

## The 9<sup>th</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column By Liz Walton

The 9<sup>th</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column (DAC) was one of the longest serving volunteer units in France and Flanders, spending nearly four years on active service. Raised in Guernsey in March, 1915, it consisted originally of officers and men of the Royal Guernsey Artillery and Engineers plus a considerable number from the Royal Alderney Artillery and Engineers Militia, totalling about 400 in all. They volunteered at the same time as the infantrymen who formed Guernsey's contribution to the two Irish Battalions. The original idea was that they would form a Heavy Artillery Battery, but the War Office refused the offer (as they refused the offer of an Infantry Battalion at that stage) so instead they were formed into the 9<sup>th</sup> DAC, Royal Field Artillery (RFA). Attestation papers refer to the unit as the Guernsey Artillery Contingent, 9<sup>th</sup> DAC.

The men of the 9<sup>th</sup> DAC went first to Scotland for training, then to Salisbury Plain, before moving to Bordon in Hampshire. In May, 1915 they left for France as part of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division which had been formed in late 1914 as part of Kitchener's New Army. *La Gazette de Guernesey*, the island's official newspaper (which was published in French) carried a photograph of the Officers who went with this first group of trainees. They were Lieutenant-Colonel HdeL Walters, Captains WR Powell and T Perry, Lieutenant RC Sowell, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants CJ Braye and RM Nicholls, all from Guernsey, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants HF Ozanne and W Bainbrigg from Alderney.



They did well at their training camps. A report in the *Guernsey Weekly Press* of the 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1916 stated that:

*News has been received by Colonel St Leger-Wood, D.S.O, Acting Lieutenant-Governor, from Major Barlow, RFA, commanding the 45<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battery in which are the following passages which will be read with pride by islanders:*

*"We sent off yesterday direct to the 9<sup>th</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column 24 men who were the first batch of the men you sent here a short time ago. They behaved excellently while here, were very keen and picked up their gunnery at 4.5 [inch] Howitzers in a remarkably short time – 7 weeks! They were trained by one of my men, Mr E McCulley who is connected with the Islands, and both he and I would like to have some more like them if you have any more of the same sort who want to become Field Gunners."*

More local men did join at a later date and followed this first contingent to France and Belgium.

The horse-drawn RFA was responsible for the medium calibre guns and Howitzers deployed close to the front line. All ammunition columns were part of the RFA and the men in the column were ranked as Gunners, Drivers or Bombardiers. The RFA was organised into Brigades, which were under the command of Divisions or higher formations. DACs had the dangerous role of delivering ammunition to the front line troops, and seeing that they were always fully supplied with what they needed. They also had to collect the valuable empty brass cartridge cases plus any unused ammunition from where they had fallen after an Artillery unit had moved on. They were often in considerable danger when they moved ammunition forward to Brigade dumps and to the men fighting in the front line. The Officers and men of the DACs didn't only work with their own Divisions but could be called on to supply any unit during an action. They were also called upon to replace casualties in the units they were supplying as were their horses, wagons and supplies. However as the Column suffered casualties, replacements came increasingly from outside the Bailiwick so by the end of the war there were some members of the 9<sup>th</sup> DAC with no link to the Channel Islands.

Although they were not front line troops in the usual sense, several of the contingent were killed in action or died of wounds in the course of the war. However of the 14 men of the 9<sup>th</sup> DAC who died as a direct result of enemy action (as listed by Eddie Parks in Appendix E of *Diex Aix*), only two were serving with the Column at the time of their death. They were Gunner Henry Rupert Rabey, who died of wounds on the 9<sup>th</sup> November, 1916, aged 30 and who is buried at Bécourt Military Cemetery on the Somme and Gunner Thomas Charles Waterman who was killed in action, aged 33, on the 21st June, 1916 and is buried at Chipilly Communal Cemetery Extension, near Albert also on the Somme.

Many men transferred to other units, several serving with Trench Mortar (TM) Batteries. An Artillery battery is basically an organised unit of guns or mortars. TM Batteries were manned by members of the Brigade who undertook special training in the use of these weapons. By mid-1916 three main types of mortar were in use; the 3-inch Stokes Mortar ('light'), the 2-inch Medium Mortar (superseded in 1917 by the 6-inch Newton Mortar), and the 9.45-inch Heavy Mortar. The chief advantages that mortars have are flexibility, mobility and the fact that they are able to fire from the protection of a trench. They can be transported over any terrain and need little logistical support. Heavy mortars are typically between 120 mm and 300 mm calibre and are usually towed or vehicle-mounted but are still easier to transport than Howitzers or conventional field guns. The British Army only

developed their use later in the war, but by March 1916, most Divisions had three Medium Batteries, designated X, Y and Z. For example, in the 24th Division they would be X.24, Y.24 and Z.24. There was also a Heavy Battery, designated V, such as V.24. The Light Batteries took their number from the Brigade, so for example 123<sup>rd</sup> Brigade in the 41<sup>st</sup> Division included the 123<sup>rd</sup> TM Battery. Batteries designated with other letters (e.g. A, B, C) were straight artillery batteries, not specifically trench mortar ones.

Sergeant Thomas de la Mare went over with the first contingent and was killed in action on the 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1915, only three days after he was promoted to Sergeant and just over six months after he had arrived in France. The son of Thomas and Nancy de la Mare, of Les Messuriers in the Forest Thomas was a former Elizabeth College student. At the time of his death he was serving with C Battery, 53<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, RFA. This was a Howitzer Brigade which formed part of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division. There was a major phosgene gas attack to the North East of Ypres on the date of his death and he may have been caught up in this as he is buried at Ypres Reservoir Cemetery in Belgium.

