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## A Baker at War - Part 1 by Norfolk Adult Education Service

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This story was submitted to the People's War site by Ann Redgrave of Norfolk Adult Education's reminiscence team on behalf of Wesley Piercy and has been added to the site with his permission. The author fully understands the site's terms and conditions.

### A Baker at War (Part 1)

In 1938 it looked highly probable that we would be involved in a European war in the not too distant future. Many of my age group were joining the Territorial Army but my hours of work, which included evening work several times a week, meant that it would be difficult for me to attend parades if I had joined. When I saw a leaflet giving details of the Supplementary Reserve which tradesmen could join and which did not involve any training, I decided to apply to join. In return for a small quarterly payment we undertook to be available to be called into the regular army in the event of an emergency, in our own trade. In due course I was called to Britannia Barracks in Norwich for a medical and a trade test, both of which I passed. After this we were sworn in by the adjutant of the barracks, Lieutenant Turner-Cain, and were then taken in front of the Commanding Officer Lt. Colonel Winter, who gave us a few kind words. We were now soldiers of the Royal Army Service Corps Supplementary Reserve, having had no experience of soldiering!

In 1939 I was working for a baker in Wells-next-the-Sea. It was a lovely summer and with lots of visitors in the town we were kept very busy. This ended for me when it was announced on the wireless that all reservists were to report to their depots immediately. This was on the last day of August. Next day I took a train and made my way to Buller Barracks, Aldershot, the depot of the RASC. I had never been to London before, so when I reached Liverpool Street and found that to get the tube to Waterloo I had to go to Trafalgar Square I had no idea how to get there. However, I eventually got there, and at Waterloo boarded a train to Aldershot. This was crowded with homeward bound commuters and army reservists heading for Aldershot.

At Aldershot Station, guides were waiting to take the RASC reservists to Buller Barracks. People of other Corps had lorries to take them to their destinations but the RASC had to walk. On arrival we were sent for a meal in the mess. While we were eating the Orderly officer came round asking "Any complaints?". One of the reservists made some trivial complaint and he got it changed. The regulars disapproved of this and told us that it was not the done thing to complain — that was our first lesson in military etiquette.

After the meal we went to the stores where we were issued with one blanket, for which we signed. We were then sent to various barrack blocks where we were to spend the night. All the beds were occupied by regulars so we had to sleep on the floor. The regulars told us that there were some biscuits in the next room that we could have; I only knew biscuits as something to eat but these turned out to be mattresses. These were three to a bed, but there were only two each so we had to manage with those.

Next morning we found a large marquee erected to eat in, the mess not being big enough to hold all the extra people. For breakfast there was porridge and boiled



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eggs. The eggs were boiled in a soya stove, the army standby for field cookery, dating back to the Crimea. These held some hundreds of eggs so naturally the first ones in were as hard as stone and the last ones in, which of course were first out, were almost raw. What the porridge was like is best left to the imagination.

After breakfast we went through the process of documentation and then to the MO where we were inoculated against Tetanus and Typhoid and vaccinated against smallpox. Next we proceeded to the mobilisation stores, where we had our uniforms and equipment, including a rifle, thrown at us. All this stuff had been in store since 1918, waiting for the next war. The uniform was the old service dress and the webbing was of pre-1914 pattern. We then had to change into our uniforms and pack up our civilian clothes to send home.

When I went to my bed space that night I found that my one blanket had gone. Wondering what to do I decided to go back to the stores where it had come from the night before, thinking that there would be some explaining to be done, but they just flung another blanket at me. I signed for it and there were no questions asked. Another lesson on army life.

The next morning (Sunday) I found that my blanket had been returned, so now I had two. A bit later we were moved to another barrack block where we all had beds. On my bed were two blankets so now I had four. At eleven o'clock that morning we heard the Prime Minister's speech announcing that we were at war with Germany. Up until that point there had still been a chance that it might not come to war, but now we all realised that it was real. As soon as Mr Chamberlain finished the air raid siren sounded and we went down to the ground floor and waited for the bombs to drop. After a few minutes the All Clear went. It had been a false alarm.

After this there was nothing to do but hang around and wait. We were told to stay in the barrack room until our names were called. This went on all day Sunday and Monday. A Corporal would come into the room from time to time and call out a number of names. Those whose names were called were posted to their units. On Tuesday morning my name was called. I was posted with two others, Bill Stavely, another supplementary reservist, from Worksop, and Noman "Tich" Wilson, a regular reservist from Sheffield, to No.1 Field Bakery at Clayton Barracks which was just up the road from where we were. We walked there. I only took one blanket with me but regretted this later.

At Clayton Barracks we were in a more modern block, with a bathroom and a sitting room. Two Field Bakeries were being formed at Clayton. Each had two officers, a regular Captain and a supplementary reserve Lieutenant, and about 350 other ranks. The most important man in the field bakery was not the commanding officer but the master baker. He held the rank of Staff Sergeant Major. The officers knew nothing about the baking trade but were mainly there for disciplinary purposes. Under the master baker was a headquarters section, concerned with administration, and three bakery sections, each under a Staff Quartermaster Sergeant. These were divided into four sub-sections, of which three were under a Sergeant and one under a Corporal. I, with my two companions was put into No.1 sub-section of No.3 section.

