The Durham Light Infantry and The Somme 1916

by

John Bilcliffe



edited and amended in 2016 by Peter Nelson and Steve Shannon

Part 1

Introduction and Background Notes

leading up to
the Battle of the Somme.





Part 1 Contents.

- 1.1: Introduction.
- 1.2: The background to the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 18 November 1916.
- 1.3: The Organisation of the Fourth Army, including the composition of Divisions and Brigades in which the DLI Battalions served.
- 1.4: Battles, Tactical Incidents and Subsidiary Attacks.

Note: The drawing on the front page of British infantrymen attacking towards La Boisselle on 1 July 1916 is from Reverend James Birch's war diary. DCRO: D/DLI 7/63/2, p.149.

1.1: Introduction.

The postscript to the regimental history *The Durham Light Infantry* by The Honourable W.L. Vane formerly Major 1st Battalion and from 1903 to 1911 Lieut. Colonel and Hon. Colonel Commanding 6th Battalion DLI, reads:

"As will have been noticed by the reader, this record of the Durham Light Infantry was closed at the end of May 1914, and had the present war not taken place would have been published before now. The war has unfortunately delayed publication of the book for several months; a considerable amount of time was necessarily required for final arrangements, and for printing the proofs, etc., etc. When the latter were completed, the war broke out, and as the compiler returned to military duty away from his home he was unable to correct them for nearly three months.

Some of those who are interested in the production of the book suggested further delay until the present war had been concluded and the share taken in it by the Durham Light Infantry recorded; but no one knows how long the war may last, and even if it were soon terminated some considerable time would elapse before the necessary literary material could be collected and arranged.

It has been finally decided to proceed with the publication of the book in its present form, and it is hoped that, if the war comes to an end within a reasonable period of time, it may be possible to compile a short supplement recording the performances of the several battalions of the Durham Light Infantry during the present crisis, and to present a copy gratis to each of the original subscribers." 1 December, 1914.

The above poignant commentary, suggesting that a supplement could record the Regiment's involvement in the Great War, indicates that nobody had any idea what horrors lay ahead. Subsequent to the war, histories were written for the 5th, 6th, 8th, 18th, and 20th Battalions and The Durham Forces in the Field by Captain Wilfrid Miles, late 13th Battalion DLI, covered the history of the Service battalions. In this last book, published in 1920, the preface stated that:

"This volume [volume 2] appears in advance of that which will carry forward the History of the Durham Light Infantry (68th and 106th Regts.) through the Great War and will also include the War History of the First Line Territorial Battalions of the Regiment. The explanation is to be found in the regrettable decease of Colonel the Hon. W.L. Vane while engaged upon this task which was to form a continuation of his earlier work".2

In 1962 S.G.P. Ward wrote a second history of the DLI called Faithful which of course included the Great War. This was published for the Durham Light Infantry by Thomas Nelson. Since 1962, a further publication has appeared entitled *The Faithful Sixth* and is a history of the 6th Battalion DLI by Harry Moses, published by County Durham Books. The earlier and brief history of the 6th Battalion confined itself to the Great War.³

Any study of the Great War is an immense undertaking, and has been tackled in many ways by numerous highly qualified historians. To the average layman, the war is so

¹ Vane, W.L, *The Durham Light Infantry* (London, 1914), p.314.

² Miles, Wilfrid, The Durham Forces in the Field, 1914-18, volume 2: The Service Battalions of the Durham Light Infantry (London, 1920).

³ For a full list of DLI histories: http://www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk/Pages/BooklistFirstWorldWar.aspx

complex as to be almost beyond comprehension. Yet anybody who is interested in military history cannot ignore the most violent four years that ever existed for millions of people, whether they were in the trenches of Flanders or sitting at home in fear of receiving the dreaded telegram. One way of appreciating the conflict is to take the story of just one regiment or of one man in a regiment. Another is to examine a theatre of war or one particular battle. This book is about one regiment's involvement in one offensive: **The Durham Light Infantry in the Battle of the Somme in 1916.**

The book lists where and when the 2469 officers and men of the Regiment fell in action. For example an entry in *Soldiers Died* simply states that 17308 Private John Donkin of the 15th Battalion DLI was killed in action in France and Flanders on 17 July 1916.⁴ Reference to this book gives the additional important information that Private Donkin was killed whilst the battalion was involved in the Somme offensive and at the battle of Bazentin. Referring to the commentary of that battle, it is clear that he died in the west or north-west part of Mametz Wood. His grave, IX.K.40, is in Flat Iron Copse Cemetery.⁵

The book also lists all the awards made for bravery, and again in nearly all cases where and when the act of bravery took place. There is no existing publication which gives a complete list of awards for the Somme and only some of the names appearing in the battalion histories give any indication of where and when the act of valour took place. As an example. Sergeant James Armstrong of the 8th Battalion had his Military Medal award announced in the London Gazette of 9 December 1916. From this book the added information is given that this award was for bravery during the attack on the Flers Line; further that Sergeant Armstrong went on to be awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal; and that later he was killed in action.

