THE 4th BATTALION, SEAFORTH HIGHLANDERS

The majority of men from **Lochbroom** served in **'B' Company,** the **4th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.** Their Company Commander was **Major Simon Keith Fraser M.C.** under **Lieutenant Colonel H W, Houldsworth, D.S.O., M.C.** They formed part of the **51st Highland Division** with **Major General Victor M Fortune, C.B.** in overall command. There were nine infantry battalions in three brigades, the 152nd, 153rd and 154th. The infantry were drawn from the Territorial Army battalions of the five Highland Regiments; The Black Watch, **The Seaforth Highlanders,** The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, The Gordon Highlanders and The Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. The Division had four regiments of artillery, a Royal Armoured Corps reconnaissance unit, and other supporting arms.

The 2nd and 4th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders formed part of the **152nd Brigade.** The Seaforths were hastily mobilised in September 1939. They left in buses from the Drill Hall in Custom House Street, Ullapool and spent the first month in Dingwall town hall in cold, rough conditions.

The Battalion then transferred to Inkerman Barracks, Woking in the first week of October, where it remained until early December when moved to Guadaloupe Barracks, Bordon, Hampshire. Embarkation leave was granted on 18th December (1st party) and 28th December (2nd party) when the first returned for duty. The Battalion left Bordon by train on 26th January 1940 for Southampton with 24 Officers and 602 Other Ranks, and embarked for service overseas. The ships had to anchor outside the port, the crossing having been delayed owing to fog. They eventually docked at Le Havre at 2100 on 27th January, with disembarkation commencing at 0730 the next day.

The troops left Le Havre by train for the Bolbec area, 25 km away. They were billeted in three villages of Raffetot, Nointot and Mirville in farmhouses and chateau stables. All areas were extremely wet and muddy. The roads and ground were frozen with ice hanging from the trees so all movement of road parties was temporarily cancelled.

TNA: WO 167/820

A ten hour train journey on 5th February transported the troops towards the Concentration Area at **Ecquedecques,** north-east of Bethune. **'B' Company** was billeted in Lières nearby.

Extracts from the 4th Seaforth Highlanders War Diary: 1940 – (TNA WO 167/820)

9th February: *"Route Marches are the order of the day. This is a rural area but overshadowed by the great coal fields of the North-East France. The people in our villages have been very kind to us, and we are all the best of friends."*

22nd February: "*The Pipes and Drums played Retreat in Ecquedecques this afternoon on the road opposite the Mayor's House. The performance appeared to be much appreciated by the Mayor and the whole civil population of the village."*

28th February: *"The Battalion today moved out of the Ecquedecques area, and proceeded in troop carrying lorries to Wingles."*

29th February: *"Our billets here at Wingles are extremely good. "B" and "C" Companies are in a disused cotton factory where they have ample room to expand themselves.*

7th/8th March: *"The Battalion left Wingles for Lys-lez-Lannoy. "B" and "C" Companies are billeted to the North-East of Leers which is a semi-rural village."*

11th March: *"Battalion Headquarters is situated in a large and comfortable farm house, with Battalion Rear Headquarters at Le Briqueterie to the West."*

12th March: *"H.R.H. The Duke of Gloucester honoured the Battalion with his presence at Battalion H.Q."*

22nd March: *"A" and "B" Companies conducted range practices today on the 2 inch Mortar Range at Bois Quatorze."*

26th March: *"Advanced party of 3 officers and 50 men moved to the Bailleul area to prepare for the arrival of the Battalion on 28.3.40."*

28th March: *"Arrived at Bailleul in severe snowstorm. Headquarters at Ferme Boddeart. "B" and "C" Companies are in farms in the Nouveau Monde area."*

During April training took place in the Nieppe Forest. Much of the time the weather was cold and rainy. Later in the month the Brigade took over a sector on the **Saar front** in the area of Hombourg-Budange on the Maginot Line. It was then that they were detached from the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.), and put under **French Command** in the **10th Army**.

Regrettably the 4th Seaforth War Diary from 1st April onwards no longer survives , but the **152 Infantry Brigade War Diary** exists for this month, including the following summary.

Summary of 152 Infantry Brigade War Diary.

April 1940

The beginning of the month found the Bde settling in to the BAILLEUL sector, thinking that they were to be there for at least six weeks. Everybody was very pleased as the sector consisted of broken hilly ground which included certain tactical features and was therefore much more interesting than the rest of the B.E.F. area. Work during the first few days was hampered by the perpetual stream of visitors.

