

## BRIGADIER CHARLES WOODHOUSE

### *"A great Dorset man and a man of the Dorsets"*

Charles Hall Woodhouse was born on April 15 1891 at Blandford St Mary. It was intended that he join the family brewing firm of Hall and Woodhouse in Blandford but whilst studying for his MA at Madgdalen College, Cambridge, he opted for the OTC in 1911. On graduation he joined the 4th Dorset's TA as a Lieutenant and, in short order, gained a commission in the regular army joining the 1<sup>st</sup> Dorsets in Belfast in 1913.

At the outbreak of war Lt Woodhouse was given command of the machine gun section and as such saw action at the battles of Mons, Le Cateau, Marne and Aisne in 1914. It was a baptism by fire. The Dorsets were only involved at Mons late in the day, notably when the BEF was in retreat in the face of overwhelming numbers. They foiled the german attempt to intercept the V<sup>th</sup> division, suffering and inflicting heavy casualties. At Le Cateau only the machine gun section at Troisvilles was engaged and acquitted itself well. When the fight back drove the germans across the Marne and the Aisne the Dorsets came under heavy fire especially in their vulnerable position, in trenches for the first time. In October Charles, having been ill, rejoined the Battalion for the second day of heavy casualties in the battle of Pont Fixe. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> at Violaines he was taken prisoner. Initially he was reported missing. He was interned in Holland and only repatriated on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1918. However, in his brief experience of action, he had distinguished himself sufficiently to gain the Dorsets' first MC, instituted in 1915., for his gallantry at Troisvilles on August 26<sup>th</sup> 1914 and was mentioned in Despatches by Sir John French on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1914. Unsurprisingly he was promoted to Captain on January 10<sup>th</sup> 1915.

Captain Woodhouse was back in action shortly after his return to England. He commanded "Y" company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Hampshire Regiment (most of whose men were in fact Dorsets) during the North Russian Relief Force expedition to Archangel in 1919.

On arrival it was immediately despatched two hundred miles by barge through flat, sandy, wooded, mosquito infested countryside to Kargomen. The Bolsheviks were upstream at Topsa and Troitza. The White Russians were to attack the former, the Hampshires the latter. Having marched there carrying ammunition, when the mules became bogged down in the swampy ground the Dorsets gave covering fire whilst the Dorset element of the company attacked. However news came that Topsa had been taken and the Dorsets were ordered there. Within days they were sent to suppress a mutiny by a White Russian battalion downstream at Ust Pinega. When they arrived the situation had resolved itself but mutiny had broken out on the Archangel – St Petersburg railway line so, once more, the Dorsets were on the move. They were detailed to hold a string of blockhouses close to the enemy, however, the opposition proved desultory and unthreatening. The decision had been made to leave North Russia, which the Dorsets did in September, pleased to

on their way before the onset of winter, but in a frustrated frame of mind and in less than good health.

A quieter period followed. Captain Woodhouse returned to the Regiment undertaking duties at Depot from 1919 to 1922, initially as Recruiting Officer and then as a Company Commander. During these years his private life flourished as he married Stella Fairlie on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1921 at Blandford St Mary and later fathered his son John, and his daughter, Ann. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was summoned urgently to Egypt in 1924 where a threatening situation had arisen. The Sirdar, Sir Lee Stark, had been murdered and Egyptian troops mutinied at Khartoum. The battalion was sent to take pressure off the troops already deployed and were kept in the Sudan until 1926. It was denied active service but had acquitted itself well. On return, Charles took up new duties as Adjutant of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion (TA) which appointment lasted until 1928.

In 1928 Charles was promoted to Major and rejoined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which was then part of the Rhine Army in Germany. The Battalion had an home posting at Portland for the next four years but the Major was appointed Depot Commander in 1929 and remained in post until 1932 when he rejoined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.

1936 saw the battalion ordered abroad again, this time to hold a watching brief in Egypt when the Abyssinian crisis blew up. Action came not in Egypt but in Palestine, where the Arab population was virtually in revolt. Promotion to Lt Colonel had come in 1935 so the undermanned battalion (a long standing problem) was his command in a dangerous situation. Sniping was constant, sabotage of communications widespread, transport ambushes frequent as were attacks on Jewish property. The Dorsets were engaged in constant patrols through hostile country, hampered by restricted powers of action. The ambushing arabs simply melted away, evading capture. They knew the terrain. The lack of manpower meant that even operations utilizing most of the battalion had little success. The occasional patrol did inflict casualties on the enemy, which helped morale, and led to the arab forces avoiding open combat and withdrawing to the north. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, supported by a draught, went in pursuit.