The descriptions of the actions in which the sixteen DLI battalions took part is described. Practically all the text comes from the individual battalion histories (5th, 6th, 8th, and 18th Battalions); from *The Durham Forces in the Field* covering the Service battalions (10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 18th, 19th, 20th, and 22nd Battalions); and from *Faithful*, the regimental history, which covers all battalions but in much less detail. Note that the 2nd, 7th and 9th Battalions had no publication specifically devoted to their action in the Great War.⁶

Other sources that have been used are the divisional histories, especially that of the 50th Division.⁷ This division had within its command the five DLI Territorial battalions. Other books containing specific or general comments have been consulted, for example *Brigadier General R.B. Bradford VC, MC and his Brothers*,⁸ and John Buchan's *The Battle of the Somme - First Phase*.⁹

Most important of all are the battalions' war diaries [held in The National Archives] from which much has been used for the books already mentioned.¹⁰

⁴ Soldiers Died In The Great War 1914-19, part 62, The Durham Light Infantry (HMSO, 1921; reprinted Suffolk, 1989).

⁵ Commonwealth War Graves Commission: http://www.cwgc.org/

⁶ For a full list of DLI histories: http://www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk/Pages/BooklistFirstWorldWar.aspx

Wyrall, Everard, The History of the Fiftieth Division, 1914-19 (London, 1939).

⁸ Author unknown, *Brigadier General R.B. Bradford VC MC & his brothers* (London, 1929; reprinted Newport, 1997).

⁹ Buchan, John, *The Battle of the Somme – First Phase* (London, 1916).

¹⁰ The National Archives: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/war-diaries-ww1.htm

Finally, *The Official History of the War*, based on official documents covering Military Operations in France and Belgium from 2 July to the end of the battles of the Somme, has been of inestimable value not only for its text but also the numerous maps. ¹¹ Coincidentally, this volume (one of 28) was written by Wilfrid Miles, the author of *Durham Forces in the Field*.

The account of the Battle of the Somme - as it affected the Durham Light Infantry - is told in Battle or Action sequence. This story cannot be told in isolation from what was going on all around and constant reference is given to other battalions in the brigade and to a lesser extent to other brigades in the division. It can be a confusing story for those reading about the Somme for the first time and extensive use has therefore been made of maps - mainly adapted from those appearing in the various battalion histories - but also from other sources including *The Official History of the War* mentioned earlier. All the information given is contemporary and no attempt has been made to "shed new light" or take a personal view. The views and comments of those who were actually there is surely enough to tell the story.

The battalion war diaries, written there and then or very soon after the event, give casualty figures which proved to be not too accurate. This is mainly due to the figures for men found to be missing at roll call. These men were later assumed to have been killed, or were known to have been taken prisoner, or eventually found their way back to their battalion. Total casualty figures usually included all those killed, wounded and missing. Many of those wounded were treated in the casualty clearing station and returned to their battalion. In this book a casualty is a soldier who was killed in action or who died from wounds, although "total casualties" (i.e. killed, wounded or missing) are given where published.

All battalions are described in full e.g. 1st West Yorkshire Regiment or 5th Northumberland Fusiliers. Where the description is simply, say, the 7th Battalion or 7th Bn., then one can assume that it is referring to the 7th Battalion DLI.

It is to be hoped that this book will help historians, researchers and DLI enthusiasts to understand what actually happened some 100 years ago. Above all the successors to these brave men might like to see this added remembrance to their forebears.

¹¹ Miles, Wilfrid, *History of the Great War based on Official Documents; Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1916; volume II: 2 July 1916 to the end of the Battles of the Somme* (London, 1938). Hereafter *Official History*.

1.2: The background to the Battle of the Somme, 1 July – 18 November 1916.

When the Great War broke out, the 1st Battalion The Durham Light Infantry was serving in India. It remained there throughout the war, but many officers and men returned to serve in battalions fighting in France and Flanders. The 2nd Battalion DLI was stationed in England and was naturally to the fore when war was declared. It was part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), landing in France on 8 September 1914.