On the 9th, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway and "Plan D" came very much to the fore. The Bde were at six hours notice, and some hard work was required to get all the necessary arrangements made. Bns were ordered to concentrate on route marching.

By the 14th "Plan D" after appearing to be a certainty, was gradually becoming more improbable, and the Bde were just preparing to resume their normal routine, when orders were received that the Div was to go to the SAAR, advance parties leaving on the 24th. At the same time Plan D remained in force, while a complete defence scheme for the BAILLEUL sector was also required for handing over to the incoming Brigade.

As a result conditions were fairly hectic, however everything was completed just in time. 132 Inf Bde who relieved us were very appreciative for what had been done.

The Bde moved out on the 25th, M.T. going by road and the remainder by train. All the billets were left in very good condition, and, in the same way as when the Brigade left WINGLES, the incoming Brigade expressed the opinion that they had never taken over better kept billets.

The move down to the SAAR was uneventful, at the same time, as far as the M.T. were concerned the chief lesson of the move was that full timings and intervals between colns must be allowed, otherwise there are bound to be delays. The train move was comfortable and well organised especially the arrangements at the two halts.

After arrival in the Metz district many difficulties were experienced. Billeting was bad and muddled. Orders from above were very brief and in many cases insufficient, and when the relief commenced on the night 29/30th April few units really understood their duties.

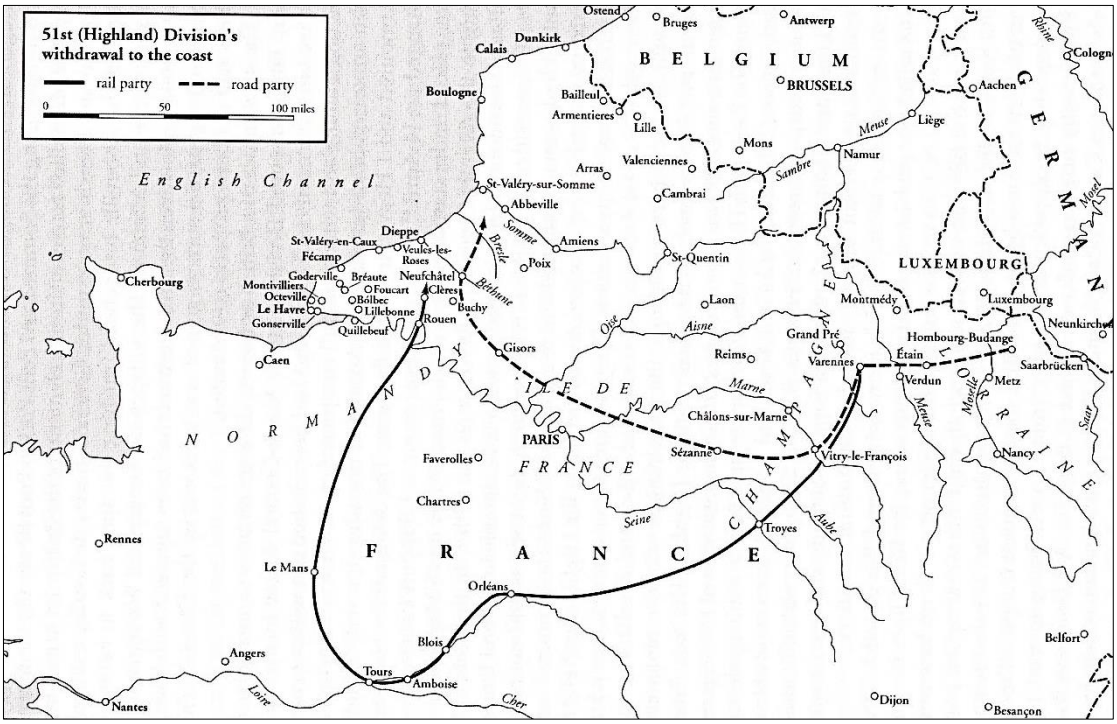
Captain.
Brigade Major 152 Infantry Brigade.

G.H.Q. 2nd ECHELON
30 MAY 1940
CENTRAL REGISTRY

RECEIVED
30 MAY 1940
WAR DIARIES
G.H.Q. 2nd Echelon

TNA WO 167/406

On 15th May the 51st Division withdrew from the Saar front owing to continued pressure from the enemy. They moved across France towards Rouen in an attempt to link up with the B.E.F. However, by this time the withdrawal of the B.E.F. from Dunkirk was already in progress and this was no longer possible. The troops were transported in buses towards the River Somme.



