

CHAPTER XV

NEW FRONT TAKEN OVER AFTER A SHORT REST

Short period of rest—Changes in commands—Preparations for the future
—Territorial Battalions—Trying weather—Strength of the Indian
Corps—New front taken over.

AFTER two months of constant combat with the enemy and the elements, the troops were greatly in need of a rest. Death, wounds, and sickness had taken a grievous toll, and a period of at least comparative quiet was necessary to enable the Corps to recuperate its strength and to overhaul its equipment.

The extent to which the Corps had suffered in the short space of two months can be seen from the following table of casualties up to the 31st December, 1914 :—

	Killed.	Wounded.	Missing.
British officers	104	148	40
Indian officers	39	96	31
Other ranks, British	349	1246	566
Other ranks, Indian	905	4370	1685
Total	1397	5860	2322

The orders which were issued towards the end of December for the troops to move into billets were therefore very welcome, but the period of rest was not to be as long as then seemed likely.

At the beginning of January, 1915, a number

of changes were made in Divisional and Brigade Commands.

Major-General H. D'U. Keary, C.B., D.S.O., succeeded Lt-General Watkis in the command of the Lahore Division, the latter being subsequently appointed a Knight Commander of the Bath.

Lt-Colonel C. G. Blackader, D.S.O., 2nd Leicesters, took over the Garhwal Brigade from Major-General Keary.

Lt-Colonel E. P. Strickland, C.M.G., D.S.O., 1st Manchesters, relieved Major-General Carnegy, who was invalided, in the Jullundur Brigade.

Colonel W. G. Walker, V.C., C.B., 1/4th Gurkhas, took over the Sirhind Brigade from Major-General Brunker, and Lt-Colonel W. M. Southey the Bareilly Brigade from Brigadier-General Macbean.

Colonel C. W. Jacob succeeded Brigadier-General Johnson in the Dehra Dun Brigade.

Although the Corps was resting in billets, it will not be supposed that it was idle. The past months of fierce fighting, of a description novel to all engaged, had revealed many flaws in our harness, many superfluities and many deficiencies in our equipment, and every use was made of the present opportunity to rectify omissions and to guard against future defects. The troops were constantly exercised in operations connected with trench warfare, such as firing trench mortars and rifle grenades, the use of bombs, and the advance on and occupation of hostile trenches.

Day after day, without a pause, the work went on, while at the same time gaps in the ranks were being closed by the reinforcements which arrived in a steady flow. Sir James Willcocks, according to

his usual practice, devoted his leisure to making the acquaintance of the officers and men under his command.

During December, 1914, the 2nd Battalion Connaught Rangers, the 4th Battalion London Regiment, the 4th Battalion Suffolks, the 4th Battalion Seaforths (the last three being Territorials) had joined the Corps. The interlude gave the Corps Commander a chance of making a thorough inspection of these Territorial units. He formed at once an opinion of their military value which later experience most fully justified.

It must be borne in mind that when in future we speak of the Indian Corps, reference is made (*a*) to the British and Indian battalions, artillery, etc., which constituted the Corps on arrival in France; and (*b*) to the Territorial and other units which joined later.

The effect of the withdrawal from the trenches and the consequent stocktaking was very striking. The constant strain and exposure of the past months had found out the weaklings, and had tended to harden those who had won through, but the lack of active exercise, so long continued, had unavoidably impaired to a serious degree the marching powers, and therefore the efficiency, of the men in the event of a prolonged advance. For weeks they had been soaking in the mud and water of the trenches, and their feet had suffered to such an extent as to render hard marching an impossibility for a large proportion of the troops.

To remedy this evil, route marching was now practised several times a week, with the result that after a short time the feet began to harden again,

the number of men falling out became less and less, and by the end of its rest the Corps as a whole was once more in sound fighting condition.

At the same time the refitting of the troops proceeded apace. Trench warfare is particularly destructive of materiel, and the constant exposure to rain, snow, and mud had worn out many articles of clothing and equipment. These were now replaced, while advantage was taken of the opportunity to provide new forms of arms and equipment which past experience, gained in a cruel school, had shown to be necessary.

During the actual progress of operations it is difficult, if not impossible, to enforce modifications of existing practice, or to inculcate improved methods in such a manner as to secure the requisite degree of uniformity, and at the same time to render the changes intelligible to every grade of intellect. To this end conferences and demonstrations are necessary, and the period of rest was utilized to the full. Instruction was given to all officers of the Corps in day and night attacks, the construction of trenches, supply of ammunition in the field, and the use of bombs. The future was to show that the time available had been well employed.

On the 15th January, 1915, the Jullundur and Sirhind Brigades relieved a portion of the 2nd Division, 1st Corps, in the trenches, the last-named Brigade being in the front line with the Jullundur Brigade in reserve. The weather during January continued to be of a very trying nature. Heavy rain fell, accompanied by high, cutting winds, and in severe alternation, snowstorms were frequent. The whole country was a wilderness of mud, and

offensive operations became impossible for both sides.

During this month we were very active in our mining operations, borrowing many ideas from the enemy's initiative. On one occasion a party of the 1st King George's Own Sappers and Miners were employed, under the command of Captain C. A. Bird, R.E., in making a mine gallery towards a German saphead which was about 30 yards away. A charge had been placed in position and was being tamped, when the enemy began bombarding the place with a medium trench mortar which was then new to us. A number of the men in the trench were killed or buried in debris.

Havildar Sucha Singh of the Sappers was in charge of the work in the mine shaft. He temporarily withdrew his party to assist in getting out those who had been buried. Having done this, he again went down the shaft to finish off the tamping and complete the preparations for blowing up the mine, in spite of the fact that two trench-mortar bombs had fallen directly on the roof of the gallery, breaking two of the supporting frames, and that his party was isolated as our trench had been evacuated. Havildar Sucha Singh finished his work with the utmost coolness and withdrew his men, afterwards receiving the Indian Distinguished Service Medal for his conspicuous gallantry.

On the 24th January, the two Lahore Brigades were relieved by two Brigades of the Meerut Division. The fighting strength of the Corps on the 28th January amounted to 20,736 rifles; 880 sabres; 114 guns; 4000 artillery personnel.

Casualties up to the 1st February, 1915:—

	Killed.	Wounded.	Missing.
British officers	104	157	40
Indian officers	42	97	32
Other ranks, British	358	1293	576
Other ranks, Indian	925	4442	1687
Total	1429	5989	2335

On the 2nd February, the front already held by the Meerut Division, together with the left portion of the line occupied by the 1st Corps as far south as the Rue de Cailloux—La Quinque Rue, was taken over by the Indian Corps, the Meerut Division being in the front line with Lahore in reserve.

February passed without any special incident on the Indian Corps front. The artillery on both sides was fairly active, the enemy's guns frequently shelling Richebourg St Vaast and Rue du Bois, but the casualties caused were insignificant in number.