899 the 1st Volunteer Battalion, with its HQ in the Magazine in Leicester consisted of some 1500 men serving in 6 Companies based in Leicester and a further 6 Companies dispersed across the county. At that time the local unit to Mountsorrel was H (Loughborough) Company of 104 men commanded by Capt F R Griggs, supported by Lt S J Wright and Sergeant-Instructor A Rudge.

On 6th May 1900 a meeting was held at St Peter's School in Mountsorrel "for the purpose of discussing the formation of a company of Volunteers in the Soar Valley villages". The chairman of the meeting was Mr RE Martin, Director of the Mountsorrel Granite Company and a serving officer with the Volunteers. The proposal was accepted and subsequently P (Soar Valley) Company was formed and based at a Drill Hall built in the village by the Granite Company.

The enthusiasm shown at the meeting at St Peter's School was followed up by men volunteering for service and by 1902 P Company, some 60 men strong and commanded by the now Captain, RE Martin, were attending their second annual training camp at Strensall Camp, outside York.

The changes that had started in the previous century continued at the start of the twentieth due to lessons learnt in the Boer War. The Territorial and Reserve Forces Act of 1907 led to the reshaping of the regular army for expeditionary force operations overseas and the change of the Volunteer and Yeomanry forces into a new Territorial Force of fourteen infantry divisions, fourteen cavalry brigades, and a large number of support units. This led in 1908 to the 1st Volunteer Battalion being split into 4th and 5th Battalions (Territorial Force). 4th Battalion was based and recruited within Leicester and 5th Battalion, with a headquarters at the Drill Hall, Granby Street in Loughborough, recruiting across the county.

5th Battalion Leicestershire Regiment (Territorial Force)



With a battalion HQ in Loughborough the battalion had eight companies based across Leicestershire as follows:

A Company - The Armoury, Rifle Range Road, Ashby-de-la-Zouch

B Company - Angel Inn, Oakham, Rutland

C Company - the Corn Exchange in Melton Mowbray

D Company - New Buildings in Hinckley

E Company - the Drill Hall, Coventry Road, Market Harborough

F Company - Mountsorrel

G Company - Shepshed

H Company - Drill Hall, Granby Street, Loughborough



F (Soar Valley) Company - Formation Photo – NCOs (?)

The new F Company continued to use the Drill Hall in the village and to be commanded by Capt RE Martin, although he now also served as the Battalion's Musketry Instructor – a significant role in an infantry unit. By 1912 the Company was about 60 men strong and were noted for both their sporting and training activities and in particular their success in rifle competitions.

But 1912 was also traumatic for the Company as their Drill Hall was accidentally burnt down.

one day they will be. we will hope so.
Captain Martin and F Company are to be sympathised on having their drill hall and stores burnt down and almost totally destroyed early in the month; fortunately the ammunition was saved, but many rifles and some clothing was destroyed.
May I include in these notes a reminder to the effect that the Officers' Cup has not yet been shot for, nor has a date been mentioned. Perhaps this will meet the eye of one who knows about these things, and I may be able to report the winner's name next month.
ASSOCIATION PRIZES.

Green Tiger (Leicestershire Regiment - Regimental Journal 1912)

With support from the Mountsorrel Granite Company a new Drill Hall was rapidly constructed at the same site and was in use some 12 months later.

Mountsorrel.—The Soar Valley Company of the 5th Batt., Leicestershire Regiment, since the old Drill Hall at Mountsorrel was burnt down a year ago, have been without permanent headquarters. Very shortly the Company will be housed in a fine new Drill Hall of stone and brick. Standing on the original site, the new building consists of a commodious Drill Hall, where a miniature rifle range is being fixed, various offices for storage, armoury, etc., men's recreation room, sergeant's room and bar. The Yeomanry will also be able to utilise this hall as their headquarters. The hall will be lighted with gas. The architect is Captain Baines, (of Messrs, Langley & Baines, of Leicester), and the contractor Mr. F. Sleath, of Rothley. The cost is about £1,800. There will be no special opening ceremony; it will be combined with the annual prize-giving sometime before Christmas.

