

## **12th (Service) Battalion The South Wales Borderers**

### **World War I**

**Fact Sheet: 3-B07-08**

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

*12th (Service) Battalion (3rd Gwent) was raised at Newport, Monmouthshire by the Welsh National Executive Committee in March 1915 as a 'bantam' battalion. July 1915: Moved to Prees Heath, Whitchurch, Shropshire as part of Welsh Bantam Brigade. September 1915: Moved to Aldershot and brigade became 119th Brigade, 40th Division. December 1915: Moved to Marne Camp, Blackdown, Hampshire. 2nd June 1916: Landed at Le Havre, France. 10th February 1918: Battalion disbanded in France at Le Havre, France.*

The 12th (Service) Battalion was raised in Monmouthshire in March 1915, and became part of the Welsh Bantam Brigade. Recruits were confined to the height of 5 feet to 5 feet 3 inches. Progress in forming the battalion was slow, as many Monmouthshire men had already enlisted in the 17th and 18th (Bantam) Battalions, The Welsh Regiment. After training at Prees Heath, Shropshire and Aldershot it eventually went to France on 1st June 1916, in the 119th Brigade of the 40th Division. Its first serious action was at Gonnelieu in April 1917, when an attack was made by the 40th and 8th Divisions. The 12th Battalion carried the formidable defences of Fifteen Ravine with great gallantry and skill, securing all their objectives at a cost of 26 killed and missing and 45 wounded. They counted 40 dead Germans in the position and many more beyond it.

In May 1917, they carried out a most successful raid, winning a MC and eight MMs. They remained in the same sector throughout the summer, distinguishing themselves by capturing German patrols and by several raids. In one of these, carried out by two officers and 32 men, the Bangalore Torpedo which was to blow a path through the wire failed to explode. The officer in charge thereupon cut the wire himself, led his men through to the second trench and brought them out with only two casualties after inflicting heavy loss on the enemy.

#### **BOURLON WOOD**

The 20th November 1917 marked the opening of the great Battle of Cambrai, in which, the 2nd Battalion fought with such determination. On the second day of the battle efforts were made by two divisions to push northwards from the new salient against Bourslon Wood and village, a dominating feature on the northern edge of the battlefield whose capture was essential for the exploitation of the success already gained. This attack failed, and next evening (22nd November) the 40th Division took over the line with orders for a fresh attack to be made on the following day.

This attack would encounter the enemy first in Bourslon Wood, a thick wood with a sunken road running east and west through the middle of it, and then in Bourslon Village, which lay on the western half of the northern edge of the wood. The 12th Battalion was the left attacking battalion of the Brigade, and in turn had the 121st Brigade on its left. Its objective was the northern edge of the wood, east of the village, and the eastern part of the village itself.

At first the attack went well and the trenches outside the wood were easily cleared. Inside the Germans were in strength, but the 12th went for them with the bayonet and drove them back. There was sharp fighting at the sunken road where the Germans lost several machine guns and some prisoners. Then their resistance stiffened, especially on the left, but with the aid of the companies in support the northern edge of the wood was won, and on reinforcement by the Royal Welch Fusiliers, a footing was gained in the village also. But the 51st Division on the right had made little progress and when, at about 1 p.m., a heavy counter-attack developed, the right company, its flanks in the air, was driven back to the sunken road. Here the attack was held, as was another delivered at 4 p.m., although the flanks were unsupported and the pressure very great. In the nick of time two companies of the 18th Battalion, Welsh Regiment came up and a counter attack was staged which won back some of the ground. In this fighting great leadership was displayed by junior commanders and by private soldiers who had taken charge. Small parties cleared strong points and pushed forward, and eventually the high ground inside the wood was secured and advanced posts established on its northern edge.

During the night the battalion was reorganised and beat off several small attacks. Next morning at 8.30 a.m., the enemy came forward in strength and drove in the advanced posts, but the 12th withheld their fire until the Germans were only 150 yards distant, when the attack melted away under the hail of bullets. A heavy artillery barrage then compelled withdrawal to the sunken road, but on the barrage lifting the 12th, reinforced by two companies of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and by the 15th Hussars on foot, recovered their old line. Further heavy fighting continued, but in the evening the remnants of the 12th, with the other troops, remained in occupation of the high ground inside the wood and part of the village.

Next day, 25th November 1917, a fresh attack was made which the 12th Battalion supported with fire. No great progress resulted. In the evening, the 61st Division came up to relieve the 40th. About 10 p.m. just as the 2nd/6th Duke of Wellington's Regiment arrived to take over from the 12th the Germans tried a fresh advance. This the 12th met with a great burst of fire, and after that the relief was carried out with no great difficulty.

The 12th Battalion had won great honour for itself at Bourslon Wood. In the three days' fighting it had lost 10 officers and 123 men killed and missing, and 12 officers and 243 men wounded, a total of 386 casualties of all ranks. It was rewarded with two DSOs, six MCs, six DCMs, and eleven MMs. This was the end of its heavy fighting. After a spell in the line in December and January, it met the same fate as the 11th Battalion and was disbanded on the reduction of the strength of brigades to three battalions. It had had a short life but a most distinguished one and the Twenty-Fourth are proud to number 'Bourslon Wood' amongst their Battle Honours.

