

X./14 - The 10th March Battalion of Infantry Regiment 14 in the Dolomites in the Summer of 1915

During the course of the First World War each infantry regiment of the pre-war army and Landwehr formed so-called "March Battalions" or *Marschbataillone* to provide trained replacements for the parent regiment already deployed in the field. In normal circumstances the March Battalion would arrive at the front and the personnel were then distributed amongst the companies of the field regiment as required. In times of emergency or dire need a March Battalion could be deployed as a constituent whole in an independent capacity and such was the case with the X. *Marschbataillon* of the Linz recruited Infanterieregiment Ernst Ludwig Großherzog von Hessen und bei Rhein Nr. 14. Formed in April 1914 under the command of Hauptmann Friedrich Ritter Hantken von Prudnik to supply reinforcements for the regiment fighting in Galicia it was to be ready for deployment by the 4th of May with a scheduled departure to the front around the middle of the month. The worsening diplomatic situation with Italy however caused a change of plan; the battalion was to be deployed to the South Tyrol and the commander of the *Ersatzbataillon* (effectively the regimental training depot), Oberstleutnant Karl Willigut assumed command.¹ The battalion was alerted during the night of the 5/6th of May 1915 and with a strength of 24 officers and 1002 NCOs and soldiers entrained for Lienz where the battalion arrived on the 7th of May.

Initially placed under the Half-Brigade of Generalmajor Lanzinger, the first priority was the instruction of the battalion's personnel in mountain warfare but this was necessarily interrupted by the need to build defensive and blocking positions along the Tyrolean/Italian border area. When Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary on the 23rd of May 1915 the commander of the Tyrol, General der Kavallerie Viktor Dankl had at his disposal the following weak forces to hand: 27½ battalions, 39 *Standeschützen* (Tyrolean Militia) Battalions of varying strength, 8 Kaiserschützen Detachments manning the various fortresses and works, 1½ squadrons of cavalry and 22 mobile batteries with aged ordnance. The German *Alpenkorps* under Generalleutnant Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen was still en route.

As it was expected that the Italian forces facing the Tyrol would immediately strike over the border towards Toblach in the Puster Valley the battalion entrained for Innichen on the 24th of May and was there placed under the command of Generalmajor Bankowski's 56th Mountain Brigade which had responsibility for the defence of this sector of the Tyrolean border. Surprisingly enough although those elements of the Italian 4th Army facing the *Pustertal* had an overwhelming superiority they were initially reticent to press their advance. On the evening of the same day the battalion moved to Sexten and from there took up blocking positions along the line Hornischek-Eisenreich the following morning to prevent any incursion in the direction of Sillian. Having taken up positions along the Eisenreich they remained there for the next ten days where they were subjected to harassing artillery and sniper fire from across the border and both sides occupied themselves predominantly with reconnaissance and fighting patrols. It was during this period that the battalion received its first wartime decorations for bravery. A patrol under the command of Fähnrich Lohninger had infiltrated the enemy positions to cut the

telephone line to the rear. On being discovered Lohninger succeeded in bringing back his patrol without loss despite a vigorous pursuit by the enemy. Members of the patrol were awarded one Large Silver, two Small Silver and two Bronze Bravery Medals. On the 5th of June the battalion was relieved and pulled back to Toblach for a short period of recuperation.

The rest was of very short duration. On the following night the battalion was set in motion along the *Dolomitenstraße* towards Cortina. The exhausted soldiers hurried to their new positions to the north of Cortina d'Ampezzo in a forced march via Landro, Schluderbach and above the Ruffreddo Valley finally arriving at Stuva the following morning. The reason for the battalion's hasty assignment was the situation at the blocking position of Son Pauses. Son Pauses which had a commanding position above the Ruffreddo Valley also dominated the direct route from Cortina and the Fanes Valley to the west. The position had been under heavy Italian artillery fire for the last 48 hours, the radio station on Monte Cadini had been destroyed by a direct hit and the enemy in brigade strength was already moving forwards from Cortina d'Ampezzo. Prior to the arrival of the battalion, the Austro-Hungarian forces in the sector only amounted to about 500 rifles. The layout of the ground and the diversity of the defensive tasks brought about a situation in which the individual companies of the battalion for all intents and purposes were pretty much independent of battalion control.

One platoon of Number Three Company under Kadett-Aspirant² Jirsa strengthened the actual garrison of the Son Pauses fortifications and the other three platoons manned its associated infantry positions. The 1st Company (Leutnant Andreas Klein) took up positions on Il Falé and the 4th Company blocked the Gottres Valley. Number 2 Company (Oberleutnant Josef Vichytil) was assigned to the position blocking the Fanes Valley, the *Fanesstellung*.

