



PLAYING THE GAME

Declaration of War

The Queen's Westminster Rifles could trace their history back to the groups of volunteers raised in the city to defend the country against the threat of invasion during the Napoleonic wars. In 1860 these volunteers were known as The Queen's (Westminster) Rifle Volunteers, and they served with distinction in the Boer War in South Africa in 1900-1902.

During an inspection in 1891, the Westminsters made such an impression on Kaiser Wilhelm II that he decided to adopt their grey uniform for the German army, and donated a portrait of himself, which still hangs in the London Club of The Rifles in Davies Street.

With the formation of the Territorial Army in 1908, the Rifle Volunteers became the 16th (County of London) Battalion, London Regiment (Queen's Westminster Rifles), commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Rupert Shoolbred, who ran a family furniture business in Tottenham Court Road.

On Sunday 2nd August 1914, the 1st Battalion of the Queen's Westminster Rifles boarded a train at Paddington Station en route to the annual camp on Perham Down, Salisbury Plain. The camp would not be held. That evening the whole of the 2nd London Division was ordered to return to London amidst rumours of imminent mobilisation. By the early hours of Monday morning the battalion was back at Paddington. Germany had declared war on Russia the previous day. Britain declared war on Germany on Tuesday 4th August, prompting large numbers of volunteers and former members of the Queen's Westminster Rifles to report to the regiment. In just 48 hours the regiment went from 511 men to over 800; many new recruits were turned away from their HQ at 56 Buckingham Gate.

"For two or three hours we struggled and pushed our way inside as soon as the door was opened - we were all so eager to join the Army. Strange to say, that men I have met since who have returned from the Front are even more eager to get out of it now." Sgt Bernard Brookes, Queen's Westminster Rifles

Some of these new recruits were billeted in Westminster School before they moved to Leverstock Green, Hertfordshire for intensive training. The Queen's Westminster Rifles were not expecting to be sent to France until the Spring of 1915, but the dire situation in France soon changed that. British casualties between 14th October and 30th November 1914 were 58,155 (7,960 dead, 29,562 wounded and 17,873 missing). The army had arrived in France with only 84,000 infantry soldiers, and the need for further troops was obvious. The Queen's Westminster Rifles responded to the emergency and were amongst the very first members of the Territorial Army to be sent to the front line.

The Queen's Westminster Rifles left Southampton aboard the SS Maiden at 6.30pm on 1st of November 1914 arriving in France on 3rd November, naively confident that the war would be over by Christmas. This was long before Company Sergeant Major Schoeberlein had a chance to join them. Despite his German parentage, Schoeberlein was feared and respected by all the men. He had been left behind at Buckingham Gate to raise recruits for a 2nd battalion. As they disembarked at Le Havre, they received a heroes' welcome:

"We marched through the town to the rest camp at the top of the hill behind the town, and on our way up were heartily cheered, and all manner of gifts were bestowed upon us. A woman with a big basket of flowers either gave them all away or pinned them on the men as they marched along." Sgt Bernard Brookes, Queen's Westminster Rifles



Portrait of the Kaiser which now hangs at the Rifles Barracks in Davies Street, London. *The Rifle Barracks*



Queen's Westminster Rifles headquarters at Buckingham Gate, London. *Peter Daniels*



Sergeant Major Schoeberlein



Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Shoolbred. *Nick Palmer*

VICTORIA TO BERLIN.



New route for the London motor-omnibus, but not yet included in the company's official guide. It is Tommy's little joke.

Soldiers being transported to fight using London buses. *Bob Brooks*



Queen's Westminster Rifles at Leverstock Green. *Jon Spence*



Territorials pictured in Dean's Yard, Westminster Abbey, August 1914. *Peter Daniels*