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Extracts from Captain Patrick Munro of Foulis' diary - Company Commander of 'C' Company, are shown in *italics* with his initials PM at the beginning.

Captain Patrick Munro of Foulis.
Photo Ross and Cromarty Heritage Society

27th May: PM. *"Travelling very slowly through Rouen we saw the preparations the French were making to try and stop the German advance. The bridges over the river were being sandbagged and hastily prepared for demolition and there were many troops about. The subsequent speed of the German advance was so great that they didn't have time or neglected to blow these bridges and the Germans found them intact on reaching the town. We travelled some 30 miles by way of Neufchatel to a RV called "Starfish Cross Roads" in the Foret d'Eu."*

It is more or less certain that the crossroads shown in this postcard, *Poteau Maitre-Jean,* south of Blangy, is the exact place where the troops rested (Starfish Crossroads.)

The signpost is one of 28 poles scattered in the forest, installed from 1876 to 1902 at the initiative of the Duke of Aumale, the Count of Paris and Count Baston d'Orléans, successive owners of the Forest of Eu. In other forests the poles are generally wooden; here they are unique, made of cast iron and each weighs several tons.

27th May: PM. *"The Battalion debussed and Companies went off to various 'hides' in the forest. A perimeter was formed with all-round defence and all the roads were blocked and covered by anti-tank rifles and guns. In the afternoon the CO took the Company Commanders in his car eight miles further north, through the small town of Blangy to a village called Le Translay which we were to occupy next day. At 9 p.m. we marched in darkness and silence to Le Translay. It had been completely evacuated in a hurry from what I saw when I went into some of the cottages. In one I found a half-eaten meal still on the table; in another a kettle boiling on the fire. Many animals had been left behind and birds in cages. Whenever I got a chance I spent my time letting out caged rabbits and birds, and loosing chained dogs, all of which would otherwise have starved."*

28th May: At Le Translay

29th May: To Grebault-Mesnil: PM.*"While walking along the road a French Army lorry passed us and then stopped. They had four or five German prisoners in the back. They were the first Germans I had seen. They were all wounded and looked very dirty and exhausted and rather frightened."*

30th May: PM. *"Some of us went to a nearby village called Huppy with the CO for a conference. The French Commander was General de Gaulle who no one then attached much importance to. He was wearing a very tattered uniform and looked extremely tired. All this time we were under command of a French Corps and the Division took its orders from the French."*

Various sources say that installed in the attic of the highest house of Les Croisettes, De Gaulle follows the progress of his tanks in combat. This was confirmed by a local resident.

Photo: Clare Church

30th May: PM. *"We then went on to the village Behen which the Battalion was to occupy that afternoon. Just as we were completing our reconnaissances the Germans began shelling the village outskirts. My Company position was in a small wood in the grounds of a large chateau on the edge of the village. The Germans had occupied this village some days before. Just outside the front door two Germans had been buried and small wooden crosses put over their graves on which their tin hats were sitting. Because of this I didn't think it was a very healthy place to have my Company HQ. So I decided to steer clear of it and dug my headquarters position in the wood not far from the platoons."*

Photo: Clare Church

31st May: PM. *"At 10 a.m. orders came for us to relieve the 2nd Seaforths in Moyenneville. The village was being shelled sporadically as we arrived. I chose a small orchard on the north (enemy) side of the village for my Company HQ. We dug two trenches, a 'V' shaped one large enough to hold ten men comfortably, and another smaller one fifteen yards away for the cooks. In my ignorance I had chosen a most unfortunate spot for my HQ. Mortar shells were coming over and bursting on impact with the top branches of the apple trees. I went off to find another site for my Company HQ in another orchard but at the south end of the village.*

1st June: At Moyenneville

2nd June: PM. *"The day was fairly quiet until midday when the Germans began shelling Moyenneville. They made a mess of the middle of the village and knocked the church steeple down. Battalion HQ rang up in the afternoon to say that we were to withdraw that night. Shortly before midnight we set off across country, parallel to, but away from the road leading out of the village. The Germans must have known some kind of relief was taking place as they were shelling this road the whole time. Our progress was slow and we seemed to come across enormous hedges and ditches every ten yards."*

Moyenneville Church

3rd June: PM. *"About 4.00 a.m. we arrived at a place called Les Alleux, the Battalion. RV."*