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**Martin Deacon (ed) *The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bedfords In France And Flanders, 1914 – 1918*, the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society and The Boydell Press. £25 (367 pages).**

At first glance the contents of this book look dull: the war diary of a battalion which fought throughout the war on the Western Front. However, there is much beneath the surface which, while not making this an enthralling read, provides considerable material of interest to World War I buffs.

In August 1914 2<sup>nd</sup> Bedfords were in South Africa, where they had been since the Boer War, and they reached France in October, just in time to fight at Ypres as part of 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 7<sup>th</sup> Division. By the end of the month they had been reduced to 4 officers and 350 men, a graphic example of how bitterly fought that battle was, and an indication of how heavy the casualties of the BEF were in that initial part of the campaign. Reinforced and replenished 2<sup>nd</sup> Bedfords remained on the Western Front for the remainder of the war, fighting at Festubert, Loos, the Somme and 3<sup>rd</sup> Ypres.

In March 1918 it was part of Gough's Fifth Army, which bore the brunt of the German offensive and was driven back 35 miles, losing 569 officers and men in ten days. All this is recorded in bald factual detail, the dead officers being recorded by name, the other ranks just in totals. Pulled out of the line they were sent north to Ypres, where they were attacked again, and were so reduced in numbers that they were amalgamated with 2<sup>nd</sup> Wiltshires. This composite battalion was again hammered by the Germans suffering 107 killed, wounded and missing on 27<sup>th</sup> April, and a further 177 on 8<sup>th</sup> May. They amalgamated for a second time in late May, when they joined up with the 7<sup>th</sup> Bedfords and moved to 18<sup>th</sup> Division.

Throughout the British offensive of the Hundred Days 2<sup>nd</sup> Bedfords took their share of the action fighting across the old battlefields of the Somme and at Le Cateau. Their last attack was on 4<sup>th</sup> November at Preux Au Bois, laconically noted as "*entirely successful*".

More importantly than this war diary are the appendices which not only include a number of battlefield tours, but also selected operational orders. Almost all of these are selected from 1915 and among these are, for example, 7 Division instructions of June 1915 on "The Proper Distribution of Troops in Defence", 2 Bedford's internal memo "Notes on Crater Fighting" of late 1915, and "A Memorandum to Commanding Officers by the Field Marshal Commanding-in-Chief, Sir John French" of 13<sup>th</sup> November 1915 which includes the immortal sentence "*Grumbling and uninformed criticism must be eliminated.*" I was always taught that the time to start worrying was when one's riflemen stopped grumbling! More than anything these appendices give us a feeling for what it was like for this battalion on the Western Front.

Anybody interested in The Bedfordshire Regiment will find the whole book enthralling. For those of us with more than a passing interest in World War I it provides a graphic insight into the daily life of a battalion from a formal point of view. For a book with what might seem a limited appeal the price is remarkably moderate.

**Robin Brodhurst**