

1st Battalion The South Wales Borderers

Waziristan 1937

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Summary of Service:

1st Battalion The South Wales Borderers were moved in February 1937 by lorry convoy from Rawalpindi to Mir Ali fort in Waziristan, there to join the 1st Indian Brigade with three battalions of Gurkha Rifles. For the next ten months the battalion was almost constantly engaged in arduous task of escort to convoys, picqueting mountain features, building perimeters and sangers, interspersed with deep-range patrols and attacks on (and by) tribal laskars – in fact, the typical Frontier warfare familiar to so many British infantrymen for more than a century. By the time the battalion were withdrawn to Rawalpindi in December 1937, they had marched some 800 miles over some of the worlds' most rugged terrain (climbing thousands of feet) and fought numerous action and skirmishes.

On New Year's Day 1936, the men of 1st Battalion South Wales Borderers were attending the Proclamation Day Parade together with other units of the 1st Indian Division at Rawalpindi. The battalion's activities in 1936 followed the traditional pattern: collective training during the winter, a march up to the Murree Hills for the hot weather, and return to Rawalpindi in October. Games and sports from polo and racing to rigger and cross-country running kept all ranks fit, and the battalion could always produce teams of quality and determination. The Borderers notably won the District Athletic Championship in 1935 and shared it in 1936 with the 5th Brigade, Royal Artillery.

The battalion was brigaded with Gurkha units normally stationed at Abbottabad, some 70 miles away, and the Brigade was usually brought together for a fortnight's collective training each year. In 1936 they concentrated at Khalabat under command of the Commanding Officer of the Borderers, Lieutenant Colonel AE Williams DSO MC in the absence of the Brigade Commander; the training being devoted the mountain warfare, to which the country lent itself admirably. The last exercise involved a march of three days over the mountains between Khalabat and Abbottabad on tracks pronounced by the experts as impassable by camels. It was certainly a most difficult route, passing at times along the edges of sheer precipices, the 500 camels of the transport column with their wide swinging loads required careful leading, in which men of the Borderers took a hand, for the normal drivers found it impossible to lead their usual strings of three. All, however, arrived safely, and only one had lost his load. One of the Machine Gun platoons got into a position from which they only extricated themselves by man-handling their guns, for the track was too narrow for laden mules. It was one of those adventures which linger long in the memory. Trouble was brewing in Waziristan during the latter part of the year, and the Brigade had to stand by ready to move at short notice for a fortnight in December but in the event things quietened down.

On 3rd January 1937, a detachment from the Borderers went to Jhelum to attend the unveiling of a lectern presented by the battalion to the church in memory of Captain F Spring and 34 other ranks of the 24th Foot who lost their lives there in 1857 during the Indian Mutiny.

The situation in Waziristan worsened again in January 1937. When a political agent was murdered and a column ambushed with severe casualties in February, the 1st (Abbottabad) Brigade was ordered up to reinforce the troops in tribal territory. The Borderers moved by rail to Bannu on 23rd February. A Company (Captain AR Smeathers) having gone ahead two days earlier, and on the following day they marched in pouring rain to a muddy camp at Saidgi, where they spent a wet and uncomfortable night. On the 25th February they marched to Mir Ali, a camp just inside tribal territory which held the headquarters of the local political administration, where the remainder of the Brigade, under command of Brigadier RI Inskip DSO MC, comprising the 2/5th Royal Gurkha Rifles and the 1/6th and 2/6th Gurkha Rifles together with the Abbottabad Mountain Artillery Brigade, had concentrated.

The stay at Mir Ali lasted nearly three weeks, during which hard training in mountain warfare was carried out under active service conditions. Brigadier Inskip, an Indian Army officer, who had taken the trouble to visit South Wales before taking over the Brigade with a view to learning something for himself of the area from which his British battalion was recruited, watched this training with keen and helpful interest, and in the result all ranks had much for which to thank him. During this period the tribal administration was doing its utmost to obtain pacification of the country without the use of force, and the Battalion watched with interest the assembly of a jbirga, a gathering of the tribesmen, to listen to the Resident of Waziristan, for whom C Company (Captain CF Blackden) provided the guard of honour. The Faqir of Ipi, however, a turbulent irreconcilable, had a strong following among the younger tribesmen; their elders, those who attended the jhirga, could do no more than promise to try to prevent the Faqir from making it a religious war, for they had no control over the young men.

