

5th (Pioneer) Battalion The South Wales Borderers

World War I

Fact Sheet: 3-B07-04

Page: 1 of 1

Summary of Service:

5th (Service) Battalion was formed at Brecon in September 1914 and moved to Park House Camp, Tidworth, Hampshire as part of 58th Brigade, 19th Division. December 1914: Moved to Basingstoke, Hampshire in billets. 10th January 1915: Became Pioneer Battalion of 19th Division. January 1915: Moved to Burnham, Somerset in billets. March 1915: Moved to Hursley Park, Hampshire. May 1915: Moved to Tournay Barracks, Bulford, Hampshire. April 1915: Moved Perham Down, Tidworth. 16th July 1915: Landed at Havre as part of 19th Division. 11th November 1918: Pioneer Battalion 19th Division at Hergies, north of Bavai, France. June 1919: Battalion disbanded.

The 5th (Service) Battalion was formed early in September 1914 under command of Colonel CV Trower, who had served in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and had taken retirement in 1905 after commanding the 1st Battalion. Under his wise leadership the 5th Battalion was to reach a high standard of discipline and efficiency, and to bring new credit on the Regiment. On 16th July 1915, the battalion landed in France in the 38th Brigade of the 19th Division. It soon became the Divisional Pioneer Battalion, and as such combined the duties of trench digging and mining with bombing and hard fighting.

After receiving its baptism of fire at Loos in September 1915, the battalion was kept busy in that area throughout the winter repairing roads, constructing tramways, improving trenches, and in mining in close proximity to the enemy. For this type of work the men of South Wales were unequalled. But it was not only as Pioneers that they shone.

On 14th March 1916, the Germans exploded a mine under a salient in the British line known as the 'Duck's Bill'. Half the salient was destroyed, and most of the garrison, including a working party of the battalion, were killed or wounded. A party of volunteers of the battalion rushed across the open under heavy fire, losing two men killed on the way, reached the Duck's Bill, and with the rest of the garrison put up a fight which prevented the enemy from exploiting the success of the mine.

As an example of the discipline and efficiency of the battalion may be quoted the digging and wiring of a new front line 750 yards in length and 150 yards out in No Man's Land in a single night, and so noiselessly as to escape entirely the notice of the enemy.

During the great battle of the Somme in 1916 the battalion had its share of digging, holding trenches, and clearing villages with bomb and bayonet, losing 220 men in the last ten days of July.

In March 1917, it was moved up to Ypres to prepare for the attack on the Messines Ridge, launched on 7th June. In this battle the 19th Division attacked in two waves. D Company was attached to the two brigades forming the leading wave, while A Company went with the second wave. Their duties were to consolidate the captured positions. B and C Company were told off to make a passage for the guns following the infantry. Both D and A Companies distinguished themselves. A sergeant of D Company with a party of his men by skilful tactics captured a strong point which was holding up the advance and took 20 prisoners. In consolidating the positions and building strong points much fighting had to be done, while the companies getting the guns forward worked hard under fire. For their part in the successful Battle of Messines the battalion gained two MCs, 2 DCMs, and 2 MMs, which shows the value of their work both as Pioneers and as Infantrymen.

The 5th Battalion was heavily employed in the summer and autumn of 1917, during the struggles of the Third Battle of Ypres, and at Passchendael, when the work of the Pioneers in the shell-stricken area became of first importance.

In the great German attack of March 1918, the battalion was in the Third Army upon which fell a great part of the assault. The battalion fought a memorable action, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy by determined counter-attacks and withdrawing steadily to positions which it had dug during the preceding days. The Germans were checked in the evening at a cost to the battalion of 150 casualties. Next day the rearguard fighting continued, the battalion making stand after stand and fighting most resolutely. This was the first occasion on which the battalion had fought as infantry, and they had shown that they could march and shoot as well as dig and wire. They had finely upheld the traditions of the Twenty-Fourth in one of the greatest trials to which the British Army has been subjected.

With the Sixth Battalion, the Fifth took part in stemming the great German attack on the River Aisne in May and June 1918, and added the Battle Honour 'Aisne, 1918' to those already won. It served the rest of the war in France, took part in the victorious advance of 1918, and was finally disbanded in June 1919.