The Volunteer Force was dissolved in March 1908. There had been five volunteer battalions in the Durham Light Infantry and they became five Territorial battalions numbered 5 to 9 inclusive. They were brigaded into the Northumbrian Division which, with the West Riding Division, became No. 5 District embracing the counties of Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire. In the Northumbrian Division were three brigades - Northumberland, York and Durham, and Durham and the DLI Battalions were brigaded as follows:

5th Battalion in the York and Durham Brigade.

6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th Battalions in the Durham Brigade.

On 14 May 1915, the Northumbrian Division was given the less distinctive title of 50th Division and the three brigades then became known as the 149th, 150th, and 151st Brigade respectively.

When in August 1914, Lord Kitchener's first call (KI) came for 100,000 volunteers for his New Army, the 10th (Service) Battalion DLI was formed. The call (K2) for the next 100,000 volunteers came in September and produced the 11th (Service) Battalion and the third call (K3) in the same month, produced the 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th (Service) Battalions.

In October 1914, the Fourth New Army (K4) contained the 16th and 17th Battalions made up from the Regiment's 3rd and 4th Special Reserve battalions. Part of the 89th Brigade, it later became the 1st Reserve Infantry Brigade. These battalions did not serve on the Somme nor indeed anywhere overseas.

On 10 December 1914 the Fifth New Army (K5) was authorised. The raising of the 1st County of Durham Battalion, the 18th (Durham Pals), was started in September by a committee under the chairmanship of the Earl of Durham. This was the only battalion in Durham or anywhere else for that matter, which was raised and equipped free of expense to the nation. The 2nd County of Durham Battalion, the 19th (Bantams), followed in January 1915. This battalion was composed of men originally considered too short, i.e. under 5ft. 3ins. This limit was reduced to 5ft, enabling many pitmen of fine physique to enlist.

The formation of the 20th (Wearside) Battalion started in July 1915, following an invitation to do so by the War Office to the Mayor and Recruiting Committee of Sunderland. The last raised battalion to serve on the Somme in 1916 was the 3rd County of Durham Battalion, the 22nd (Pioneers), the formation of which was started in October 1915, following another approach from the War Office to the County Recruiting Committee.

All the above battalions, with the exception of the 1st, 16th and 17th, served with distinction on the Somme at some time between July and November 1916.

The battalions landed in France on the following dates:

2nd Battalion	8 September 1914
5th Battalion	17 April 1915
6th Battalion	19 April 1915
7th Battalion	19 April 1915
8th Battalion	20 April 1915
9th Battalion	20 April 1915
10th Battalion	22 May 1915
11th Battalion	21 July 1915
12th Battalion	26 August 1915
13th Battalion	26 August 1915
14th Battalion	12 September 1915
15th Battalion	12 September 1915
18th Battalion	14 March 1916 (served in Egypt before going to France.)
19th Battalion	1 February 1916
20th Battalion	4 May 1916
22nd Battalion	17 June 1916

1.3: The Organisation of the Fourth Army.

The Fourth Army, formed on 5 February 1916, consisted of the II, III, VIII, X, XIII, and XV Corps. The Reserve Army took over the VIII and X Corps on 4 July 1916 and was designated the Fifth Army on 30 October that year. The XIV Corps relieved the XIII at midnight 16/17 August 1916 and the 1st ANZAC Corps relieved the XV Corps on 30 October.

An army was usually composed of four infantry corps which was sub-divided into divisions. In turn, the divisions were made up of brigades and within brigades there were battalions. The make-up of brigades and divisions changed very little and usually only when they had suffered so heavily, as to make them ineffective as a fighting force. Divisions were sometimes transferred to other corps.

All the Durham Light Infantry battalions on the Somme came under the command of the Fourth Army, except for the 18th Battalion at Ancre in mid-November 1916, when it was part of the Fifth Army. The DLI battalions were split between a number of corps, divisions and brigades

A division was commanded by a major general; a brigadier general commanded a brigade and a lieutenant colonel commanded a battalion. There were by necessity very many temporary and acting ranks - for example Brigadier General R.B. Bradford's substantive rank was lieutenant! For the purpose of this exercise, the rank held at any one time, be it substantive, temporary or acting is the rank attributed to the officer mentioned.