Green Tiger (Leicestershire Regiment - Regimental Journal 1913)

1913 saw further change for F Company as Captain Martin was promoted, but with promotion came a move for him from the Company to the Battalion HQ as the Second in Command.

A special parade of the Soar Valley Company of Territorials was held at Mountsorrel on Sunday morning, and attracted a large number of onlookers. The Company fell in at the Drill Hall, under the command of Lieut. Weildon, and they were joined by the band of the 5th Batt. Leicestershire Regiment, under Bandmaster Lovett. Scoutmaster Barradale also attended with a troupe of Boy Scouts, and in addition there were present, the representatives of the National Reserve and Church Lads' Brigade. A sermon was preached at Christ Church by the Vicar, the Rev. A. L. Simpson, M.A., and subsequently the men were formed up on the Green, when Major R. E. Martin, late Captain of the Company, presented the long service and efficiency medals to Sergt. Preston, Sergt. Hambleton, Sergt. Palmer, Sergt. Jowett, and Sergt. Evans, who have rendered 12 years of efficient service with the Company, and a special certificate to ex-Sergt. B. E. Saunders, who had only failed to earn the medal by resigning a few weeks prior to a twelve years' service.

Major Martin addressed each recipient individually, and, speaking to the Company, which was formed in the days of the South African War, said he always felt he was leading men who endeavoured to do their best for the credit of the Company and of the Battalion. He much regretted that owing to his new command he would in the future be less intimately connected with the Company than he had hitherto been, but he should always take a great interest in their well-being.

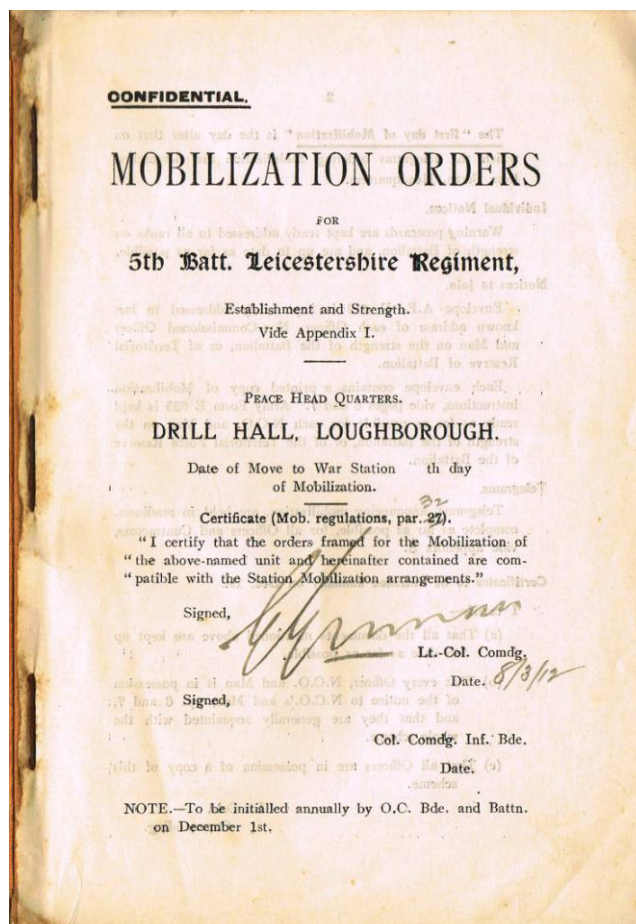
Green Tiger (Leicestershire Regiment - Regimental Journal 1913)

Mobilisation

During the first weekend of August 1914 5th Battalion Leicestershire Regiment had arrived at Manor Farm Camp, near Bridlington, for their annual training camp. They had settled in and were preparing for their weeks training when at 05:30am on Monday 3rd they received orders by telegram to strike camp and return to Loughborough "but not disband". By 08:00am the Transport Officer had arranged for wagons to take the heavy baggage to the railway station and the Companies had struck their tents and loaded them ready to move.