The following day Son Pauses took a direct hit and the platoon from Number Three Company lost eight men killed and a further ten wounded. On the afternoon of the 9th of June the Italians mounted their first attack against the Son Pauses fortifications which totally miscarried. At the same time an attack in battalion strength accompanied by mountain guns against Gottres was repulsed and thrown back into the Ruffreddo Valley. During the course of the latter engagement the 4th Company under Leutnant Julius von Wellenreiter had taken 4 enemy officers and 144 NCOs and soldiers prisoner. Although the Italians did not repeat their efforts against Gottres contenting themselves with artillery bombardments they did attempt to take out the section position on the Croda del Ancona held by Gefreiter Sageder's section. These attempts also failed.

That night an assault was to be mounted against the enemy held bridge at Ponte Alto by Leutnant Klein's 1st Company from the Il Falé position and the 2nd Company of the Bavarian Reserve Jäger Battalion Number 2 under the command of Oberleutnant Joseph Klaus from the Fanes blocking position.³ However due to a misunderstanding between the respective commanders the time for the assault was unclear and the Bavarian Jäger assaulted alone. The consequence of this was that the enterprise failed, the Bavarians suffered heavy casualties and Oberleutnant Klaus was killed by a gunshot wound to the

throat. His body could only be recovered with the utmost difficulty. Leutnant Klein's 2nd Company which commenced its assault somewhat later than the Bavarians ran into a position held by Italian Bersaglieri. The enemy although initially surprised and forced to withdraw, brought up reserves and any further progress was impossible. The battalion's own 2nd Company under Oberleutnant Vichytil which had also been assigned a supporting role in the assault had not come into action on account of the extremely difficult terrain and the necessity to find a better approach route. It had only managed to reach the form up point at Fanes as the Bavarians withdrew to that place. Casualties to the battalion itself were light.

The next few days were relatively quiet with only the Son Pausas fortifications repeatedly taking heavy artillery fire. Any Italian attempts at storming the work were repulsed by its garrison under the command of the Landeschützen Hauptmann Franz Tousek. When on the 14th of June an Italian advance approached to within close vicinity of the fortifications, the battalion adjutant Oberleutnant Helmut von Görtz led at the last moment a rapid counter-attack with a mixed force of *Vierzehner* and some Bavarian Jäger over Monte Cadini. This restored the situation and the Italians refrained from any further offensive activity on account of the losses so far incurred. The next two weeks could therefore be spent on improving the defensive positions and thanks to this work any further attempts by the enemy to force the Son Pausas position were fruitless.

Shortly after taking up positions around Stuva, Oberstleutnant Willigut had been detached from the battalion and he was replaced by Hauptmann Ritter von Hantken. The commander of the Bavarian *Infanterie-Leibregiment*, Major Max Graf von Bothmer assumed the sector command. He in turn was replaced as sector commander on the 13th of June by the commander of 2nd Bavarian Reserve Jäger Battalion, Major Rudolf Plötz.

The battle losses of the battalion during the month of July, around a hundred were relatively light considering the defensive successes so far achieved. However the ongoing problems with sickness, in the main due to the climate and the difficulty in providing an adequate supply of provisions, clothing and equipment and exacerbated by the terrain, brought about a request by the battalion commander for a short period of recuperation. This request was granted and having been relieved by Bavarian elements of the Alpenkorps, the companies retired to Toblach.

Three days rest and recuperation were allowed. On the fourth day the 1st Company was sent to the Kreuzberg Saddle, the 3rd under Oberleutnant Dr. Fritz Hasenöhrl⁴ and the Machine Gun Detachment under Feldwebel Johann Guttenberger were despatched to Schluderbach. Renewed fighting had broken out in these areas and although the Italians were content with just a demonstration against the Kreuzberg Saddle they were serious in their attempts to take Monte Piano. The Landeschützen defenders on Monte Piano were struggling to contain an enemy superior in numbers and with absolute superiority in artillery.⁵ From the 15th to the 20th of July the Italians mounted repeated attempts to take the north summit of Monte Piano and the flanking positions in the valleys to either side. On the 16th Kadett-Feldwebel Rupert Eckert commanding a platoon at the blocking position in the Val Popena was killed and by the 19th Oberleutnant Hasenöhrl with three

platoons of his company and the machine gun detachment was on the north summit when the Italians attacked yet again. With the supporting fire of the two machine guns they yet again forced the enemy to withdraw. Although Oberleutnant Hasenöhrl was wounded during the enemy assault he continued to lead his company in the defence of the summit. The Italian losses on the 19th were severe: 104 dead, 578 wounded and 151 missing.⁶ The crisis had passed and the Austrian positions atop Monte Piano were restored. Unfortunately the commander of the Machine Gun Detachment, Feldwebel Guttenberger, a much experienced veteran of the previous year's campaign in the east was killed during the day.

