

# Les Anglais à Ancoisne en 1940

## Durham Light Infantry

Origine de la recherche :

- les 2 tombes de soldats anglais au cimetière d'Ancoisne
- une photo trouvée sur un site anglais montrant des officiers anglais devant le presbytère d'Ancoisne

Les soldats tués à Ancoisne appartenaient à la Durham Light Infantry. La plupart des régiments anglais portent des noms de lieux : dans notre cas c'est le Comté de Durham. Durham est une ville du nord-est de l'Angleterre.



Ces unités étaient composés de 18 bataillons pendant la WW2.

Les 3 bataillons qui étaient dans la région en 1940 constituaient la 151 Brigade de la 50<sup>th</sup> Division Tynes/Tees : 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> Durham Light Infantry Battalion

Les effectifs de cette brigade devaient être de l'ordre de ? Hommes.

Chaque bataillon avait 4 compagnies et une compagnie d'état major.

le 24 mai 1940 la brigade fit mouvement pour rejoindre le BEF à Dunkerque

Ces bataillons ne furent pas intégrés dans la bataille de la poche de Lille en mai 1940.

Ces unités étaient dite : infanterie légère, qui n'existent pas l'armée française. L'infanterie Traditionnellement légère (ou des tirailleurs) était des soldats dont le travail devait fournir un écran d'escarmouche en avance du corps (de l'organisme) principal d'infanterie, harcelant et retardant l'avance ennemie

## **Rapide parcours des bataillons pendant la WW2**

The 2nd Battalion (2nd Bombay Europeans and 106th Light Infantry) saw action with the BEF and the withdrawal through Dunkirk. The 2nd Batn, fought with the 14th Army in Burma, seeing action at Kohima, Donbaik and Mandalay.

The 6th Btn, went to France with the BEF in 1940. It later saw action at Gazala, Gabr el Fakri, Mersa Matruh, El Alamein, Mareth; Landing in Sicily, Solarino, Primosole Bridge, Sicily, and took part in the June 1944 assault landings in Normandy and saw action in the advance towards Germany, Villers Bocage, Tilly-sur-Seulles, St Pierre la Vielle, Gheel.

The 8th Battalion served in N Africa, Gazala, Gabr el Fakri, Mersa Matruh, El Alamein, Mareth; Landing in Sicily, Primosole Bridge. The also took part in the assault landings in Normandy in June 1944 and saw action in the advance towards Germany, Villers Bocage, St Pierre la Vielle, Gheel.

The 9th battalion saw service in N Africa, Zt el Mrassas, Point 174; El Alamein, Mareth. Landing in Sicily seeing action at Primosole Bridge and in NW Europe: Villers Bocage, Tilly-sur-Seulles, St. Pierre la Vielle; Gheel, Roer, Ibbenburen.

## **L'arrivée sur le sol français**

Le second bataillon arriva le premier en France fin septembre 1939. Il fit partie de la 2 DI. Le 10 mai les allemands attaquèrent et le 2th B Mi fut affecté en Belgique à la défense de la Dyle. Ils y perdirent de nombreux soldats. Ensuite ils partirent vers Mouchin en France. Ils se déployèrent sur un axe Pont à Marcq-Seclin-La Bassé le 23 mai. Ils remontèrent vers St Venant ou ils furent accrochés le 27 mai. Le 29 mai, arrivés à Dunkerque, ils embarquèrent pour l'Angleterre. On trouve une 60 de tombes dans les cimetières français surtout à St Venant et Dunkerque. Les pertes estimées furent de 150 hommes.

La 151° Brigade arriva fin janvier 1940 avec la 50° Division. Embarquement à Southampton et débarquement à Cherbourg.

Un premier transport eut lieu avec le SS Fenella les 25 et 26 puis les hommes sur le SS et le SS Prague les 28 et 29 janvier. Le 6<sup>th</sup> fut envoyé le 19 février vers Amiens. Le 9<sup>th</sup> resta à Alençon et Mortagne au Perche. Le 8<sup>th</sup> regagna aussi Amiens.

Les 10 et 11 mai les 3 bataillons furent envoyés à Grammont en Belgique. Ensuite vers le Rivière Dendre pour protéger les ponts.

Le 20 mai engagement de la 151 brigade dans la Bataille d'Arras.

