

## 10th and 11th Battalions The South Wales Borderers

### World War I

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#### Summary of Service:

**10th (Service) Battalion (1st Gwent)** was raised by the Welsh National Executive Committee in October 1914. December 1914: Moved to Colwyn Bay as part of 130th Brigade, 43rd Division. 29th April 1915: Formation became 115th Brigade, 38th (Welsh) Division. July 1915: Moved to Hursley Park, Winchester then to Hazeley Down, Southampton. 4th December 1915: Landed at Le Havre, France. 11th November 1918: Part of 115th Brigade, 38th (Welsh) Division near Aulnoye, France. May 1919: Remnant of Battalion embarked at Le Havre for Southampton.

**11th (Service) Battalion (2nd Gwent)** was raised by the Welsh National Executive Committee in October 1914. January 1915: Moved to Colwyn Bay. 29th April 1915: Formation became 115th Brigade, 38th (Welsh) Division. August 1915: Moved to Hazeley Down, Southampton. 4th December 1915: Landed at Le Havre, France. 27th February 1918: Battalion disbanded in France.

The 10th Battalion (1st Gwent) and 11th Battalion (2nd Gwent) were both raised in October 1914, as part of the 115th Brigade of the 38th (Welsh) Division. In December 1915, they went to France, where their Division was to remain until the end of the War, winning much glory for Wales.

After spells in the Line at Givenchy in the spring of 1916 the Division moved to the River Ancre on 3rd July at the opening of the Battle of the Somme, and both battalions had their first real action in the attack on Mametz Wood. Here they had five days' hard fighting in a thick wood flanked by machine guns. It required skill and determination on the part of all ranks to turn the Germans out, and fine work was done with bomb and bayonet by the courage and initiative of junior leaders. The 10th Battalion lost 180 men and the 11th Battalion 220.

After an uneventful winter in the trenches the Welsh Division found itself attacking the Pilckem Ridge on 31st July 1917, the opening day of the Third Battle of Ypres. The two leading Brigades were to capture as their three objectives the German line east of the Ypres Canal, the German second line on the Pilckem Ridge, and a further ridge east of Pilckem known as Iron Cross Ridge. The 115th Brigade was then to pass through, push forward another 700 yards to the Steenbeeke and secure crossings over that stream.

The attack started at 3.50 a.m. The first two objectives were taken up to time but there was hard fighting at Iron Cross, and when the 11th Battalion reached that area about 9 a.m. to pass through they came under machine gun fire from some still untaken pillboxes. In spite of this, the 11th completed the capture of the Iron Cross Ridge and swept down to the Steenbeeke, dealing with the pillboxes in a manner which showed their training and dash. As an example, a machine gun nest was holding up the left. It was rushed and captured by a platoon, together with 50 prisoners. Another machine gun was causing heavy casualties at short range. Sergeant Ivor Rees led his platoon forward till he had worked round to the rear of the position and was within 20 yards of the gun. He rushed the post, shot one of the team, bayoneted another and silenced the gun. Then he bombed the adjacent pillbox, killed five of its garrison, and captured the rest, two officers and thirty men. For this gallant and dashing piece of leadership he received the Victoria Cross.

The three leading companies of the 11th Battalion now crossed the Steenbeeke and started to establish their bridgeheads. This work was so good that when at 3 p.m. two large bodies of Germans advanced to counter attack, the 11th bowled them over with their rifles and Lewis guns. Unfortunately, the battalion on their left was driven back, and with their left thus exposed to enfilade machine gun fire the 11th was forced to withdraw across the Steenbeeke.

At this time the 10th Battalion in reserve were busy digging a line in front of Iron Cross Ridge to act as a support of the 11th along the Steenbeeke. About 5 p.m. D Company of the 10th was sent forward to help the 11th, and did magnificent work in helping to repulse a second counter attack. By this time rain, mud and shells were making conditions very difficult. The 11th had lost heavily, the enemy was only 100 yards from the Steenbeeke, and his machine guns and snipers made movement very dangerous.

Next day (1st August 1917) the Germans opened a terrific artillery barrage along the Steenbeeke and on Iron Cross Ridge, which seemed to herald a counter attack. B Company of the 10th went forward to reinforce the 11th, A Company began consolidating a support line in the old German machine gun posts, and C Company took up fresh ammunition and bombs. About 9 p.m. the shelling slackened off, and the 10th did fine work in organising the position and sending out patrols.

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Next day, after playing a part second to none in a most successful action, both battalions were relieved. Their Division had gone straight through to its final objective, had consolidated the ground won, and had smashed up the famous German 3rd Guards Division. The 10th Battalion suffered 200 casualties while the 11th, who had the harder fighting, lost 350 of all ranks.

After taking part in the battle of Langemarck in the latter half of August, in which the 10th Battalion lost another 100 men and the 11th only slightly less, the Welsh Division was relieved and sent down to Armentières. In this sector both Battalions distinguished themselves by their vigorous patrol work in which they took prisoners, made valuable identifications, and generally kept the German patrols under by their determined action. On the night of the 7th/8th November the 10th carried out a big raid by 10 officers and 270 men on a front of 300 Yards. They penetrated 200 yards into the defences, blew up three concrete dugouts, killed at least 50 Germans and took 15 prisoners, at a cost to themselves of five killed and 45 wounded.

In February 1918, the 11th Battalion was disbanded on the reduction of the strength of British Infantry Brigades from four battalions to three. In the bitter fighting of Mametz Wood and Pilckem Ridge they had more than maintained the honour a reputation of the Twenty-Fourth, and had added another Victoria Cross to the already long roll.

The 10th Battalion remained in the Welsh Division, and took part in its victorious advance across the old Somme battlefield in the great British offensive of August/September 1918. In this advance the gallantry and initiative of the junior leaders was conspicuous, NCOs taking over when their officers were hit, and on more than one occasion a platoon was led forward with determination by a private soldier.

The Battalion took part in the breaking of the Hindenburg Line in September and October, and on the 8th October, in the attack on Villers Outreaux which cost the Battalion 200 casualties, CSM Jack Williams was awarded another Victoria Cross for the Regiment. The attack started at 1 am, and met with uncut wire and heavy machine gun fire which caused confusion and delay. Finding his men held up by a machine gun post, CSM Williams engaged it with one of his Lewis guns, while he and Private Evans, who won the DCM for his gallantry, worked round the flank, rushed the post and captured the entire enemy position of 11 men, and so enabled the advance to go on.

The battalion fought with the Welsh Division throughout the remaining stages of the advance to victory, and so brought to a close a distinguished career in which the fine spirit common to all the battalions of the Twenty-Fourth had shone undimmed.

