

## CHAPTER 22

### ITALY

Among the reasons for the failure of the Cambrai venture to fulfil the high hopes which its earlier stages had raised must be included one which had special importance for The Queen's Own. Had larger reserves been available the advantages gained on the opening day might have been pressed home and relief afforded to the tired and weakened units which were still holding on November 30th the positions they had taken ten days earlier. Had that been possible the results finally achieved might not have fallen so short of the break through which had at first seemed on the point of being attained. Certainly it was by Divisions which were not exhausted and reduced by the earlier fighting that the great German attack on the Bourlon Wood front was held and so terribly punished. But the collapse of the Italians at Caporetto had introduced a most disquieting element into the strategical situation. It became necessary hastily to detach to Italy British and French divisions which might have accomplished great things had they been available to reinforce the Third Army on the 21st of November. Even before the great tank attack was delivered two Divisions were well on the way to Italy, and two others were starting, while a fifth was waiting entraining orders when the Germans made their counter-attack.

Nov – Dec  
1917

Among these Divisions were the Fifth and Forty-First, so that in all three battalions represented The Queen's Own in a country which neither the 1st nor the 2nd had ever visited in all their wanderings before 1914. The Forty-First were the first of the two to depart for Italy. Since the attack on the Tower Hamlets Ridge it had had an almost enjoyable

Oct-Nov  
1917  
10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>  
Battalions

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time in a quite unfamiliar part of the line, the coastal sector East of Dunkirk. The 11<sup>th</sup> reckoned their fortnight in Divisional reserve at La Panne the best time they had had in France. Sea-bathing, football, more leave than had yet been possible, mingled with a little training, formed indeed a pleasant change from the horrors and hardships of the Salient; and except for the unpleasant frequency of night-bombing by German aeroplanes and occasional shelling by high velocity guns the sector was distinctly peaceful.

Oct-Nov  
1917  
10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>  
Battalions

The 10th Battalion had arrived at Bray Dunes over 850 strong, and during its stay there substantial drafts had brought it well up to strength. Colonel Beattie was now in command with Captain Waydelin as Adjutant. Its stay in the coastal sector was quite without incident, and early in November it moved to Teteghem, where it was training for open warfare when orders to entrain for Italy reached it. The 11th had come out of the Salient very much depleted. In Colonel Corfe's absence Major Beadle was commanding, Captain Jiminez second-in-command and Captain R. Kerr Adjutant, while with Captains Lindsay, Rooney, Preston and H. G. Rogers as company commanders, competent and experienced officers were available to superintend the reconstruction of the battalion and the training of drafts. These last were none too plentiful, and the battalion was still 200 under strength when it entrained for Italy on 13th November. It had been about to take over the front line when the orders were received to be ready to proceed to another front; the wildest rumours were immediately current, Mesopotamia, India, Ireland and Egypt, all figured in turn as the undoubted

destination of the battalion, though cynics were confident that the next place in which the 11th would find itself would be the familiar but little desired Ypres Salient.

The journey to Italy was most interesting, novelty compensating for its duration and the impossibility of

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leaving the train for long. Halts were frequent but uncertain in duration—as often as not between instead of at stations—and the four days and a half spent on the train would have been irksome but for the enthusiastic welcome which the troops received all along the Riviera, the inhabitants turning out with presents of fruit, tobacco, flowers and food. The concentration area allotted to the Division was around Mantua, the 10th detraining at Isola della Scala, the 11th at Asola; but directly detraining had been completed the Division had to start forthwith for the Piave, on which river the defeated Italians were rallying. The plan was to move first to the line Montegaldella-Vicenza, which was to be the line of deployment from which a further advance might be made. It was an open question whether the Italians would maintain the Piave line, and such French and British troops as had reached Italy had to hasten to the critical point. Thus the 10th and 11th had to start on their 100 miles' march practically straight from a five days' train journey—no good preparation for strenuous marching. But the men answered well to the calls upon them, and the 11th distinguished themselves by having fewer men failing out than any other battalion in the Division. The difference of the scenery, with the mountains getting nearer and nearer, and vineyards and maize fields instead of the uninteresting lands of Northern France and Belgium, helped to get the men along; and if maps proved inaccurate and billets often uncomfortable, the plentifulness and cheapness of the wine and fruit were sufficient compensation, and it was great to have exchanged the damp and mud and fogs of Flanders for the sun and brightness of Italy.

November 1917  
10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>  
Battalions

November 22nd saw the Adige crossed at Oppano by the 10th, at Albaredo by the 11th, and three days later the Brenta also was passed. Two days' rest followed and then another three days' marching took the Division across the 40 miles between Brenta and Piave

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and to the foot of the Montello, a ridge which rose somewhat abruptly out of the low ground and was of the greatest tactical importance in the Piave line. This position was to be taken over on the following day from the Italians.