Après les combats de la Bataille d'Arras : HQ Brigade à Ancoisne  
6<sup>th</sup> près de Don, 8<sup>th</sup> près de Carvin et 9<sup>th</sup> près de Provin

Le 27 mai la Brigade rejoignit le reste de la 50<sup>th</sup> Div à Ypres.

Le 30 mai la Brigade fut à Bergues et embarqua le 1er juin vers l'Angleterre.

## **Parcours du 6<sup>th</sup>**

On the 24th May 1940 6th Durham Light Infantry moved to the area of **Ancoise-Don-Provin** unaware at this time was the decision to withdraw the BEF through Dunkirk had already been made.

Captain Ronald Cummins of 'D' Company was tasked with providing a recce of the area in order for the battalion to move through Lens and onto Don no easy task as many of the outlying villages had been bombed and vital bridges destroyed. At this time 6th DLI had a battalion strength of just ten officers and 192 other ranks. 'A' and 'B' Companies set off at 0120hrs through Billy Montigny and Harnes and then split up 'B' Company had to take short cuts through various goods yards and over railway crossings in particular those between Avion and Touquiers in an attempt to cross the canal which they finally achieved at Harnes finally reaching Don after travelling for some five hours. 'A' Company under Captain Leslie Proud and 2/Lieutenant Tim Chamberlain also had problems they found all the bridges at La Bassee, Bercleau, Beauvin and Pont a Vendin destroyed and were forced to cross the canal by boat storing their kit at Beauvin (for collection later) and marching to Ancoisne where they were transported by truck to the battalion HQ at Don. Once there the battalion got what rest they could between almost constant German air-raids.

On the 25th May 1940 rations for each man were cut by half, men of the battalion were sent into Lille to forage for food, the French civilians and shop keepers were only too willing to offer them food but once they found the battalion could not pay the offer was withdrawn so not only were they weary but hungry to.

At 1430hrs the battalion was told of The Weygand Plan, General Weygand had planned an eight division assault southwards scheduled for the 26th May in a revised plan it was cut to five divisions with the French providing three and the British two, the 5th and 50th. However at 1700hrs the plan was cancelled and orders were received to be ready to move at two hours notice it was planned that 151Bde were to move to plug the widening gap between the British and Belgian armies between Comines and Ypres.

Three whole German divisions were reported to be attempting to break through a gap between Comines and Ypres in response the 50<sup>th</sup> Division of which the 6<sup>th</sup> DLI were part were ordered to move into this gap At this time the 25<sup>th</sup>/26<sup>th</sup> May 1940, 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> DLI were heavily engaged so it was left to 6<sup>th</sup> Durham Light Infantry to push ahead leaving on borrowed RASC transport the battalion moved off at approx 10:00hrs, moving through Wavrin, Radinghem and Erquinghem-sur-lys until at around 1300hrs they reached a farm situated between the canal and the main road to Sailly sur la Lys following a short rest orders were received shortly after midnight on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 1940 to be ready to move to positions on the Yser canal.

Despite being stood to at around 0200hrs the battalion did not start to move until around 1100hrs and progress was pitifully slow due to the sheer number of refugees using the same route. At Strazeele Lieut-Colonel Jefferys took a small party ahead to assess the situation. As the battalion rested by the side of the road a number of dispatch riders and some French armour came past them from the direction of Strazeele with the news that German panzers had been spotted in the town.

Captain Leslie Proud got the battalion moving again working their way around the town they passed through Bailleul and Dickebusch onto Vlamertinghe Chateau before reaching positions on the Yser canal where they began to relieve the French 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoon Guards. The other two Durham battalions now free of their engagement took up their positions alongside the 6<sup>th</sup> DLI. The 9<sup>th</sup> DLI took up positions on the left of the sixth supported by the machine guns of The 2<sup>nd</sup> RNF whilst the 8<sup>th</sup> DLI moved into reserve at this time.

The relief was completed at around 0130hrs on the 28<sup>th</sup> May.

As heavy torrential rain began to fall the Germans increased their Heavy bombardment of the DLI positions and casualties began to increase alarmingly. News of the Belgian capitulation filtered through to the men along with a rumour that the BEF were withdrawing through Dunkirk, these were things which concerned the officers and the brass at this time the ordinary Durham Light infantryman was far too busy fighting for his life! At 1530hrs the Germans advanced to within two hundred yards of the canal, at 1700hrs came the order to withdraw once again but this time came an additional order all mortars were to be destroyed before they moved back.