At 1:30pm a message arrived to inform them that they would not be moving until 11:00pm as the trains arranged for them were still at Hull. At 08:25pm, F, G and H Companies left camp for Bridlington station to entrain for Loughborough where they arrived at 02:30am on the morning of 4th.

Whilst the Battalion packed and made ready to move the Officers were checking the Mobilisation orders and started to plan.



Planning was based on a week of preparation prior to moving to their war station. Initially the men returned home but with clear orders to be ready to report back to their Company bases and then to their mobilisation billets in Loughborough when ordered.

At the appointed time Companies moved by rail to Loughborough apart from F Coy who marched by road from Mountsorrel with their baggage being collected by regimental transport. In Loughborough the battalion moved into the town schools schools:

A & B Companies – Rosebery St Board School (near the L & N W Railway Station)

C & D Companies – Cobden St Board School (near cricket ground and Bell foundry)

E Company – Rendell St Board School (near Parish Church)

F & G Companies Church-gate Board School (near the Parish Church)

Animals were to be held at the Boot Hotel, Loughborough (at War Establishment the battalion would have 38 horses of which 24 were heavy draught animals)

H Company men, who came from Loughborough, continued to live at home until Battalion moved off to their war station and the Shepshed half of G Company also remained at home until the move.

This Table refers to Rapid Mobilization

APPENDIX XV.

The Battalion consists of:—
Battalion Headquarters.
Eight Companies.
At Headquarters—H Company.

Detachments.	Place.	Distance from Head Quarters.		Day of Mobn. of Move to Head Quarters.	By Road or Rail.	Strength.	
		By road.	Rail.			Officers.	O. Ranks
A. Coy.	Asby-de-la-Zouch	34	12½	2nd	Rail		
B. "	Oakham	30	25	"	"		
C. "	Melton Mowbray	18	15½	"	"		
D. "	Hinckley	27	25	"	"		
E. "	Market Harborough	28	26	"	"		
F. "	Mountsorrel	5	4	"	Road		
G. "	Uppingham	34	30	"	Rail		
H. "	Loughborough	—	—	—	—		
	Shepshed	4	—	—	—		

Appendix XV a

Return showing march of Outlying Companies when joining Headquarters at Loughborough as mobilized

Coy	Place	Distance to march miles	Day of march to Hd Qr.	Day of arrival at Hd Qr.	Place where billeted during march	Strength		Remarks
						Officers	O. Ranks	
A.	Asby-de-la-Zouch	12½	2nd	2nd		5	147	
B.	Oakham	30	2nd	3rd	Melton Mowbray	2	84	
C.	Melton Mowbray	18	2nd	2nd		2	27	
D.	Hinckley	27	2nd	3rd	Leicestershire	2	102	
E.	Market Harborough	28	2nd	3rd	Leicestershire	1	96	
F.	Mountsorrel	5	2nd	2nd		2	68	
G.	Uppingham	34	2nd	3rd		2	103	
H.	Loughborough	—	—	—		4	166	

That advance planning paid off and as stipulated in the plan on the 7th day after receiving the order to mobilise the Battalion was ready to move off to the initial war station – Duffield in Derbyshire.

11th August 1914

5th Battalion Leicestershire Regiment parading in Loughborough Market Place



Being addressed by Mr Mayo JP, Mayor of Loughborough



Marching off to Loughborough Railway Station to entrain for Duffield

Duffield

The area around Derby was the concentration area for the whole of the North Midlands Division of the Territorial Force and alongside the 5th Battalion in Duffield were the 4th Battalion.

Duffield proved to be only an interim station but one at which an important legal question was put to all the Territorials. They had volunteered for home defence not overseas service but even in those first days of the war it was apparent to the War Office that greater numbers of troops would be needed to bolster the British Expeditionary Force already in France than were available from the Regular Army. The question was posed initially on 13th August and roughly 70% indicated that they would consent at once, for the others the question must have caused serious reflection. Many were skilled men, and had joined the home army merely because they felt it be the right thing to do but overseas service had not been part of their original consideration. On 17th August when the question was put again but now requiring a formal response of those ready to extend the terms of service and an estimated 90% of the battalion agreed.

