



**Paul McCue *The Wandsworth and Battersea Battalions in the Great War*. Pen and Sword, 2010. Price £25. ISBN 1-8488-4194-9**

After the great wave of volunteering in the autumn of 1914 slowed down, the continuing manpower requirements of the British Army saw a new appeal for recruits go out in April 1915. Using the public outrage at the German use of gas in April, the War Office made a direct appeal to the mayors of London boroughs to raise new units – either an infantry battalion or a brigade of artillery – to be found entirely at the public expense and then handed over to the War Office.

The neighbouring boroughs of Wandsworth and Battersea each raised a local battalion – 13<sup>th</sup> East Surreys and 10<sup>th</sup> Queen's (Royal West Surreys) respectively. Paul McCue, not a specialist historian of the War, has done a very good job indeed of describing the social history of the two boroughs, the mechanics of raising a new battalion of volunteers, and comparing and contrasting the fate of these two units raised in the same part of south-west London. The first call was for 36 officers and 1,314 men, showing that they were recruiting a 'battle reserve' to form a battalion depot from the very outset. The harsh lesson of casualties on the Western Front was absorbed quickly enough.

The Wandsworths were assigned to 118<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 39<sup>th</sup> Division only to find their whole brigade declared '*in need of further training*' and left behind when the division goes to France. They finally join the Anglo-Scottish 120<sup>th</sup> Brigade of 40<sup>th</sup> Division, going to France in June 1916. They start trench life near Loos under the tutelage of 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division and only come down to the Somme in November, after the battle had been 'shut down' for the winter. They had two stiff fights in 1917, at Arras in April and Cambrai in November, managing to miss all involvement in Third Ypres.

After 'avoiding' two of the bloodiest battles of the war, it is almost ironic that the Wandsworths should survive the wave of disbandments in early 1918 – transferring to Crozier's 119<sup>th</sup> Brigade in the same division – only to be severely hammered in the German March offensive and to be effectively annihilated in the Lys offensive of April. They had the misfortune to be on the immediate left of the Portuguese on 9<sup>th</sup> April, were promptly surrounded and obliged to surrender *en masse*. (77 men killed, 81 wounded, 388 made prisoner of war).

What remained of the battalion was sent back to England, and was rebuilt only to have half the 800 or so men declared unfit for overseas service – an indication of the parlous state of British manpower reserves in 1918. In a final indignity they were disbanded on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1918 – just eight days short of seeing it through to the end and without returning to France.

The Battersea boys, recruited by offers of "*Free tickets to Berlin via Boulogne or Havre to Adventurous Young Men*", found themselves in 124<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 41<sup>st</sup> Division (what I always call the London Pals division). They were in France by May 1916, trench raiding in July and part of the great attack at Flers in September, where they were famously observed from the air co-operating with the new Heavy Branch, Machine Gun Corps – the tanks. At Messines they have a good day on 7<sup>th</sup> June, but have a torrid time on the Menin Road Ridge on 20<sup>th</sup>



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September. It was their brigadier, personally lugging a Lewis gun, who comes forward and encourages the men to go on and achieve their second line objective.

After a short interlude in Italy (thus avoiding the disbandments) they return to the Western Front in March – a clear indication we were expecting the German offensive at any time. They spend the rest of the war in and around the Ypres salient, taking part in the great offensive of 28<sup>th</sup> September. Their success is recognised by their joining BAOR until demobilisation in March 1920.

**John Lee**