The frustrating situation continued – reconnaissance sorties, convoy escorts and patrols were in demand; the main road near Jenin had to be kept clear of marauding gangs; a mobile column had to be maintained for emergencies. However, the battalion's tactics proved successful so that the prominent arab leader Fawzi al Aawagi, withdrew his troops into Trans Jordan and the country reverted to its former agricultural life style.

The battalion was brought home as the bad weather struck. It arrived on New Year's Day 1937 and returned to Dover after a nine month's absence. Only one man had been lost, in a motor cycle accident, with two officers and three men wounded in action. Lt Colonel Woodhouse was awarded the DSO for his leadership as CO and the GSM and was mentioned in Despatches.

The Battalion, now severely undermanned, spent just over a year back at Dover, then moved to Aldershot. It was a period of reorganisation, which was unsettling at a time of international tension. Lt Colonel Woodhouse's four years of command expired but instead of going on half pay he was retained and sent on a course at the Senior Officers' school before taking over command of a Territorial brigade. He was also promoted to Colonel. The 4<sup>th</sup> Dorsets were transferred to the 128<sup>th</sup> Brigade based in Southampton. In early 1939 it was decided to double the numbers of the TA. An intensive recruiting campaign around the county was highly successful, numbers tripled so it was decided to split the battalion in two. The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion kept its HQ at Dorchester, covering the west and north of the county, the 5<sup>th</sup> was based on the south east. So at the start of World War II Colonel Woodhouse commanded 128<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Division until 1940 and the 211<sup>th</sup> Group and Brigade from 1940 to 1941.

From the end of 1941 Brigadier Woodhouse, as he now was, was GSO of the Home Guard Dorset Division and in 1942 held the same position at HQ Central Midland District. The Government, concerned about the threat of German airborne troops, intended to set up a patrol force of ex-servicemen to report sightings to the local military defence headquarters. An appeal for volunteers resulted in enough men coming forward to form an army! Retired officers were called on to organise companies and battalions, which were slowly armed and equipped. In 1940 the new force was designated the Home Guard. By mid 1941 Dorset had seven general purpose battalions spread across the county, plus six light anti-aircraft units defending vital defence facilities such as Vickers Armstrong, the RN Cordite Factory and the RN Torpedo Depot. It also mustered a transport column. The Home Guard's defence force safeguarded the county while the regular army prepared for the invasion of Europe. By the end of 1944 its contribution was no longer needed and it was disbanded in 1945. In 1944 Charles Woodhouse became an honorary Brigadier.

At the point at which it might have seemed that his days of service were over, the Brigadier was appointed Colonel of the Dorset Regiment. It was an unsettling time of drastic reorganisation. Charles oversaw the Regiment's reduction from a force of four experienced battle battalions to one Regular and one Territorial Battalion. In 1952 his tenure ended part way through the celebrations, delayed by the King's death, of the Regiment's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. One more call of duty was answered when the 6<sup>th</sup> Home Guard was revived in 1952 and commanded by the Brigadier until 1956.

In retirement Brigadier Woodhouse continued to show a lively interest in the Dorsets. He instigated the War Memorial Fund which financed the building of houses for the benefit of ex-soldiers in need of accommodation. He used his business acumen and local contacts to advance causes such as the Regimental Museum. He acted as its medal expert and fostered good relations with the County Museum, of which he was President. He actively supported the amalgamation of the Devons and Dorsets, attending all their social events. Not least he financed the publication of the Atkinson's History of the Dorset Regiment – the researchers' Bible.

He was equally committed to the service of his county holding important offices such as Deputy Lieutenant, member of the County Council and JP. He also maintained his interest in the Territorial Association amongst others. And he beautified Dorset by planting the five hundred woodland acres of his estate.

As was written in his obituary "Charles Woodhouse was a very great patriot. He lived for the service of his county, his Regiment and his own local countryside of Blandford and Melcombe. Burdens were piled upon his small figure, and carried cheerfully, modestly and with supreme efficiency."

Charles Woodhouse died on June 1962, 'active and happy to his last day'!

[This note is based on references in The Keep Military Museum, Dorchester]

Jean Lawson

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