We stayed here for a week, doing nothing much apart from parading in full marching order every morning. What the object of this was I could never understand. On the sixth day we were paid the sum of 5s. A man named Private Snooks threw his money back at the officer saying it was no good to him. He was promptly marched away to the guardroom. They explained to us then that where we were going we could not spend English money and the 5s was just to be going on with. The next morning we marched off to Farnborough Station with the Corps band leading us. As the train left the station they played "Smile when you say Goodbye". The train took us to Southampton where we boarded a ship which sailed as far as Portsea and then stopped until dusk before getting underway again. We woke up the next morning with the ship tied up in Cherbourg. We were able to have a look around but had to be back at the station by six o'clock where we boarded a train which travelled all that night, the next day and most of the night after. We must have been going round in circles because during the day we passed through a station called Redon, which is exactly where we were when we finally got off the next night. We had got on the train on the thirteenth of September and got off it on the fifteenth. Sitting on those hard wooden seats on the train all that time was no joke.

The Major of Redon was waiting on the platform to greet us. He had laid on some hot coffee, which was good apart from the fact there was no sugar or milk. We were then

conducted to our billets — in the case of my section, this was a building which had once been the town gaol. Here there was fresh straw on the floors which we were to sleep on. Not quite as good as our beds in Clayton Barracks, and with only one blanket I began to regret leaving three behind at Aldershot. I did not get to sleep on the straw that first night as I was put on guard. The guard commander was an old corporal named Busty Goldsmith. He sat all night drinking cider from a barrel. We did not stand on sentry or anything like that. With a high wall round the place and a massive door with huge bars, we did not see any need. Busty Goldsmith was a bit of a character. He had been a regular soldier and now in his late thirties was a class D reservist who would have finished his reserve service in a few months time and escaped the call up. He was rather contemptuous of us supplementary reservists — we were not real soldiers in his eyes, and he was probably right about that.

The next day we were free to do as we liked so Bill Stavely, Tich Wilson and I had a walk out into the country. There were peaches and pears growing on the sides of the roads. We discovered later that we were in Brittany. Along the way we met a man with a wooden leg who invited us into his cottage and offered us wine. He had a great admiration for the English who he had fought alongside in the last war, hence the warm welcome. Later we came to a village where we were surrounded by schoolchildren. Tich had a mouth organ on which he was playing Ravel's Bolero but they wanted him to play Horsey Horsey, which was not in his repertoire.

The following day we had to start work. A disused glass factory had been allocated for our use as a bakery. It was full of machinery so we set to work with sledge hammers to smash it to pieces. After a week or two of machine breaking the powers that be decided that we were to transfer our section of No.1 Field Bakery to No.2 Field Bakery, and to transfer a section of No.2 to No. 1 in our place. The reason was that No.2 Field Bakery had a large number of militia men amongst them where as No. 1 had none. The militia were those twenty year olds who were called up for six months just before the war, sometimes called Belisha's Babes, after the war minister. This meant our taking another trip on French railways in rather overcrowded carriages. We had rations with us on the journey and when we had a stop at midday we were issued with a pack of army biscuits each and a tin of bully beef between two. Tea was brewed with hot water from the engine, which tasted a bit smoky but was wet and warm.

We joined No.2 at a place called Formerie and erected bell tents for ourselves and marquees to work in. The ovens had to be set up outside. Both sub-sections had two marquees — one contained the mixing troughs and the other was a bread store. The tents and marquees were white and were conspicuous from the air. We therefore had to smear them with mud. When all this was done, all was ready to start baking. The night shift was detailed, flour was tipped into the troughs, but before we started everything was cancelled and we had to pack up as we were on the move again.

It might be appropriate at this point to say something about the equipment we used. Our ovens were made by Baker-Perkins of Peterborough. They each held 144 2lb loaves; each sub-section had four ovens, making sixteen to a section — forty-eight ovens in all. Ach oven took at least six batches a day so the whole battery produced 41472 loaves per day, ration for about eighty thousand men. By the time of Dunkirk there were four bakeries in France turning out this amount of bread seven days a week. The ovens had to be manhandled on and off trains and lorries with levers and rollers, and it was not until near the end of the war that we had ovens on wheels. All our doughs were made by hand until near the end of the war. Like our personal kit, the ovens were relics left over from 1914-18.

You may wonder how the British Expeditionary Force was fed while we were still getting prepared. In September there were comparatively few British troops in France and the supply arrangements had not yet been organised, so if we had started work then there would have been no way of distributing the bread. In the meantime most supplies were purchased locally. At Redon this was done with the assistance of the mayor using an interpreter. This went well until it was discovered that he and the mayor were working a racket whereby they each got a rake off on all purchases made. Another interpreter was found, whose schoolboy French was no more intelligible to the French than their accents were to him. The bread we were issued was French army bread, rather hard and dark. When on the move we had bully (corned beef) and army biscuits.

Our next destination was Doullens in the Somme Departement, not far from the battlefields of 1914-18. Here we set up our marquees once again, wondering whether

this time we should really start work. Our section was billeted in a workshop belonging to a Monsieur Thuillier, who I think was a plumber. Here we slept on a concrete floor without any sort of mattress. The only washing facility was one cold water tap in the yard and the latrines were a few holes in the ground, surrounded by a piece of Hessian. The rest of the men were in a disused brewery, where conditions were much the same. The officers and warrant officers made themselves comfortable and did not seem to care about the welfare of their men.

Before we started baking the militia men were sorted out so that there were some in each section. At twenty-two I had been the youngest in my section but now there were four or five twenty year olds with us. When the war broke out these militia men had been in other units, mainly artillery, but when the army discovered that it was short of bakers they had been asked to transfer.

Our bakery was set up on a grassy square in the town and now we actually started baking. It went quite well at first, the weather was good and there were no particular problems. One day a party of newspaper men, photographers and a film crew arrived and our sub-section was the one they chose to photograph and film. A photograph of us at work appeared in the magazine "Illustrated" and we were seen on the cinema screen.

My story continues in a separate People's War site entry entitled "A Baker at War — Part 2".

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