

The Chorley Pals



War Memorials Trust

Overview

The 'Chorley Pals' were one of the companies of soldiers that made up part of the well-known 'Accrington Pals' battalion. Like many similar companies and battalions that formed from local recruits at the start of World War I, the Chorleys retained their regional character throughout the early years of the war. As the name suggests, the Pals were men from Chorley, a northern cotton town that had developed during the Industrial Revolution. The Pals were in the front line at the Somme on 1st July 1916 and suffered heavy losses. This information sheet tells the specific story of their formation and service and can be used with other resources to examine the local impact of the Battle of the Somme.

Formation of the Pals

The creation of the Pals Battalions is explained in more detail in WMT's 'Pals Battalions' information sheet. The idea of them was devised as a way of encouraging more men to enlist in the army – men from the same town, family, workplace could join up together and fight together in the same battalion. The Chorley Pals were no exception. Out of a total population of 55,000 in 1914, the town aimed to recruit 1000 local men. Eventually, an estimated 4000 men from Chorley served during World War I, with 221 of these being in the original Chorley Pals Company.

The Chorley Company (as they were originally known) was formed in September 1914 and became 'C' Company of the 7th (Accrington) Service Battalion of the East Lancashire Regiment (the Accrington Pals). Later that year the battalion was officially named as the 11th (Accrington) Service Battalion and consisted of four separate companies, including the Chorley Pals.

Early days and training

After formation the Chorley Pals remained at home but attended the town's Drill Hall each day for training. It was February 1915 before they, along with the other three companies making up the battalion, left home for Wales to undergo further training. In Chorley a farewell send-off was given for the Pals and they marched through the town accompanied by band music before their departure for Caernarvon on the 23rd February.

Training in Wales

The companies of the 11th (Accrington) Service Battalion spent the majority of 1915 training in Caernarvon, and later on in Ripon and Salisbury Plain. The training was tough and the men's days were long, but they were billeted with local families and had the opportunity to become part of the community. They were a boost for the local economy and as such were welcomed.

This period was also when the Pals started to become a more cohesive battalion – all four companies came together for the first time and, also for the first time, received khaki uniforms (they had previously been blue) and so looked more like a fighting battalion. It was also during this time that Colonel Rickman became the battalion's Commanding Officer. He was to lead them for the remainder of the war and retire from service in 1920.

In September of that year the Pals were given a week's home leave, in preparation for being sent abroad. For many this was the last time they would go home.

Egypt

Towards the end of 1915 the Pals received orders to embark for Egypt. They eventually left on 19th December, assuming they were headed for Gallipoli where fighting had been

going on for some months. Because of the timing of their departure from Wales the Pals did not receive the 1914-15 Star (a medal awarded to soldiers serving abroad during those years). This was controversial, because the Pals were en route to service abroad and faced considerable difficulty and danger while on that journey. Rickman, their Commanding Officer, tried to ensure the Pals were awarded the 1914-15 Star but to no avail.

For the Pals, the early months of 1916 were spent stationed at Port Said and the Suez Canal but in March plans were made to move them to France and the Western Front. Some of the men wrote home suggesting that where they were being moved to would make getting home easier.

Preparing for the Somme

In March 1916 the Pals (and the wider brigade of which they were part) received notification that they would be part of a planned attack on the Germans at Serre that summer – this attack was to become known as the Battle of the Somme.

The Pals arrived and disembarked in France in early March 1916 and journeyed by train to their billet where they received further training. Towards the end of the month they began their march to the front line, arriving in the trenches at the Somme in April. Training for 'the Big Push' continued, with one soldier observing, "We captured Serre three times a day" when describing practice attacks. Serre is in the northern part of the Somme front and the Pals were among those attacking Serre and then protecting the northern edge of the whole attack.

This was considered to be a difficult task, made more so by the relative inexperience of the men in the battalion making the attack. However, those in command appeared sure that the attack would be successful. An artillery bombardment was intended to destroy the German defences making the attack easy. On 28th June a Special Order of the Day was issued by the Commanding Officer of the 94th Infantry Brigade which concluded with the optimistic words, "Keep your heads, do your duty, and you will utterly defeat the enemy," adding that "the honour of the North country rests in your hands."

On 30th June the Pals moved from their positions in the reserve trenches to the front line trenches opposite Serre. By the following morning 720 men from the Accrington Battalion waited to go over the top in waves. Two platoons from Y Company (the Chorley Pals) were in the third wave. Alongside them in other areas were more similarly inexperienced troops from other Pals Battalions.

1st July 1916

At zero hour, 7.30am on 1st July 1916, the four waves of troops from the 11th (Accrington) Service Battalion went over the top at Serre. Following orders to walk towards the German line, they advanced carrying 70lbs of equipment and immediately came under fire. The German sentries had realised what the British plan was and alerted their troops, who emerged from the safety of their dug-outs and waited ready with machine guns for the British to advance.

By 7.40am those that had reached the German trenches were engaged in fighting. The artillery bombardment preceding the attack had largely failed but in some sections the wire had been cut meaning that some men were able to reach the second line. However, by 7.50 it was becoming apparent that the attack had failed. Battle reports from both sides show the increasingly desperate situation for the Pals. One particularly poignant

War Memorials Trust 14 Buckingham Palace Road London SW1W 0QP

Telephone: 020 7834 0200 / 0300 123 0764

Email: learning@warmemorials.org **Website:** www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org

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comment came from a German soldier: "if only the British had run, we would have been overwhelmed."

On the morning of 1st July, 720 men from the 11th (Accrington) Service Battalion are known to have gone over the top, the Chorley Pals among them. 584 of those were either killed, wounded or missing. Of the 221 Chorley Pals, 175 went over the top in the third and fourth waves. 34 of these were killed and another 59 were wounded. 21 of the dead have no known grave and are commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. One soldier who survived described the story of the Pals Battalions as "Two years in the making, ten minutes in the destroying."

Aftermath

The events of the first day of the Battle of the Somme are widely documented and it is easy to overlook the fact that the battle actually continued for several months and that in the days that followed 1st July the consequences of the opening attack had to be dealt with.

The men from the Accrington Battalion were relieved in the early hours of 2nd July and set about recovering and burying their dead. Among the Chorley Pals buried in this period were Corporal William Clarkson, Lance Corporal John Blackstone and Private Harry Hardman, whose details are given in the accompanying information sheet. The wounded soldiers were also brought back to the trenches and what was left of the 11th (Accrington) Service Battalion marched out on 4th July.

Back at home, the *Chorley Guardian* reported on 7th July that there had been casualties but none killed. This was revised as further news came in.

After the early days of the Battle of the Somme, many of those who had survived were either reposted to other units or discharged from the army. To compensate, men from reserve units replaced them. As such the Chorley Pals Battalion lost its regional character – what truly made it a 'Pals' battalion. Although the Battalion continued to serve until the end of the war, it was never the same again.

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