On the 15th August the battalion left Duffield and marched to Derby Station and there experienced the delays that can be the normal experience in moving large numbers of troops using civilian transport systems. Their train was to start at 11:00pm, but they did not arrive at Luton, their destination, until 2:00pm the next day

Luton

Initially the battalion was billeted in schools in Luton. This was an advantage for briefings and instruction, as in the Beech Hill Schools of Luton, the whole battalion could assemble in the main school room. This temporary arrangement soon ended when it was time for the school term to start again and 28th August they moved out of the schools, and were billeted in private houses in West Luton. The tenants cleared out the ground floor front room of each and took in up to four men on a universal rental fixed on 2nd October at 9d. a day for each man. This must have made a welcome income for the townsfolk of about twenty-one shillings where their average rental was at the most twelve shillings! Battalion headquarters and billets for senior officers were found at Ceylon Hall, a Baptist Church Hall. The Chapel Committee were most accommodating to the battalion lending the use of their chapel and organ for Sunday service.

The battalion spent 3 months in Luton in intensive training, long marches and field exercises preparing them for war.



5th Battalion on a training march at Luton with Maj RE Martin on Wit Pait

These months of training led to some irritation amongst the men who wanted to get to France and when they asked were told the answer "You will go soon enough, and you will stay long enough." But on what was described in the Regimental History as "one still and dark November day" orders to move were received at short notice, and in full marching order, the Battalion marched off down the Bedford road. As they marched in silence the men of leading Companies dropped a hastily scrawled postcard home in the postbox by the roadside. "It was only the leading companies that could put the farewell card actually in the box, for it was quickly crowded out, and in the end the upper portion of the red pillar was visible standing on a conical pile of postcards". After 16 miles the battalion tuned off the roads into fields where they were inspected after which they marched back to Luton.

Ware - Bishops Stortford - Sawbridgeworth

Some two weeks after that testing march down the Bedford Road on 14th of November, the usual proportion of officers and men were on weekend leave as usual. At 1:00am on the Monday, orders were received, the whole of the North

Midlands Division were to move. The Battalion moved off at 7:00am complete, for Ware, a distance, by the route set, of 25 to 30 miles. Despite the lack of notice and missing personnel, they reached Ware 7:20pm except for two Companies who were detached as rear guard to the Division. After a rest day at Ware they moved again, marching to Bishops Stortford. Here along with many other units they awaited yet more orders to move. When these came they were to march on to Sawbridgeworth and go into billets there, which they did on the 26th of November.

It was in Sawbridgeworth that the briefings for life at the front began in earnest and they learnt the fine arts of digging and fighting from trenches were learnt. But they still found time for sport and some relaxation with football, boxing and concerts, and even dancing, filling the little spare time they had. It was at Sawbridgeworth that the battalion ate their first Christmas war dinner. With support sent from the villages what appears to have been a memorable dinner was enjoyed by all ranks.

Mountsard Hill
Dec. 22/14

Dear Madam

Enclosed please find Cheque value £8.
for the Xmas holiday fund, for 5th Battalion West Yorkshire Reg^t.
The amount is made up as follows:-

Mr J. A. Smith	5-0-0
The Employees of The Granite Boat Co	1-16-0
" " " " School Boat Co	18-0
Mr. Charles Wilson	3-0
" W. A. Smith	3-0
	<hr/>
	£ 8 " 0 " 0

I should like to point out to you that Mr J. A. Smith
doubles the collection taken at his Factory, every week, so that
his donation to the above object is really £ 5-18-0.

Yours sincerely
W. A. Smith

With the turn of the year the most important although simple change was made in the organisation of the battalion. To reflect the structure of the regular army, the eight companies were re-organised as four and F Company was no more.