The defenders on Monte Piano were relieved on the morning of the 21st of July by the 3rd Battalion of the Tyrolean *Kaiserjäger* Regiment Number 4 and the company and machine gun company returned to Toblach where in the next few days the entire battalion reassembled. There they spent a week in uninterrupted recuperation with decent accommodation and provisions in the glorious summer weather. Battalion headquarters used the time to send a written report on the regiment's activities to the Regimental-Proprietor or *Inhaber* – The Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig von Hessen und bei Rhein. The Grand Duke's rapid reply was accompanied by the first awards of the Hessian Bravery Medal.

While the 1st, 3rd and 4th companies had been in action at Gottres and Ponte Alto, the 2nd under Oberleutnant Vichytil had been deployed to the Fanes Position and where as related above had not been able to assist the Bavarian Jäger company in a timely fashion during the night of the 9th/10th of June. They were however successful in repelling an enemy assault on the 14th alongside the Bavarians and from then onwards the situation at Fanes was quiet. On the 19th of June Oberleutnant Vichytil was ordered to come to the assistance of the hard pressed defenders of the neighbouring brigade sector in the Travenanzes Valley with half of his company. The remainder of the company was to remain at Fanes.

On his arrival in the Travenanzes Valley, Oberleutnant Vichytil assumed command of the defence in that area in what would prove to be difficult and anxious days. The Travenanzes Valley with a length of some 8 kilometres from Monte Vallon over the three Tofana peaks, the Cima Falzerego to the Lagazuoi had to be defended by half a company of the Hessen Regiment, a half company of Kaiserschützen and a company of Tyrolean *Standeschützen*. Supported by a couple of machine guns from the Tre Sassi fortifications they had to defend a position flanked on three sides without proper defensive positions or accommodation. Overlooked by the Alpini, supplies could only be brought up under the cover of darkness and the enemy often in company strength probed and assaulted at various points along the valley day and night.

On the 6th of July the experienced mountaineers of the Alpini successfully overran the position held by Kadett Poppa at the foot of the Tofana III killing and wounding half the post and capturing the rest. A further advance into the valley seemed open to the Italians but they initially acted with caution. In the meantime Oberleutnant Vichytil had assembled a last reserve of telephonists, orderlies, walking wounded and two machine

guns and these occupied a pine covered blocking position north of the Wolf-Glanwell Hut. A report was despatched to the brigade headquarters informing them of the critical situation with a request for immediate support.

In the meantime the enemy was still prevaricating and eventually assembled a force to advance down the valley and at last moved to Hill 1780 with two guns which opened fire on the Austro-Hungarian positions. With every passing moment the expected enemy assault was awaited but around 1500 hours the requested reinforcements arrived; about 90 men including Gendarmerie officials from Cortina and aged Ladin and Italian Landsturm men from the Ampezzo district. Despite their poor equipment; they were armed with old Werndl rifles and had about twenty to forty rounds of ammunition each, they were a welcome relief. They were quickly briefed and took up positions in the defensive position. A quarter of an hour later the enemy advanced and displaying excellent fire discipline the defenders held their fire until the last moment and then brought down a hail of rifle fire into the surprised Alpini. Unable to stand the fusillade, the Alpini retreated from whence they had come. Simultaneously a Bavarian Jäger company had arrived on the scene on the heights of the Furcia Rossa and a part of this company was already threatening the enemy withdrawal route at the peak of Hill 1780. A few days quiet ensued and then the Italians renewed their efforts in the valley.

Assembling machine guns atop the Cima Falzarego they were able from this dominant position to bring the Austrian positions under flanking fire. A Bavarian battalion was moved into the valley to clear the enemy positions and the half company of the Hessen Regiment was relieved and sent to join the remainder of the battalion at Toblach.

At the end of July the sick Hauptmann von Hantken was replaced as battalion commander by Hauptmann Theodor Janauschek of Landeschützen-Regiment II. At the same time the battalion received orders to again move to the Sexten Valley in order to relieve the Landeschützen deployed there. The battalion arrived at Sexten around midday on the 31st of July and had just started the midday meal when for the first time in the war the Italians opened artillery fire on the town. The approach of the battalion had been observed by enemy artillery observers on the *Drei Zinnen* and the first round detonated on the house of the mayor killing his daughter and seriously wounding his wife. Four hours later the church went up in flames and within two days much of the town was destroyed.

The relief of the Landeschützen battalion on the line Hornischek-Roteck and Matzenboden was carried out during the night without incident. The 2nd Company (Oberleutnant Vichytil) and the Machine Gun Detachment (Leutnant Panitschka) and a platoon of the Standschützen Company Hall manned the Roteck, the 3rd and 4th Companies the positions on the Alt-Herzberge and Matzenboden. The 1st Company and the Pioneer Detachment remained in reserve at Hollbruckeck. The new garrisons immediately set about improving the positions, new trenches were dug and obstacles erected with the available material at hand. The very rudimentary accommodation was also improved.