At approximately 1755hrs the 2<sup>nd</sup> RNF reported a gap had appeared between themselves and No2 Company of the 6<sup>th</sup> DLI on the left of Boesinghe following the withdrawal of the French forces from that location without waiting for their relief to move up! German engineers were now making attempts to bridge the canal but were forced back by the DLI. Attempts by 8DLI to reinforce the 6<sup>th</sup>

Battalion companies were unsuccessful due to heavy concentrations of German Shell fire in the area. `A` Company of the 8<sup>th</sup> DLI finally broke through to 6<sup>th</sup> DLI's positions shortly after midnight but casualties in all the DLI companies had been high,

On the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1940 at 0400hrs the withdrawal from these canal positions began with the Germans pushing forward the 6<sup>th</sup> DLI were pulled back to positions around Woesten .

### **Parcours du 9<sup>th</sup>**

Throughout the 23<sup>rd</sup> May the Durham Brigade were heavily bombed with 9DLI suffering heavy casualties. Orders to hold at all costs were received then later recinded. Eventually new orders were received to withdraw behind the La Basse canal a distance of over twenty miles a distance which had to be covered on foot as all of the battalions transport had been ordered to the rear following `The Hold at all Costs` order. The exhausted men of 9DLI had to pass through the heavily shelled village of `Billy Montignys` where the villagers handed the Durham soldiers bottles of wine as they passed by, an act which was made with nothing but good intentions but in their exhausted state was as the saying goes literally `Killing them with kindness`.

Early on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1940 The 6<sup>th</sup> DLI found themselves at Don, The 8<sup>th</sup> DLI in woods near **Carvin** whilst The 9<sup>th</sup> DLI were at **Provin**.

The 25<sup>th</sup> May 1940, orders were received that the battalion were to be part of a French attempt to advance and split the German Forces with this news also came the order to cut the mens rations by half .Morale already low most have suffered another alarming dip with this news, however events elsewhere were changing rapidly and as quickly as the plan had been formulated, so to was it abandoned.

Heavy shelling on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 1940 resulted in heavy casualties especially amongst the men of `C` Company, whose positions received a direct hit casualties included 44

### **Parcours du 8<sup>th</sup>**

Once in **Carvin** 8 DLI initially took up a position within an old factory before they were ordered to the Wood at Epinoy which was to the left of the Carvin-Libercourt road. The plan was for the battalion to rest up in preparation for its role in the Weygand plan in which strong French Forces supported by elements of the BEF were to strike Southwards. This role never materialised for the 8<sup>th</sup> DLI because once the Belgian armies had collapsed Lord Gort diverted the 5<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions northwards to the Ypres area.

Whilst awaiting final orders the battalion awoke on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> May 1940 to the sounds of battle, although not engaged directly some French Algerian Units had clashed with the advancing Germans. A request was made to the battalion for help the 8<sup>th</sup> DLI Carrier section under 2/Lt Ian English and Sgt Skorochood were dispatched back to Carvin to support the French Forces there. An hour later the awaited orders arrived for the battalion to withdraw to the village of Camphin and there await transport to the Ypres sector. Minus their carriers the 8<sup>th</sup> DLI formed up into marching columns but once out in the open they were the target of German saturation bombing which inflicted heavy casualties upon the battalion. Pressing on the battalion arrived at Camphin the transport they had been promised was not there instead they were met by General Curtis who informed the battalion that Carvin had fallen and that the 8<sup>th</sup> DLI were to return put in a counter attack and re-capture it..easy!. The question on everyones lips at the time was if Carvin had fallen then what had happened to the battalions carriers?

The carriers had reported as ordered to the French commander who had deployed them to the southern exits of the town, it was true that the Germans had crossed the canal and were now on the Carvin-Lens Road but they had advanced no further since their initial crossing instead they

shelled the town whilst keeping their distance, a planned counter attack supported by 8DLI carriers achieved little and the carrier section were later joined in their positions by a French Algerian Company whose French Lieutenant let it be known to all who would listen that come what may these positions would be held. As the rain poured down and the German shelling grew heavier it was a bemused carrier section that watched as this brave French Lieutenant led his men in a most indignified retreat leaving the Durhams alone once again.