The distribution of **DLI Battalions** was as follows:

2nd & 14th	8th Brigade	6th Division	XIV
22nd	Pioneers	8th Division	III Corps
10th	43rd Brigade	14th Division	XV Corps
11th	Pioneers	20th Division	XIV
15th	64th Brigade	21st Division	XV Corps
12th & 13th	68th Brigade	23rd Division	III Corps
18th	93rd Brigade	31st Division	VIII
19th	106th Brigade	35th Division	XIII
20th	123rd Brigade	41st Division	XV Corps
5th	150th Brigade	50th Division	III Corps
6th, 8th & 9th	151st Brigade	50th Division	III Corps
7th	Pioneers	50th Division	III Corps

It can be seen that the major division, as far as the DLI was concerned, was the 50th (Northumbrian) Division, with all the DLI Territorial battalions within its command. The build-up of the other brigades in the divisions, which, as stated, rarely changed and in which the DLI had battalions, is worthy of note.

Composition of Divisions and Brigades in which the DLI Battalions served. 12

6th Division 16th Brigade

¹² The Regiments' titles listed are the original titles.

8th Bedfordshire Regiment

1st East Kent Regiment

1st Shropshire Light Infantry

2nd York and Lancaster Regiment

18th Brigade

2nd DLI

14th DLI

1st West Yorkshire Regiment

11th Essex Regiment

71st Brigade

9th Norfolk Regiment

9th Suffolk Regiment

1st Leicestershire Regiment

2nd Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment

Divisional Pioneers: 11th Leicestershire Regiment (Midland Pioneers)

8th Division

23rd Brigade

2nd Devonshire Regiment

2nd Middlesex Regiment

2nd West Yorkshire Regiment

2nd Scottish Rifles

24th Brigade ¹³

1st Worcestershire Regiment

1st Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment

2nd Northamptonshire Regiment

2nd East Lancashire Regiment

25th Brigade

2nd Lincolnshire Regiment

2nd Royal Berkshire Regiment

1st Royal Irish Rifles 2nd Rifle Brigade

Divisional Pioneers: 22nd DLI (Pioneers)

14th (Light) Division

41st Brigade

7th King's Royal Rifle Corps

8th King's Royal Rifle Corps

7th Rifle Brigade

8th Rifle Brigade

42nd Brigade

5th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

9th King's Royal Rifle Corps

9th Rifle Brigade

5th Shropshire Light Infantry

43rd Brigade

10th DLI

6th Yorkshire Light Infantry

6th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

6th Somerset Light Infantry

This work is licensed under a <u>Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License</u>
You can download this work and share it with others as long as it is credited, but you can't change it in any way or use it commercially

¹³ In July/August 1916, the 24th Brigade re-joined from 23rd Division and 70th Brigade returned to 23rd Division.

Divisional Pioneers: 11th Liverpool Regiment (Pioneers)

20th (Light) Division

59th Brigade

10th King's Royal Rifle Corps

11th King's Royal Rifle Corps

10th Rifle Brigade

11th Rifle Brigade

60th Brigade

6th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

6th Shropshire Light Infantry

12th Rifle Brigade

12th King's Royal Rifle Corps

61st Brigade

12th Liverpool Regiment

7th Yorkshire Light Infantry

7th Somerset Light Infantry

7th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

Divisional Pioneers: 11th DLI

21st Division¹⁴

62nd Brigade

12th Northumberland Fusiliers

13th Northumberland Fusiliers

1st Lincolnshire Regiment

10th Yorkshire Regiment

63rd Brigade (replaced by 110th Brigade)

8th Lincolnshire Regiment

8th Somerset Light Infantry

4th Middlesex Regiment

10th York and Lancaster Regiment

64th Brigade

15th DLI

9th Yorkshire Light Infantry

10th Yorkshire Light Infantry

1st East Yorkshire Regiment

110th Brigade (replaced the 63rd Brigade)

6th Leicestershire Regiment

7th Leicestershire Regiment

8th Leicestershire Regiment

9th Leicestershire Regiment

Divisional Pioneers: 14th Northumberland Fusiliers

23rd Division¹⁵

68th Brigade

12th DLI

13th DLI

10th Northumberland Fusiliers

¹⁴ The 110th Brigade replaced 63rd Brigade on 7 July which went to 37th Division.

¹⁵ The 24th Brigade returned to 8th Division in July/August and 70th Brigade re-joined 23rd Division.