February 1918  
10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>  
Battalions

This march across Lombardy had been a memorable experience for the 10th and 11th, as well as no small test of march discipline and endurance. The men were extremely heavily laden, carrying 80 or 90 lb. apiece, and to have accomplished it with but few stragglers or sick was a creditable performance. It had also considerable military value; for though even before the arrival of the British and French contingents the Austro-German advance had been stopped, the knowledge that these reinforcements were hurrying forward unquestionably contributed to encourage the Italians to stand on the Piave. Had they abandoned that line it would have been hard to keep the Austrians out of Venice, and the loss of that city must have reacted most unfavourably on the political situation in Italy and might have had far-reaching consequences. The British Divisions who made that march may therefore claim to have rendered thereby an effective service

to the Allied cause, even if after arriving at the Piave they were to see scarcely any fighting worth the name. The Australians had the advantage of position and better facilities for observation, so that movement in the front line had to be avoided; but they were unenterprising, and the Piave complicated patrolling and reduced the opportunities of snipers and machine-gunners. Neither the 10th or 11th attempted any serious raid or had to repel a hostile attack. A patrol across the Piave on February 19th led to a brush with the enemy in which Captain Hindle, of the 10th, distinguished himself, extricating his party from a nasty position by his coolness and determination, and bringing back across the river 2nd Lieut. Nisbitt who had been badly wounded. Ptes. Waite and Stone helped greatly in this and

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received the M.M. A day later 2nd Lieuts. Weston and Anderson led another patrol across, but had to retire on encountering the enemy in force, effecting their withdrawal without casualties.

Feb 1918

The 1st Battalion did not leave for Italy till nearly a month after the 10th and 11th. It was kept waiting a fortnight for its entraining orders and did not get away till December 12th, when a six days' train journey through Macon, Marseilles and Nice brought it to its detraining station at Fontivilla on the 17th. Then it marched to Bolzenella where it remained until the middle of January. The rest and the change of scenery and climate were very welcome to the battalion, and though it did not receive as large drafts as were needed, over a dozen officers joined or rejoined, among them Lieut. H. S. Doe, who had come out with the battalion as R.S.M. in 1914, and Captain Sutherland, who was awarded the M.C. in the New Year's Honours' Lists, as was also 2nd Lieut. Monypenny.

Dec 1917 –  
Jan 1918  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

On January 22nd the battalion's rest came to an end, and it set out for the Piave by march-route. Three days' marching brought it to Arcade, not far from the left bank of that river, and on the 29th it went into the front line again. This consisted of trenches running down to the river bank where they expanded into T-shaped posts, communication being maintained by a good lateral trench some way back. The trenches required a great deal to make them habitable, more particularly in the matter of sanitation, but from the defensive point of view the line was satisfactory enough. The Piave bed was wide, Consisting of a number of small channels separated by little islands, the streams being as a rule shallow but rapid, and having the inconvenient habit of changing their channels almost nightly as the melting snow from the mountains swelled the river. The enemy's lines were three quarters of a mile distant, and during the 1st Battalion's stay on the Piave his infantry were extraordinarily inactive; they never

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ventured into No Man's Land and all the efforts of the battalion's patrols to secure a prisoner proved unavailing. Patrolling was energetically carried on, the difficulty of fording the streams having been surmounted by the construction of light bridges, for the most part consisting of iron, stakes and wire. This and the activity of the enemy's aircraft were the chief features of this time, nearly two months in all. About the middle of March the Division was relieved by Italians and withdrew to billets at Visnadello, whence it moved back by Fassalta to Villafranca, preparatory to returning to the French

Jan-April  
1918  
1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

front. Two large drafts had joined during March as well as a smaller one in February, and as casualties had been extremely low, under 20 for the whole period, it was quite a strong battalion which at last entrained on April 1st for its return "to the war."

The Forty-First Division had preceded the Fifth back to France as on the outward journey. It had been withdrawn from the front before the end of February, had a three days' march to its entraining area and then began its long train journey in the first week of March. By March 7th it was detraining round Doullens. Both 10th and 11th were fairly up to strength; their battle casualties had been insignificant, (1) though the wastage from sickness had been rather higher. Colonel Corfe had rejoined the 11th on February 11th and resumed command, while the New Year's Honours' List had brought M.C.'s to Major Jiminez and 2nd Lieut. R. O. Russell.

10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>  
Battalions

(1) The 11th had only 3 killed and 10 wounded