The frontier tribesman is a guerrilla fighter par excellence. He is a master of the art of camouflage and can hide himself in the open without cover of any sort. He watches thus unseen the movements of his foes, noting any weaknesses and routine movements. He moves up and down his mountains with remarkable rapidity, being encumbered with no more than his rifle, a knife, a few rounds of ammunition and a handful of food. He will be fed and sheltered in any village, and thus, no matter the size of the lashkar (a tribal force), he

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is untroubled by logistics. He can concentrate up to 3,000 warriors in 24 hours if he finds a target, an attack on which gives prospect of success, and they will not be seen from the ground until the moment has come to strike.

In appearance the tribesman is a tough individual, varying in colour from light brown to white, dressed in a sort of cloak which becomes his blanket by night, and wearing pyjama trousers, off white in colour. He believes that the killing of an infidel is a sure passport to Heaven.

His country consists of barren mountains averaging 6,000 feet above sea level; the temperature is therefore not excessively hot in summer, but gets cold in winter and at night. Water is scarce and through most of the year the riverbeds are dry; water can be found underground, and the villages are always close to riverbeds (algads); for in their vicinity lie the only places where it is possible to grow the scanty crops of the country. There are no trees worthy of the name, but occasional thickets of thorn-bush are encountered. Even grass is rare in this eroded land, and the tribesmen's few goats and sheep have to forage far and wide. The poverty of the land was the root cause of tribal unrest, for it impelled the tribes to raid neighbouring territory to get the necessary things their own country could not provide.

The British-Indian Government paid allowances to the tribes while on good behaviour, and in return expected them to maintain the military roads in good order and to police them. The political administration did much to help, but the tribesman's innate objection to anything savouring of control and his strong religious prejudices tended to keep him backward. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon in peaceful times for tribesmen to visit cantonments such as Kohat and Bannu by bus, park their rifles and knives at the police post receiving tickets in exchange, do their shopping and go to the cinema, and in due course redeem their weapons, catch their buses and go peacefully home.

Military operations were hampered in that there was no strategic objective the seizure of which would compel the enemy to surrender, and seldom a formed body which could be met and defeated. If the recalcitrant leaders could have been captured, operations would have ended speedily, but finding a needle like the Paqir of Ipi in a haystack like Waziristan was a task which failed of accomplishment. Operations therefore tended to become little more than a military occupation of the country, with an occasional raid or "gasht", in the hope of capturing someone of importance, or of inducing the tribesmen to attack in conditions less favourable to themselves than they might think.

A garrison of about a brigade group was maintained at Razmak, which was approximately central on the circular road passing round Waziristan from Mir Ali on the north to Dera Ismail Khan on the south. This garrison symbolized the might of the British Raj and gave a feeling of support to the elder tribesmen, but when the younger and wilder men got their way, the first task which faced troops brought in from India was to open up the supply route to Razmak.

The technique of warfare on the North-West Frontier was never to move a single soldier or a body of troops without adequate protection, and never to do a thing twice in the same way. The former entailed that piquets be sent to occupy all hills within rifle range of the main body, that they be covered the whole way while going up, that they remain up as long as the main body required their protection, and that they be covered again while withdrawing. Their most dangerous moments were while they were on the move: the duty of covering the piquets uphill devolved upon the advance guard, and downhill upon the rearguard. It will be seen that a column on the move in the mountains shed bodies of troops, usually platoons but occasionally whole companies, along both sides of the route, a process which absorbed much time, for in Waziristan the peaks which had to be piquetted often necessitated climbs of 500 feet, or half an hour, and frequently of 1,000 feet.

Where the route followed a made road, things were easy for the transport, which in such circumstances was usually mechanical but if a move was being made away from a road mules and camels had to be utilized, much slower and more vulnerable targets. Along the few roads, too, a column was likely to find camp sites; relics of former campaigns, conveniently spaced apart, and requiring comparatively little work to put them in order.

The prime need of a frontier camp was a strong wall, not too high to shoot over, all round the perimeter. This was built of rock and stone, of which the supply was abundant, but much hard toll was necessary, especially as the number of builders available could never be at full strength, because the piquetting troops had to remain up at their posts; these troops, too, if not actively engaged in holding off the enemy were busy in building their "sangars", small stone defensive posts, each big enough for a section. As a general rule, a new camp site had to be reached by mid-day, for at least four hours would be consumed in building the perimeter wall. The piquets were relieved when they had constructed their sangars, and barbed wire, ammunition, blankets greatcoats and other stores had to be sent up with the reliefs in time for the carrying

