

## **1st Battalion The South Wales Borderers**

### **World War I**

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#### **Summary of Service:**

*4th August 1914: Stationed at Bordon, Hampshire as part of 3rd Brigade, 1st Division. 13th August 1914: Landed at Le Havre, France with BEF. 11th November 1918: Part of 3rd Brigade, 1st Division at Fresnoy le Grand, north of Le Quesnoy. 12th June 1919: Landed at Tilbury Docks.*

At the outbreak of war the 1st Battalion was quartered at Bordon, near Aldershot, in the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Division. It went to France with the original British Expeditionary Force and took part in all those earlier battles of the war which foiled the great German plan and destroyed for ever their hopes of a speedy victory over France.

This plan took the form of an advance across the Franco-German frontier by the two armies of the left, while three more in the centre and on the right carried out a gigantic enveloping movement through the Ardennes and through Belgium in order to encircle Paris and drive the French armies up against their eastern frontier, there to compel their surrender. The essence of the plan was speed, so that France should be beaten before the slow mobilising Russia could come to her assistance.

The British Expeditionary Force took its place on the left of the French Armies, and thus met the full force of the German right wing at Mons. Forced back by greatly superior numbers and by the retirement of the French, they carried out the famous Retreat from Mons right back to the south-east of Paris. Then General Joffre, the French Commander-in-Chief, staged his great counter attack, and the BEF advanced with him. Driving the enemy back across the Marne they came to grips with him on the heights north of the Aisne, where a bloody struggle ensued in which the Twenty-Fourth fought as their traditions demanded. Then followed the extension of the battle line northwards through Flanders to the Channel, the move of the BEF to Flanders and the great First Battle of Ypres. Here the weakened BEF held up repeated and desperate German efforts to force a way through with superior numbers to the Channel ports. Had the Germans succeeded the war would have been won. Nothing stopped them but sheer dogged fighting in which the Twenty-Fourth played a memorable part at Gheluvelt.

#### **AISNE 1914**

On the Aisne, the battalion carried out a most gallant attack on the Chemin des Dames, losing 150 men, and a few days later, on 26th September, held a vital position on the Mont Faucon spur against a greatly superior German counter attack. Men fought hand to hand in the quarries, and it was nothing but sheer grit which held the ridge. The battalion lost 8 officers and 200 men and received many congratulations on its gallant resistance against heavy odds. Sir Douglas Haig, who was at that time their Corps Commander, wrote, 'The conduct of the South Wales Borderers in driving back the strong attack made on them is particularly deserving of praise'. He subsequently visited the battalion to thank it in person for having saved the situation on the Aisne.

#### **GHELUVELT - 31st OCTOBER 1914**

At the end of ten days' fighting in mud and rain the 1st Battalion found themselves on 31st October 1914, holding a position in front of Gheluvelt Chateau, in touch with the Scots Guards on their left, and with the Welch Regiment in and in front of Gheluvelt Village on their right. Close in front of the battalion's trenches was a wood which, though it gave concealment from the German artillery observers, afforded their infantry good cover in which to collect for an attack. C and B Companies were on the right in rather exposed positions and close to the wood. D Company on their left bent back to join up with A Company and the Scots Guards on the edge of the Chateau grounds. Two platoons of A Company formed the battalion reserve inside the grounds.

It had been a troubled night with constant sniping and frequent shelling which developed shortly before daybreak into a bombardment of tremendous severity followed by repeated infantry attacks. C Company in its exposed position on the right suffered severely, but the battalion stuck stubbornly to its line and beat back all the attacks. One of these left a party of Germans established in a trench facing B Company, but so sited that a platoon of A Company, with the help of a Scots Guards machine gun, was able to enfilade it with destructive results, whereupon the surviving Germans, some sixty in all, surrendered. This success was a great encouragement and, in Colonel Leach's words, 'instilled new life into everyone'. A platoon of C Company actually counter attacked and drove the enemy out of a small copse on the right front.

