

Military Structures – A Background Note

The army or navy unit in which a man served is stated in his biography.

The following ranks are found among our Amersham servicemen:

Officers: sub-lieutenant; lieutenant; second lieutenant.

Other ranks: company sergeant major; sergeant; corporal; bombardier; lance corporal; guardsman; private; trooper; sapper; gunner; rifleman; driver; able seaman.

Our men served in many different units. Naturally, more served in the county infantry regiment – the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) – than in any other military formation. Some were in specialised formations or corps such as artillery and engineers.

Many of our Amersham men served in more than one unit. Transfers from one to another were made for many reasons, including promotions. Casualties were so numerous that some regiments and battalions virtually ceased to exist and survivors were transferred to other units. Some new battalions were created with men from battalions which were no longer large enough to continue as separate fighting forces.

A few of our men were regular soldiers or in the reserves, e.g. **Thomas George Irons** and **William John Slade** both joined the 1st Battalion OBLI in around 1909.

At the outbreak of the war the British Army was composed entirely of regular, volunteer soldiers: there were no conscripts as there were in the armies and reserves of most continental countries. The Territorial Force (TF) was composed largely of men who had served some years full-time in the army. The so-called 'First Line' units were men who had undertaken a commitment to serve abroad. In the 'Second Line' units no such commitment had been given; however, when in 1916 conscription was brought in by law, all men were deemed to have agreed to serve outside the UK. The TF was mobilised immediately when war broke out.

Infantry regiments usually had two battalions, each of about 1000 men, plus one or more part-time Territorial Force or reserve battalions. Often, one of the two regular battalions was abroad and the other at home. **William John Slade** was in India with the 1st Battalion OBLI in the years immediately before the war. The 2nd Battalion of the OBLI was at home and left for France at the end of August 1914, the month the war started. At the same time, **William Lawrence** went with the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion of the OBLI. He was finally moved to the 6th Battalion.

During the war, regiments expanded by the creation of new battalions. **Mervyn William Allen** enlisted in the 28th Battalion of the London Regiment (Artists Rifles). When he was commissioned he transferred to the 7th Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment, which by the end of the war had 19 battalions, of which eight were on active service.

An infantry battalion of about 1000 men was usually divided into four companies (Coys), each with four platoons, of about fifty men. A battalion was under the command of a lieutenant colonel and companies were commanded by majors or captains. The senior non-commissioned officer (NCO) in a company was the company sergeant major. Platoons were commanded by lieutenants or second lieutenants, assisted by NCOs: sergeants, corporals and lance corporals. In some formations other than the infantry NCOs had different titles, for example bombardier in the artillery, the equivalent of a corporal. As a result of casualties, command often passed temporarily to soldiers of lower ranks.

By 1918 the British Expeditionary Force in France, under Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, had expanded so that it consisted of five armies. Three or four corps made up an army; and each corps

contained three or more divisions. The division, containing 20,000 men, had three or four brigades each with about 5,000 men. Regiments and battalions together with their supporting arms were part of a brigade or a division. **Sidney Wilkins** was a member of the 4th Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment, in the 88th Brigade, which was part of the 29th Division. **Arthur Thomas Crawford Cree** was in the 7th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry, in the 151st Infantry Brigade of the 50th (Northumberland) Division, a formation of the Territorial Force. **William George Hoare** was in 'D' Company of the 1st Battalion of the Honourable Artillery, part of the 7th Infantry Brigade in the 3rd Division.

During the war 259 infantry brigades were raised by the Army, two by the Royal Navy and one by the Royal Marines.

When the war began there were generally four infantry battalions in a brigade but by 1918 the number was reduced to three. In the light of requirements of battle at any particular time, corps, divisions, brigades, regiments and other units, including individual battalions in a regiment, could be moved and placed under the command of a different, higher unit.

The 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, originally named the Royal Naval Division, which fought as an army division, was formed at the outbreak of war from Royal Navy and Royal Marine reservists and volunteers who were not needed for service at sea. The various battalions were named after famous British navy commanders. **Bertram Alfred Bizzell** served in both the Drake and Benbow battalions.

The British had five armies in France and Flanders during the war, and all these came under the command of General Headquarters (GHQ). Other GHQs existed in the other theatres of war. All these were under the command of the War Office.