11th Northumberland Fusiliers

69th Brigade

8th Yorkshire Regiment

9th Yorkshire Regiment

10th West Riding Regiment

11th West Yorkshire Regiment

70th Brigade

11th Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment

8th Yorkshire Light Infantry

8th York and Lancaster Regiment

9th York and Lancaster Regiment

Divisional Pioneers: 9th South Staffordshire Regiment

31st Division

92nd Brigade

10th East Yorkshire Regiment (1st Hull, Commercials)

11th East Yorkshire Regiment (2nd Hull, Tradesmen)

12th East Yorkshire Regiment (3rd Hull, Sportsmen)

13th East Yorkshire Regiment (4th Hull, T'Others)

93rd Brigade

18th DLI (1st County, Durham Pals)

15th West Yorkshire Regiment (1st Leeds Pals)

16th West Yorkshire Regiment (1st Bradford Pals)

18th West Yorkshire Regiment (2nd Bradford Pals)

94th Brigade

11th East Lancashire Regiment (Accrington Pals)

12th York and Lancaster Regiment (Sheffield City)

13th York and Lancaster Regiment (1st Barnsley Pals)

14th York and Lancaster Regiment (2nd Barnsley Pals)

Divisional Pioneers: 12th Yorkshire Light Infantry (Halifax Pals)

35th Division

104th Brigade

17th Lancashire Fusiliers (1st South-east Lancashire)

18th Lancashire Fusiliers (2nd South-east Lancashire)

20th Lancashire Fusiliers (4th Salford)

23rd Manchester Regiment (8th City)

105th Brigade

15th Cheshire Regiment (1st Birkenhead)

16th Cheshire Regiment (2nd Birkenhead)

15th Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment (Nottingham)

14th Gloucester Regiment (West of England)

106th Brigade

19th DLI (2nd County, Durham Bantams)

17th West Yorkshire Regiment (2nd Leeds Pals)

17th Lothian Regiment (Rosebery)

18th Highland Light Infantry (4th Glasgow)

Divisional Pioneers: 19th Northumberland Fusiliers (2nd Tyneside Pioneers)

41st Division

122nd Brigade

12th East Surrey Regiment (Bermondsey)

15th Hampshire Regiment (2nd Portsmouth)

11th Royal West Kent Regiment (Lewisham)

18th King's Royal Rifle Corps (Arts and Crafts)

123rd Brigade

20th DLI (Wearsiders)

23rd Middlesex Regiment (2nd Football)

11th Royal West Surrey Regiment (Lambeth)

10th Royal West Kent Regiment (Kent County)

124th Brigade

10th Royal West Surrey Regiment

26th City of London Regiment (Bankers)

32nd City of London Regiment (East Ham)

21st King's Royal Rifle Corps (Yeoman Rifles)

Divisional Pioneers: 19th Middlesex Regiment (2nd Public Works Pioneers)

50th Division

149th Brigade

4th Northumberland Fusiliers

5th Northumberland Fusiliers

6th Northumberland Fusiliers

7th Northumberland Fusiliers

150th Brigade

5th DLI

4th Yorkshire Regiment

5th Yorkshire Regiment

4th East Yorkshire Regiment

151st Brigade

6th DLI

8th DLI

9th DLI

5th Border Regiment (Cumberland)

Divisional Pioneers: 7th DLI¹⁶

¹⁶ When 7 DLI became 50th Division's Pioneer Battalion on 16 May 1915, its place in 151st Brigade was taken, firstly by 5th Battalion Loyal Regiment, and then, on 23 December 1915, by 5th Battalion Border Regiment.

1.4: Battles, Tactical Incidents and Subsidiary Attacks.

The Battles' Nomenclature Committee of 1921 designated the actions in the Great War into "Battles", "Tactical Incidents" and "Subsidiary Attacks". Not met with universal approbation, it had, by the very nature of the task, to leave out some actions in which individual battalions had fought with great gallantry and loss of life. Notably for the Durham Light Infantry, the omission of the advance to, and capture of, the Flers Line and the attack on the Butte de Warlencourt must have caused some anguish.

The DLI battalion involvement in those battles, tactical incidents and subsidiary attacks and which were credited to their divisions, were:

Battle of Albert 12th, 13th, 15th, 18th, 22nd

Capture of:

Montauban None
Mametz None
Fricourt None
Contalmaison 12th, 13th

Battle of Bazentin Ridge 12th, 13th, 15th

Capture of:

Longueval None Trones Wood None High Wood None

Battle of Delville Wood 10th, 19th

Battle of Pozieres Ridge 12th, 13th

Battle of Guillemont 11th

Battle of Ginchy None

Battle of Flers-Courcelette 2nd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th,

15th, 20th

Capture of Martinpuich None

Battle of Morval 2nd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 12th, 13th, 15th

Capture of:

Combles None Lesboeufs 2nd, 14th Gueudecourt 15th

Battle of Transloy Ridges 2nd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 20th

Capture of:

Eaucourt l'Abbaye None Le Sars 12th, 13th

Operations October/November 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th

Battle of the Ancre 18th (in Fifth Army)