



*Extract from*

*Kitchener's Army:  
The Raising of the New Armies,*

*1914-1916*

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***Training Camps and billets***

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The bad weather also revealed that insufficient care had been taken in selecting the sites for many of the new training centres. Codford, Sherrington and Chiseldon were three of the worst in this respect. At Codford the site originally chosen for the camp of the 11th Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) was in a field bounded by a stream on three sides. Warnings from a local resident that the field was often flooded and used for skating in winter appear to have been ignored. The heavy November rains turned the camp into a quagmire. Similar predictions from farmers failed to prevent the War Office from siting Sherrington Camp on gently sloping land close to the river Wylye, with equally dire results. The low-lying fields in which the 4<sup>th</sup> South Wales Borderers were encamped at Chiseldon actually contained the source of a stream. When this overflowed the site was transformed into a lake, making the tents uninhabitable.

The appalling state of these and other camps was soon reflected in an increase in cases of sickness among the men of the New Armies. F.T. Mullins, who was stationed at Codford as a private in the 10th Devonshire Regiment, noted that "We Country lads could stick it much better than the town boys. Scores of them fell sick and soon our numbers went down. Private G.F. Cribley, training with the 8th Gloucestershire Regiment at Tidworth, was one of the many soldiers taken ill during this period: "I myself went home with pneumonia. The doctor said I had come home just in time." Some units survived the ordeal with only minor reductions in their parade strength. In the 7th East Lancashire Regiment at Tidworth, for instance, the average number of men reporting sick each morning represented only 2 per cent of the battalion. Indeed, H.J. Tennant, replying to a question in the House of Commons on 20 November, denied that the number of cases of pneumonia the camps was abnormal. Nevertheless, only three months later he was obliged to admit that, up to 31 January 1915, 1,508 cases of pneumonia had been recorded among British troops in training in the United Kingdom. Of these, 301 had died.

Things might not have been so bad for the troops had the War Office been able to adhere to its hutting programme, but my mid-November serious delays had arisen at several of the key sites. The poor weather, of course, played a major part in causing such hold-ups. The mud and rain frequently prevented the contractors from doing any work at all for days on end, and country roads, churned up by vehicles bringing materials to the sites, soon became impassable. However, the delays were not wholly attributable to the weather. Unrestricted enlistment in the opening weeks of the war had already resulted in a shortage of skilled building workers. A thousand members of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners joined the army in August 1914 alone and by September 1915 over 4,000 had volunteered. This union had approached the War Office in the first month of the war, offering to supply enough skilled labour for hut building, provided that its working rules were observed. Although the offer was accepted, the subsequent demand for huts

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had become so urgent and extensive that the union was unable to supply all the men required from within its membership. Understandably the War Office then applied to the labour exchanges for help, and in consequence, all sorts of men who said they could use a hammer and chisel were drafted to hut-building. It is, in fact, doubtful whether the enlargement of the pool of labour produced any real benefits. On the contrary, the widespread employment of unskilled labourers brought about a disturbing increase of poor workmanship. Furthermore, the policy also led to a worsening of relations between the War Office and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners at a crucial stage in the hutting programme. Before the end of November the union had presented to the National Workers' War Emergency Committee detailed evidence from various camps of the violation of its rules, of the extensive use of inferior materials and of the prevalence of scamped work.

Shortages of materials, particularly of seasoned timber, also slowed down the rate of construction in the winter of 1914-15. Galvanised sheets became almost unobtainable, since practically the whole of the zinc trade of the world was under German control and with the cessation of German overseas trade the supply ceased. Unseasoned wood therefore had to be used as an alternative building material in many camps, though some unscrupulous contractors did this all along in an attempt to improve their profit margins. Kitchener himself added to the problems by insisting on economies in the hutting programme. The estimated cost of a battalion hutment as designed by Armstrong, was £15,000, or £15 per man, and at the time the programme was submitted to the Army Council the anticipated increase in costs over the next six months was worked out at a possible £5 per man extra. This £20 was intended to cover all external and accessory services. In fact the cost eventually came to about £23 per man on the average, and it included not only water supply, drainage, roads and railways, lighting and power, but also rifle ranges and hospitals. However, Kitchener considered even the first estimate of £15 per man too high and ordered every possible reduction. Thus a large number of camps had no central dining halls, which Kitchener regarded as "luxuries", and the men's meals had to be conveyed, in some cases, considerable distance to the sleeping huts.

To be fair to Kitchener, he gave a good deal of personal attention to the matter of accommodation and, while he was anxious to cut expenditure, he also put pressure on his subordinates to ensure that the hut-building was pushed on with all speed. For instance, early in November, he sent for Lieutenant-General W. Pitcairn Campbell, the GOC Southern Command, and told him that he was not satisfied with the progress to date. "Unless it improves, you go," he pointedly remarked.....

.... For all these efforts, very few of the hutments constructed in the autumn of 1914 were anywhere near completion by the end of November but, because of the dreadful conditions in many of the tented camps, it was essential to move as many troops as possible to the available huts, even where they were only half finished. To the soldiers who were rehoused in this way, the defects of the new huts were all too apparent. At Sandling Camp, near Shorncliffe, men of the 6th Buffs (East Kent Regiment) had to put up tents inside the huts to keep dry. The situation at Bramshott, as described by a member of the 6th Cameron Highlanders, was no better:

*Very cosy and homely did these huts look – at a distance. It was only on a closer inspection that we found they were mere shells – half-inch boarding for walls, and brown paper for roofs, no cookhouses, no washing accommodation.....That first night was for most of us the coldest we had ever spent. In vain did we roll ourselves more closely in the suit lengths which did duty for blankets. There was absolutely no heating system whatever, so we just lay and waited painfully for morning.....It was weeks before the place became habitable, and when it rained the walls and roofs leaked like sieves.*

At the depots and during their early days at the training centres, most recruits had accepted discomfort, believing that conditions would soon get better. Now that they had been in the army for some three months they were less tolerant of poor treatment. The month of November 1914 was marked by a wave of unrest among the battalions of the first three New Armies, Codford and Seaford being the training centres most seriously affected. Mass meetings were held in the 25th Division at Codford and whole companies refused to go on parade. Trouble in the 11th Cheshire Regiment was narrowly averted by an issue of extra beer. The 26th Division too had its share of protests. There were demonstrations in the camp of the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, while F.T. Mullins mentions a riot in B Company of the 10th Devonshire Regiment. Strikes were also recorded at Seaford, particularly in a brigade of the 22nd Division which was composed largely of Welsh miners. Here, according to Private I. P. James of the 11th Welsh Regiment, the men lived under canvas by day but had to sleep in some unfinished huts which did little to keep out the rain.....

