

NORTH AFRICA, 1942

The outbreak of war found the 1st Battalion in India where it had earned a high reputation for itself in the North West Frontier campaign of 1937. For the first two years it remained at Cawnpore on Internal Security duty but in November 1941, it sailed for Iraq. There it became part of the force protecting the oil fields against a possible attack from the north by the German armies which were then sweeping across Russia. This threat did not materialise and late in May 1942, the battalion made a gruelling overland trip to Libya where the great German-Italian offensive against Egypt was in full swing.

The battalion immediately occupied defensive positions at Bel Hamed near Tobruk, forming a 'box' with other members of 20th Indian Brigade. The British forces were now in full retreat and orders were given that this 'box' was to be held to the last man. Accordingly, the battalion laid in stocks, sent back its transport and prepared for a siege. But the very next evening, 17th June, it was suddenly ordered to withdraw 70 miles to the east. There was no transport and no time even to destroy supplies, The Intelligence Officer sent to reconnoitre the route and meet the transport was captured by a German patrol so the battalion withdrew over unknown country leaving behind a small rearguard under Major CPG de Winton and Lt. TM Stephens. This rearguard, for which no transport could be made available, was composed entirely of volunteers. They knew, before volunteering, that their only future was death or capture. The rest of the battalion marched back to their transport then set off in a convoy for Sollum, but they found the enemy had outflanked them and now lay in considerable strength with many tanks across the road. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel FRG Matthews decided to try to outflank the enemy by driving south and cast into the desert. In the confusion, contact could not be made with all vehicles, but most of them started off on a disastrous journey in which they had to run the gauntlet of enemy tanks and shells. Many vehicles were lost or hit and only a few trucks kept with the Commanding Officer and finally reached Sollum, after 7 hours driving behind the German forward troops. A few others found their way through separately but the battalion lost more than five hundred officers and men, most of whom were taken prisoner. Four officers and about a hundred men reorganised in Sollum where they were joined by reinforcements. The retreat continued by night along choked roads enlivened by enemy bombing. The battalion passed through El Alamein where the Germans were eventually halted, through Cairo and back to a rest area where a draft brought the numbers up to 15 officers and 300 men. They then moved to Cyprus where a German invasion was expected. There they retrained and awaited reinforcements. It came as a great shock to all ranks when, in mid-August, the battalion was disbanded and most of its members were transferred to 1st King's Own Royal Regiment. A small cadre however, was sent home to join the 4th Battalion, The Monmouthshire Regiment which in December 1942, became the 1st Battalion, The South Wales Borderers.

Meanwhile the identity of the old 1st Battalion was kept alive in captivity. Ten officers and about a hundred men were interned at Chieti in South Eastern Italy, while a further body of men were lodged in a camp at Sulmona, some thirty miles distant. The two groups joined up early in September 1943, when the Chieti internees were transferred to Sulmona, and at the end of the month a mass escape was made by members of the South Wales Borderers, together with groups from other units. Of these, four officers and some thirty men of the old 1st Battalion succeeded in regaining their freedom. The remainder were either recaptured and sent to prison camps in Germany, or killed as were Captain W Wright and Lt. J Tidy and the men with them.

1st Battalion The South Wales Borderers

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 3-B09-01

Page: 2 of 2

Locations of First Battalion

15 December 1934	Arrived in India from Hong Kong
October 1938	Landi Kotal, North West Frontier
31 December 1939	Cawnpore, India (Internal Security duties)
10 November 1941	Move to Iraq, 20th Indian Brigade, 10th Indian Division.
16 November 1941	Basra, Iraq
December 1941	Qaiyara, Iraq
February 1942	Mosul, Iraq
March 1942	Baiji, Iraq
May 1942	Taji, Iraq
30 May 1942	Palestine
2 June 1942	Egypt
5 June 1942	Bir Hamid, Libya
17 June 1942	Battalion suffered heavy losses
17 July 1942	Cyprus, 4th Indian Division. (most remaining personnel transferred to 1st Battalion King's Own Royal Regiment - 29 August 1942)
12 December 1942	Cadre sent home to Merley Park Camp, Wimborne Minster, Dorset (to join 4 MONS which became 1 SWB)
1 January 1943	Bridport, Dorset, 113th Brigade, 38th Division.
22 March 1943	Winterbourne Steepleton, Dorset
20 May 1943	Broadstairs, Kent
7 September 1943	New Romney, Ashford, Kent
22 October 1943	Wynches Camp, Much Hadham, Hertfordshire
4 November 1943	Haltwhistle, Northumberland
28 November 1943	Tormiston Camp, Kirkwall, Orkney
24 December 1943	Haybrake Camp, Hoy, Kirkwall, Orkney
31 August 1944	Moore Barracks, Shorncliffe, Folkestone, Kent, 182nd Brigade, 61st Division as an Infantry training battalion
16 October 1944	Vinters Camp, Maidstone, Kent
11 October 1945 - 25 May 1946	Palestine, 61st Infantry Brigade, 1st Armoured Division

Commanding Officers, First Battalion

20 February 1938 - 15 October 1940	Lieutenant Colonel RG Lochner <i>MC</i>
15 October 1940 - 11 June 1942	Lieutenant Colonel JS Windsor <i>MC</i>
11 June 1942 - 11 August 1942	Lieutenant Colonel FGR Matthews <i>DSO psc</i>
18 August 1942 - 15 December 1942	Major CJ Reynolds (temporary)
15 December 1942 - February 1943	Lieutenant Colonel AJ Elliot, INDIAN ARMY
February 1943 - 26 June 1945	Lieutenant Colonel JL Jordan
26 June 1945 - June 1948	Lieutenant Colonel CF Cox <i>OBE</i>