Meanwhile the rest of the battalion were starting their counter attack on Carvin which unbeknown to the battalion had never fallen and was still under French control under the watchful eye of the 8thDLI Carriers. The battalions advance was not an easy one and the shelling and mortaring cost valuable Durham lives.

The original orders to move to Ypres were reissued and at 0230hrs on the 27th May the battalion made its way through [Gondécourt-Armentières-Bailleul](#) until at 0800hrs they arrived at Steenvoorde after only a brief stay in which German fighter bombers continually targetted the town the battalion moved out onto the Cassel road to await further orders

Brigadier Jackie Churchill ordered the battalion forward to the Ypres Canal area here the 8th found themselves in reserve with the 9th DLI on their right and the 6th DLI on their left. After a brief loan period with 150Bde all three Durham battalions found themselves withdrawn to the area in and around the village of Woeston, by 1000hrs 8th DLI companies were positioned as follows 'D' Company on the right, 'B' Company Centre, 'C' Company on the left with 'A' Company in reserve, the carriers went on a recce and from their positions they had a grandstand view of the German armour attacking the positions that only six hours ago had been manned by the Durhams themselves.

As the carriers made the return journey to Woeston they found and engaged German forces at Elverdinghe which was only a mile or so ahead of the 8th DLI's forward positions. At 1800hrs the German artillery found the range of the company positions it was at this time that the news of the Belgian capitulation began to filter round, the collapse of the left flank, probable encirclement and the destruction of the entire BEF were the concerns of the General Staff and the politicians to the Durham soldiers their main concern was one of survival and at this stage survival was very unlikely.

Just before 2000hrs the 8th DLI were ordered to withdraw but before they could do so a strong German attack completely cut off 'C' Company and although the three platoons battled all night only two men escaped to tell the tale with the rest killed or captured. As the battalions carriers clattered out of Woeston the German armour clattered in.

### **La Bataille d'Arras du 20 au 24 mai 1940** **The Arras counter-attack 21 May 1940**

50th Division with the Brigade was deployed to France with the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF) in January 1940. The BEF was deployed on the border of Belgium, around the city of [Lille](#). In May 1940, German armoured forces broke through French positions east of the BEF, and moved rapidly across its rear, separating it from the main French armies.

To close this gap, General [Weygand](#) ordered a counterattack by British forces around the city of [Arras](#). "Frankforce" was to include the 5th and 50th Divisions and the [1st Army Tank Brigade](#). The attack was actually made by just two battalions of the 151st Brigade, the 6th and 8th DLI, with the [4th](#) and [7th Royal Tank Regiments](#). The attack made significant progress before it was stopped, and the shocked Germans estimated that five divisions had attacked. It may have been one of the factors for the surprise German halt on 24 May that let the BEF begin [evacuation from Dunkirk](#).

After the failure of the Arras attack, the BEF had to get out of France. Most of 151st Brigade and 50th Division were fortunate enough to get out at [Dunkirk](#), but had to leave all equipment behind. On returning home, 151st Infantry Brigade and [150th Infantry Brigade](#) were joined by the [69th Infantry Brigade](#), from the now disbanded [23rd \(Northumbrian\) Division](#), to complete 50th Division. It remained in Britain until 22 April 1941, when it was sent to the Middle East.<sup>[2]</sup>



Photograph of Captain R.I. Cummins, left, and Second-Lieutenant D. Blackman, right, of The Durham Light Infantry, in the garden of an officers' mess at Ancoisne, France, 1940

(un Capitaine Ronald Cummins 6<sup>th</sup> DLI, Compagnie D : le même ??)



Eglise de Ancoisne construite en 1900



Photograph of Captain R.I. Cummins, left, and Lieutenant P. Walton, right, of The Durham Light Infantry, in the garden of an officers' mess at Ancoisne, France, 1940

Montage avec des photos de 1940 et 2015





Le Presbytère de nos jours

Photos : Jerome Grosse

Sources :

- Tombes du cimetière de Ancoisne
- Presbytère de Ancoisne
- <http://www.atf40.fr/ATF40/>
- Récit des parcours des bataillons d'après le site :  
<http://durhamlightinfantry.webs.com/france1940.htm>
- <http://souvenirfrancaisarras.com/node/70>
- les photos sont extraites du site internet du Durham County Record Office