Gunner Clifford Philip Baker, son of Phillip and Edith Baker, of St Martin's was killed in action at the age of 23 on the 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1916. He had gone to France with the first contingent of 9<sup>th</sup> DAC, but quickly transferred to 53<sup>rd</sup> DAC and at the time of his death was serving with B Battery, 51<sup>st</sup> Brigade, RFA. He is buried at Warlencourt British Cemetery in the Pas de Calais region of France. During the final stages of the Battle of the Somme, the Butte de Warlencourt was the subject of a number of costly and unsuccessful attacks by the British Fourth Army. It was eventually captured by the British after the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line in February, 1917. Gunner James Martin Keyho transferred to C Battery, 51<sup>st</sup> Brigade from 9<sup>th</sup> DAC. He was killed in action aged 20 less than a week after Gunner Baker, on the 20<sup>th</sup> November, 1916. He has no known grave but is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. This bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before the 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1918 and have no known grave.

Many were involved in the fierce fighting in the Arras region in the spring of 1917. Gunner Alfred Bichard was in the first contingent and also ended up in 51<sup>st</sup> Brigade. He first transferred to 52<sup>nd</sup> Brigade in June, 1916 and then to D Battery, 51<sup>st</sup> Brigade. The son of Mr and Mrs James Bichard, of Les Gigands, St Sampson's, he was killed in action age 20 on the 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1917 in the Arras region and is buried at Athies Communal Cemetery Extension in the Pas de Calais, France. Gunner Stanley Slade Green, son of William and Annie Green of Fountain Street, St Peter Port and husband of Lily Maud Green (née Richard), of 11, St Clement's Road went to France with the second contingent of 9<sup>th</sup> DAC which left the island in June, 1916. He was serving with D Battery, 51<sup>st</sup> Brigade, the same unit as Gunner Bichard, when he was wounded. He died of wounds on the 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1917, a few days after Gunner Bichard was killed in action and is buried in St Nicolas British Cemetery on the outskirts of Arras. Bombardier Wilfred Hilary Nicolle aged 20 of C Battery, 50<sup>th</sup> Brigade, RFA was killed on the 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1917 and is buried in Athies Communal Cemetery Extension also near Arras. All of their units were part of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division and were involved in the battle of the Scarpe in April, 1917.

Gunner John Henry Luxon, aged 23 who started with 9<sup>th</sup> DAC but transferred to a Heavy Mortar Battery, was killed in action on the 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1917. He has no known grave but is commemorated on the Arras Memorial. Gunner James Bihet, son of Pierre and Marie Bihet of La Carrière, Vale was a First Contingent man who transferred to 50<sup>th</sup> DAC in August, 1915 but was serving with the 9<sup>th</sup> TM Battery when he was wounded. He died of those wounds on the 26<sup>th</sup> May, 1917, aged 22 and is buried at Aubigny Communal

Cemetery Extension near Arras, a cemetery which was used by several Casualty Clearing Stations. Gunner Wilfred James Tostevin originally of the 9<sup>th</sup> DAC but later serving with D Battery, 79<sup>th</sup> Brigade, RFA died of wounds a few days later on the 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1917 and is buried at Duisans Military Cemetery also near Arras.

Two other men from 9<sup>th</sup> DAC died as a result of enemy action. One was Gunner Arthur Hammond, son of William and Elizabeth Hammond, of High St, Alderney who died of wounds aged 21 on the 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1917 and is buried at Buff's Road Cemetery near Ypres. He was serving with D Battery, 155<sup>th</sup> Brigade, RFA at the time of his death. Gunner Charles Thomas Wallbridge of D Battery, 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade, RFA was killed in action age 31 on the 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1917 and has no known grave but is commemorated on the Menin Gate, Ypres.

Of those who survived, at least one was awarded a Military Medal (MM). Acting Battery Sergeant Major (A/BSM) Percy de Carteret was in the first contingent to leave the island. He joined up at the age of 20 as a Gunner on the 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1915, and was almost immediately promoted to Bombardier. Six months later he became a Corporal and eventually by 1919 had reached the rank of A/BSM. He received a gunshot wound on the 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1916 and was hospitalised in Rouen then Southampton. He had been awarded the MM (Gazetted 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1916) and according to his service records the medal travelled some distance going to Southampton but arriving after he was back at the Front so it had to be sent on again, this time to Hemel Hempstead when it was kept in the records department. It was eventually received by his mother back in Guernsey in 1920! He was shot in the head, hand and leg on the 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1917, this time being hospitalised at Wimereux then London. In the meantime on the 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1919 when he could have been demobilised, he volunteered to stay on with the Army of Occupation in Alexandria, working in Prisoner of War camps there then in France. He finally came home in May 1920. The men who survived and remained with the 9<sup>th</sup> DAC were to be the longest serving local unit, serving on the Western Front for almost four years before returning to Guernsey for demobilisation in 1919. At the time of the Armistice they were resting in billets away from the front line.

Eddie Parks devotes Chapter 4 and Appendix E of *Diex Aix* to the 9<sup>th</sup> DAC but as more primary source material has become available on the internet it is now possible to fill in more detail and clarify some anomalies. I am in the process of updating this material, adding service numbers from the "burnt papers" archive, and also including details of men wounded in action, and any medals won. This should be available early next year.

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