Before long, however, the situation took a change for the worse. Though under heavy rifle fire, D Company and B Company's left were shielded from the shelling by the copse in front, but the rest of B and C beyond them suffered heavily. The Welch were in a bad or worse plight, and some time after 10 a.m. their right was overwhelmed, apparently by Germans who had penetrated into Gheluvelt

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from the South. Thus C Company found itself under enfilade rifle and machine gun fire from its right. Major Lawrence, the Company Commander, stuck stoutly to his position setting a magnificent example of steadfast courage. Before long the remaining company of the Welch was overwhelmed, and then from front, flank and rear the enemy swarmed over the battered trenches to which the remnants of C Company were clinging. Major Lawrence went down fighting to the last, and only a handful of men managed to force their way back through the Germans who, pushing on drove them and B Company back into the Chateau grounds. This seems to have been between 1 and 2 p.m.

The Reserve, two platoons of A Company, had prepared a position on the east side of the Chateau grounds, and to this D Company and the remaining half of A Company fell back. In the meantime Colonel Leach and part of his Battalion Headquarters had occupied a position along the light railway just west of the Chateau where the remnants of B and C Companies eventually rallied. With these and a few Scots Guardsmen, Colonel Leach counter attacked.

The effect of the charge was immediate. The Germans were surprised, many were shot or bayoneted, others bolted throwing away rifles and equipment as they fled. In their flight they afforded targets to A and D Companies, and to the Scots Guards. These stood up on the bank and did great execution among the retiring enemy, while Colonel Leach's men lined the edge of the Chateau grounds to the right. The position was still very insecure as the right flank was quite open and the Germans were in Gheluvelt Village beyond it, but a little later the Germans began bombarding the ground to the battalion's right rear, and units of British Infantry were seen advancing. These were the 2nd Worcestershire coming up to counter attack. Their advance completed the work which the stout resistance of the Twenty-Fourth had begun. The Germans to the right of the battalion fled in confusion, and the Worcestershire, prolonging the battalion's line towards Gheluvelt Village, made that flank secure. South of the village however the 7th Division had suffered terribly, and after dark the 1st Brigade with the Twenty-Fourth and the Worcestershire were withdrawn to a new line 600 yards west of Gheluvelt.

Of all the fighting that the 1st Battalion went through in France its defence of Gheluvelt Chateau stands out as its greatest achievement. Sir John French, the Commander-in-Chief, in his book acknowledged the 'indomitable courage and dogged tenacity' which the battalion displayed. This defence came at a critical moment for the BEF was standing with its back to the wall. Had the Germans succeeded in breaking through the Channel ports were at their mercy.

Both the Twenty-Fourth and the Worcestershire Regiment remember Gheluvelt with a special pride. Without the 1st Twenty-Fourth's gallant stand and counter attack the Worcestershire's magnificent advance could never have been made. Had this advance failed the efforts of the Twenty-Fourth would have been in vain.

Gheluvelt also cost it dear, with Major WL Lawrence killed, the Commanding Officer Colonel Leach, so badly wounded that he could never resume command, and over 400 officers and men in the casualty list, but it was an outstanding achievement, rivalling in value and importance even the great stand at Talavera. For another fortnight the remnant of the battalion, now under Major Reddie, continued in the fight, repulsing several more attacks, if none of quite the intensity of 31st October, and when it was at last taken out to rest it had lost all its officers but four and over 800 NCOs and men.

### **FESTUBERT, GIVENCHY AND LOOS 1915**

Its rest period was interrupted in the middle of December 1914 by a call to recover trenches near Festubert from which the Indian Corps had been driven. It could do no more than re-establish a line in the water-logged mud flats round Festubert, in which region and in the adjacent sectors of the Rue du Bois and Givenchy it spent the first five months of 1915. These were marked by the successful repulse of the Kaiser's Birthday attack on Givenchy (January 25th) and by the unavailing display of devotion on that day of disaster, 9th May 1915, when the First Division shattered itself against the German breastworks along the Rue du Bois, enormously strengthened since the Neuve Chapelle attack and virtually impregnable against attackers so inadequately supplied with artillery and ammunition. After May 9th it shifted across the La Bassée Canal to relieve the French, and from then till the battle of Loos was in and out of the different sectors of the British right. Before Loos, Colonel Reddie left to take command of a brigade, and it was Major Gwynn who led the battalion throughout the three weeks' fighting of Loos (25th September-13th October 1915). It was in reserve for the original attack but had plenty of fighting, making one gallant but unsuccessful attempt against Hulluch, beating off several counter-attacks; one on 26th September being in considerable force, and adding nearly another 200 casualties to its list.