On the 4th of August in the early morning light the Italians assaulted.⁷ The enemy infantry had closed with the Austrian positions on the Roteck under the cover of darkness. As was

normal routine, the forward Austrian positions had been strongly manned during the night but had now switched to daytime routine. Suddenly the enemy artillery commenced firing and the Italian infantry rapidly assaulted and broke into the forward positions. Oberleutnant Vichytil quickly gave orders to have the enemy expelled and the platoon of Fähnrich Franz Riepel soon accomplished this task. Zugsführer Karl Schiefermayer and his section of bombers particularly distinguished themselves. The trenches had just been cleared of the enemy when a renewed assault fell upon the position. It seemed as if the Roteck would fall but the Machine Gun Detachment which had a commanding view of the entire position came into play and broke up the assaulting enemy before they could reach the wire. Those that got through were met in close combat and with hand grenades. The enemy repeated their assaults throughout the morning and the situation became ever more critical. Fähnrich Riepel was killed as was the Company Sergeant Major, Feldwebel Franz Reininger and many more. The leader of the bomber section, Zugsführer Schiefermayer was severely wounded and the shortage of ammunition and hand grenades was now starting to be felt. The Karbach Position under Feldwebel Nelböck which protected the east flank of the Roteck had to be abandoned under the increasing enemy pressure and once again the enemy infantrymen were in the forward positions on the Roteck itself. Then a 15cm howitzer from the fortifications at Innergell dropped a direct hit amongst the leading enemy and this produced a panic. The Italians now withdrew to the Kaarback Position to find cover and the Austrian defenders immediately pursued, taking 42 prisoners. Seven dead Italian officers and over 200 NCOs and soldiers lay dead about the position.

The Austrian defenders had also paid dearly: 97 *Vierzehner* and 13 Standschützen were dead or wounded. For his gallantry Zugsführer Schiefermayer was awarded the Golden Bravery Medal, a further five Large Silver and numerous Small Silver Bravery Medals were also awarded following the successful defence of the Roteck position. The battalion remained until the end of August in this sector until it was relieved by the Bicycle Battalion Major von Schönner. On the 29th of August it was entrained for Caldonazzo in the Trentino where it would take part in the late summer battles on the Plateau of Folgaria.

Unlike most of the *Marschbataillone*, X./14 would remain an independent front line organisation throughout the war in which it earned a well deserved reputation as a first class fighting battalion. Indeed, two of its officers would be awarded the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresia: Major Béla von Szilley and Oberleutnant Alois Windisch. In addition to Zugsführer Schiefermayer, a further nine NCOs and soldiers would win the Golden Bravery Medal as would five officers. In January 1918 X./14 would become the 2nd Battalion of the newly formed Infantry Regiment 114 – II./114 under the command of Oberstleutnant Rudolf Freiherr von Handel-Mazetti.

¹ Karl Willigut born on the 10th of December 1866 in Vienna and died at Arolsen on the 3rd of January 1936. Promoted to Oberst in IR. 47 on the 1st of August 1917. A later Allgemeine SS-Brigadeführer and occultist!

² Reserve Officer Aspirant with the rank of Feldwebel.

³ *Das K.B. Jäger-Regiment 1 im Weltkrieg* by Karl Paulus, München 1925. The Bavarian Reserve Jäger Battalion Number 2 was part of the *Alpenkorps* which had recently arrived in the South Tyrol.

⁴ Oberleutnant Dr. Fritz Hasenöhr, a k.k. Landwehr officer was killed in action on the 7th of October 1915 at Piovèrna Alta on the Folgaria Plateau. He was posthumously awarded the Order of the Iron Crown 3rd Class with War Decoration.

⁵ The Italian forces committed to the attack on Monte Piano were battalions of Infantry Regiments 55 and 56 of the Marche Brigade under Maggiore Generale Augusto Fabbri of the 10th Division, I Corps. See also *Die Kämpfe am Monte Piano und im Cristallo Gebiet 1915-1917* by Generalmajor Viktor Schemfil, Universitätsverlag Wagner, Innsbruck 1984.

⁶ *Die Kämpfe am Monte Piano und im Cristallo Gebiet 1915-1917* – Schemfil.

⁷ *Die Kämpfe im Drei Zinnen-Gebiet und am Kreuzberg in Sexten 1915-1917* by Generalmajor Viktor Schemfil, Universitätsverlag Wagner, Innsbruck 1986. The battalion deployed against the Roteck was Colonnello Barbetta's 1st Battalion of Infantry Regiment 92 of the Basilicata Brigade.