Latest online war diaries reveal sports activities of First World War Troops

EMBARGOED UNTIL Thursday 22 May 2014, London, 00:01 GMT – Today The National Archives is making the third batch of 724 digitised First World War unit war diaries from France and Flanders available online via its First World War 100 portal.

The unit war diaries provide interesting accounts of battles and events as well as insights into the daily routines of British troops on the Western Front. This third tranche (WO 95/2432 – WO 95/3154) contains the diaries from the Kitchener Divisions and those of the Territorial Force (later The Territorial Army). They include a number of insights into maintaining a good environment within the trenches as well as accounts of the troops' sports activities - including pillow fighting, wheelbarrow races and wrestling on mules (WO 95/2524) - that helped keep them motivated and continue fighting until the end of the war.

Also amongst this batch are the unit war diaries for the 36th (Ulster) Division, which had many casualties on 1 July 1916, the 46th (North Midland) Division, who after their failure at the Gommecourt Salient in July 1916, went on to be the division which broke the Hindenburg Line in September 1918 and the 66th (2nd East Lancashire) Division, which was the last division to leave the UK for France in March 1917.

William Spencer, author and principal military records specialist at The National Archives said: “Now that this latest batch of unit war diaries is online, people all around the world can read the official army accounts to discover more about the troops on the Western Front. The diaries note successful battles, such as 46th Division breaking the Hindenburg Line, as well as failures and casualties in key battles such as those on the Somme in 1916. They also provide rare insights into how the troops maintained the environment in the trenches as well as the sports days which helped to keep them motivated to fight.”

List of highlights from the third batch unit war diaries:

- A sports day programme dated 31 October 1917, which notes pillow fighting, wheelbarrow races and wrestling on mules – ref: WO 95/2524
- Sketch of a ‘snapshot’ view from the front (which notes ‘dead animals’ and even a ‘dead Frenchman’) – ref: WO 95/2970/3
- 2 photos giving a ‘how to’ and ‘how not to’ lay trench boards – ref: WO 95/2670
- Diagrams of underground dressing station – refs: WO 95/2648/1 & 2648/2
- 3 photos of battalion officers from 7th Battalion Black Watch Fife (one group photo and 2 photos of the Battalion on the move) – ref: WO 95/2879
- Printed invitation to discuss Peace terms by Austro-Hungarian Government dated 12 September 1916, discovered in October 1918 – ref: WO 95/2959
- Bound booklet “A Short Description of the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel” by Brigadier General W R Ludlow KCB CB DL dated 1 July 1918 – ref: WO 95/2756 (PDF ref: pg. 38-49 of WO 95/2756-2_2)

The next batch of unit war diaries will be made available online in the autumn.
Notes to Editors:

Spokespeople available:
William Spencer is Principal Military Specialist at The National Archives where he has worked since 1993. He served in the Royal Navy, including operational service in the Falklands in 1982, and holds an MA in War Studies from the prestigious Department of War Studies at King's College London. William is also the author of the bestselling books Medals: the Researcher's Guide, First World War Army Service Records, Air Force Records and Family History in the Wars.

More on the Unit War Diaries (file series WO 95)
The National Archives has one of the largest First World War collections in the world. The diaries are the most popular records from The National Archives' First World War collection (file series WO 95) and the first in a series of First World War records to be digitised as part of The National Archives' centenary programme – First World War 100 – which spans a five-year period from June 2014 to June 2019.

The unit war diaries are arranged by front, then by division, then by the units within each division. This digitisation will allow researchers around the world to access the diaries as never before. We plan to digitise more war diaries as part of our centenary programme.

First World War 100 - The National Archives First World War Centenary Programme
First World War 100 - a new digital platform - has been created to guide people through the vast collection of historic records, letters, wills, maps, photographs, illustrations and artworks held by The National Archives. Adding content throughout the five year programme, First World War 100 will be the central hub for the public to search and view official First World War records.

About The National Archives:
For the record, for good…The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk www.legislation.gov.uk

First World War Centenary Partnership, led by IWM
The National Archives is a member of the First World War Centenary Partnership, established in 2010 and led by IWM. The First World War Centenary Partnership is a network of over 2,000 cultural and educational not-for-profit organisations from 37 countries, who are producing a collective programme of events, activities and resources from 2014 – 2018 to mark the centenary. www.1914.org