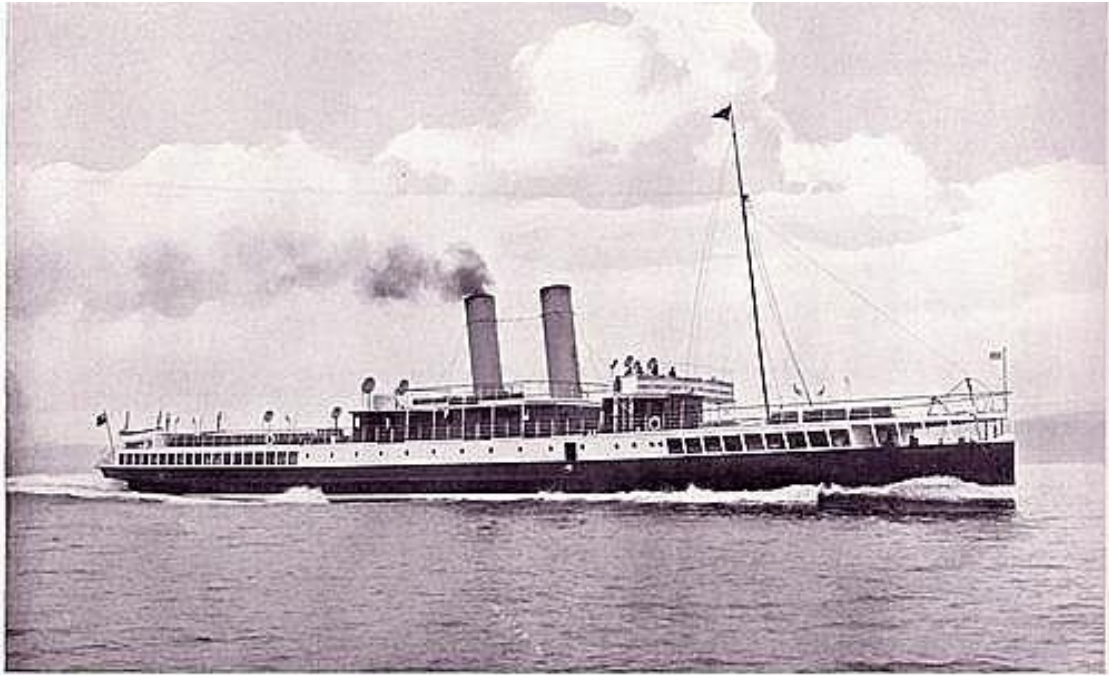


F Company – the final photograph

The Move to France

On the 18th February, the Divisional Commander returned from a week's visit to France, and briefed the officers on the latest position at the Front and with that it was apparent that departure for France was imminent and on the 25th the battalion was ordered to entrain at Harlow at midnight, and the next morning they were on Southampton Docks awaiting their boats.

Late in the afternoon of 26th February they embarked. The Headquarters and the right half battalion in S.S. Duchess of Argyle, left half, under Major Martin, in S.S. Atalanta.



ss Duchess of Argyll



ss Atalanta

Four other ships containing Divisional Headquarters and some of the Sherwood Foresters were to sail with along with them and at 9:00pm they sailed with S.S. Duchess of Argyll leading. Out on the Channel there was confusion when war ships were sighted, Duchess of Argyll sailed on whilst the remainder returned to harbour.

After an appalling journey through very rough seas, which saw the former river Clyde pleasure steamer buffeted by the waves, they reached Le Havre in the early hours of the morning and disembarked.



Le Havre – Commercial Harbour

The rest of the battalion arrived on the 28th, after an equally trying journey made worse by having to make it twice. With everyone now arrived the battalion moved slowly by stages to the Front, being held in reserve initially, for what became the battle of Neuve Chapelle. They did not see action there but on 1st April a warning order informed them that the Division would take over shortly a sector of the line South of St. Eloi where on the night of Easter Sunday 4th April 1915 they took over trenches held by the Welsh Regiment near Wulverghem.