

15629 Sergeant-Major John Basford



John and Kate in Hong Kong in 1906

John Basford was born on 9th February 1878 at Dudley Road, West Bromwich, the fifth (fourth son) of nine children of Henry Basford and Mary Basford (née Whinsper). John had worked in the metal trade as a faggoter, when he enlisted as a Gunner in the Royal Artillery on 8th June 1896, aged 18.

John moved to Hampshire for his early training and joined No. 20 Company Royal Garrison Artillery. His army career was nearly cut short by a serious injury to his left knee while playing football off duty in Fareham on 29th October 1897, but he recovered well. John gained his first promotion to Acting Bombardier on 1st April 1899, the full promotion followed on 23rd February 1900.

John was promoted to Corporal on 9th October 1900. He was living in barracks in Southend when married Lizzie Kate Mortimer in Alverstoke, Gosport on Christmas Eve 1902. Lizzie accompanied John on his first overseas posting in February 1903, when they travelled out to Gibraltar. After

less than a year there they were back in the UK, where John was promoted to Sergeant on 26th September 1904. Their first son, John Robert, was born in Alverstoke on 11th January 1905.

The family left the UK in the following November to travel out to Hong Kong, where they spent three years. On return to the UK in December 1908 John was posted to No. 21 Company RGA in the Scottish Coast Defences and the family moved to Leith. Their second son, Harry, was born in Leith on 24th September 1909.

On 6th December 1911 John was posted to join the Orkney Royal Garrison Artillery, a Territorial Force then seven companies strong. John became CSM Instructor to No. 7 (Kirkwall) Company and the Basford Family moved into 6 High Street, Kirkwall. Their third son, Ronald Norman, was born there on 10th June 1912. Volunteer service in the Royal Artillery already had a long history in Orkney and was popular among the young (and some older) men, appealing to their sense of adventure and also providing opportunities to travel outside the islands to annual training camps.

When Britain declared war on Germany on 4th August 1914, the companies of the Orkney RGA mobilized. Nearly 600 Orcadian Territorial gunners left their peace time occupations to man coast defence guns, most sited to protect the entrances to Scapa Flow from positions in the South Isles of Hoy, Flotta and South Ronaldsay. Nearly all of the Royal Navy's modern dreadnought battleships had already arrived in Scapa Flow, the main base of its mighty Grand Fleet.

John Basford probably deployed with his company to its gun positions, while his friend RSM Thomas Bond (with wife, Edith, Ronald Basford's godparents) stayed in the Kirkwall Territorial Centre on Cromwell Road to handle the administrative duties of mobilizing and deploying its men.

Although during World War 2 the Orkney Royal Artillery Territorials deployed together overseas (to Burma as half of 226 Heavy AA Battery), they did not do so during the Great War. Many of the Orkney RGA officers and men volunteered to undertake service overseas, but they did not leave as a unit (or even as companies). During 1915 and 1916 increasing numbers of trained Royal Marine and British Army gunners arrived to man the coast defences, releasing Orcadians who left in small groups to join many RGA Siege and Heavy Batteries to serve in France and other theatres overseas (usually after further training on different guns in RGA bases in the UK).

John Basford left Orkney before most of the Territorial gunners of the Orkney RGA. He was posted to the Woolwich Heavy Artillery Depot on 6th February 1915. His good standing in the Orkney RGA was demonstrated by the parting gift of a fine gold watch from its officers and ncos.

John moved to Lydd in Kent, where he served in three different batteries. He was promoted to Battery Quartermaster Sergeant on 15th April and to Battery Sergeant Major of 131 Heavy Battery on 4th August, when he returned to Woolwich. Another promotion and transfer found John on 15th January 1916 joining as Acting RSM Warrant Officer Class I the 38th Brigade RGA. It was then preparing to leave on overseas service, not on the Western Front but in far off East Africa.

38th Brigade arrived in Plymouth on 7th February and boarded the 9,060 ton troopship *Huntsgreen* (ex German *Derfflinger*). It sailed next morning, took on coal and water in the Cape Verde Islands and again in Durban, where John probably went ashore. On 14th March *Huntsgreen* reached the port of Mombasa, Kilindini. 38th Brigade had arrived in East Africa with its guns, 11th and 158th Batteries each had four obsolescent BL 5-inch Howitzers, but left its horses in the UK. The troops drilled hard while they waited for their mechanical transport to arrive, but tropical diseases took an early toll that included John Basford, who was hospitalised with malaria for four days in April.

38th Brigade's mechanical transport, 30 cwt lorries and Napier cars, had arrived and been tested when it left by train for Voi on 3rd May. Lieutenant-General Jan Smuts had reorganised the British force in East Africa into three divisions and 38th Brigade RGA was split up twice, having guns in all three divisions. These joined columns that pushed forward through the tropical heat and rain towards the awesome snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro and into German East Africa.



The Germans in East Africa were lead by Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who was now on the defensive but determined to tie down there as many British troops as possible. He had only 1,100 German soldiers in the Kilimanjaro area, but also almost 20,000 native troops and he used the climate and difficult terrain as his allies, only fighting the British when he had the advantage.

John Basford served a year and a half in the difficult conditions of East Africa, where from 1916 to 1918 the British force lost 3,480 fatal and missing battle casualties, while 6,308 died there of disease. Total of 7,023 soldiers were hospitalised wounded (and survived wounds), but no less than 330,232 survived admission to hospital sick. The loss in transit and long delay in the delivery of mail took a heavy toll on the morale of British troops, but John did receive a precious postcard photo and short message from his wife Kate and their three sons. On 21st January 1917 John was officially considered to be supernumerary to the establishment of 11th (Hull) Heavy Battery RGA. He embarked for the UK at Dar Es Salaam on 4th August.

John relinquished his appointment as Acting RSM on 3rd October, when back in the more familiar station of Fort Brockhurst in Hampshire. A few days later John reported to the Siege School at Horsham, where he presumably took up again the role of instructor. John was posted to 537 Siege Battery RGA as Battery Sergeant Major on 15th January 1918. John was with the battery at Lydd when he elected to start drawing his pension (after 22 years service) on 8th June 1918.

John continued to serve for over a year, most spent as 541 Siege Battery BSM at Lydd, after the Great War had ended. He was discharged in Dover on 8th January 1920. The malaria that John contracted in East Africa probably had some effect on his health in later years, but the only serious injury in his army service lasting 23 years and 215 days was that playing football in 1897! John enjoyed many more years of family life, before he died in Gosport in 1944, during World War 2.