### **THE SOMME 1916**

The winter of 1915-16 the battalion spent in the salient created by the Loos fighting or in the adjacent sectors taken over early in 1916 from the French. Lt.-Colonel Gwynn had been invalided and Lt.-Colonel Collier was in command. 'Trench warfare' that winter tended to be aggressively conducted by both sides, and the fighting was often fierce and in the aggregate very costly. The battalion had a particularly hard struggle in February 1916 for some craters just South of Loos, but it was even more severely tried when in the middle of July it had its first turn in the long drawn out struggle on the Somme. In that it had in all three turns, near Contalmaison in the middle of July 1916, near High Wood in the second half of August, near Flers at the end of September. None of these coincided with any of the main attacks, but in these intermediate periods of consolidation and preparation the fighting, if on a smaller scale, was often of great bitterness, and intensity, and the 1st Battalion's efforts to capture the Intermediate Trench near High Wood involved some desperate struggles and substantial casualties.

The third winter of the war the 1st Battalion spent mainly on the Somme battle-field or just South of it, in sectors recently taken over from the French. The weather defied description and the conditions were atrocious. If there was less fighting than in the previous winter the alternations of frost and thaw, snow and rain on a permanent foundation of mud and slime were awful and the sick-rate was high, the invalided including Colonel Collier, who was replaced by Colonel Taylor.

### **3rd YPRES 1917**

In March 1917, when the Germans retired 'according to plan' to the Hindenburg Line, the First Division found itself detailed for a spell of road-making; this was followed in April by a transfer to Flanders and before long by its selection for employment in that descent 1917-18 on the Flanders coast in which it was hoped the Ypres offensive of 1917 would culminate. This involved its seclusion behind the barbed-wire of the 'Hush Hush' camp at Le Clipon, with its rumours of awful epidemics and its training for the descent which never came off. Not till the very end of 1917, when it was employed in the closing stages of "Third Ypres", was the 1 SWB again in action, and then the main difficulty was that of movement, of reaching the Germans rather than of defeating them. Mud foiled the attack of 10th November 1917, along the Goudberg Spur, and in the mud of 'the Salient' the 1st Battalion spent the winter and early spring, moving down to the Givenchy area in April in time to come in for the second of the great German 'pushes' of 1918 and to distinguish itself greatly by its stubborn and highly successful defence of Loigne Chateau on 18th April, another notable achievement of vital importance.

### **BREAKING THE HINDENBURG LINE 1918**

After a somewhat uneventful summer, spent mostly in 'quiet' quarters, the 1st Battalion moved at the end of August to the extreme right of the British line, joining the Ninth Corps in the Fourth Army, and for the next two months it shared in that Army's 'Advance to Victory'. It was heavily engaged early in September round Holnon and Maissemy, in the breaking of the Hindenburg Line at Bellenglise on 27th September 1918, when the First Division accomplished great things, and in October near Wassigny, and it fought its last battle in France when on 4th November it captured Catillon. The Armistice found it at Fresnoy le Grand and from there it marched with its Division into Germany, having been detailed for the Army of Occupation. From first to last it had had 50 officers and 1,174 men killed and 70 officers and 2,400 men wounded out of the 258 officers and 6,201 other ranks entered on its rolls. The 1st Battalion saw one theatre of war only and served all its time in the same brigade and Division.

After the Armistice the 1st Battalion's Colours were brought out, and the Colour saved at Isandlwana was carried into Germany with the Army of Occupation. The same fighting spirit and soldierly qualities which had saved that Colour and defended Rorke's Drift had carried the Twenty-Fourth to victory in the greatest war in history.