

2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers

World War 2

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NORWAY, 1940

The 2nd Battalion was the first battalion of the Regiment to go into action in the war. When the Germans invaded the neutral countries of Norway and Denmark in March 1940, it became part of a small allied force, which included a Polish Brigade and some of the French Foreign Legion and Chasseurs Alpins, sent to the aid of the Norwegian army north of the Arctic circle. In mid-April the battalion landed at Harstad and then moved in Norwegian fishing boats to the Ankenes Peninsula opposite Narvik where they were to support a drive towards Narvik by the Chasseurs Alpins. On the 30th April the battalion's first casualties were sustained and the next day it successfully beat off a German attack. It advanced with its allies along the Peninsula until it was withdrawn and embarked on HMS Effingham on 16th May. The next day the Effingham struck an uncharted rock and had to be abandoned-no lives were lost and the regiment was transferred to a destroyer and continued its journey. For the rest of the campaign the battalion was responsible for the defence of Bodo where an airfield was under construction. At the end of May the whole Allied Force in Norway was withdrawn owing to the successful German invasion of Belgium and Holland and the growing threat to both France and Britain.

The campaign had been unsuccessful and the amount of actual fighting the battalion had done was small. Casualties amounted to thirteen wounded and six dead, and two DCMs had been won for gallantry. Conditions had been extremely trying and the whole force had been hampered by lack of equipment suitable for a campaign in snow, and by the lack of air support but the battalion had had the distinction of forming part of a small force sent to help a gallant ally fighting against overwhelming odds.

NORTH-WEST EUROPE, 1944-1945

NORMANDY LANDING

The Allied re-conquest of Western Europe began with the invasion of Normandy on 6th June 1944. The 2nd Battalion had the honour of being the only Welsh Battalion to land with the assault troops on 'D' day.

The battalion had only been allotted this role in March and it had spent a feverish two months training. In May it moved into an Assembly area. The whole Operation 'Overlord' had been planned with minute care, attention to detail, and in great secrecy. Briefing took place in an atmosphere of rising excitement. The battalion's task was to land near Arromanches after the first assault waves, to push inland from the beachhead to the high ground north of Bayeux capturing a radar station, a gun position and a bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure on the way. It would then link up with American troops coming up on the right.

The battalion sailed in assault craft on the night of 5th June and landed at Hable de Heurtot at midday on 6th June. Two men were drowned in the landing and the Commanding Officer nearly suffered the same fate in his eagerness to get ashore. Organised resistance had already been overcome at the beachhead. D Company successfully drove the Germans out of the radar station and by nightfall the bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure had been captured intact.

When 'D' day came to an end the battalion had covered more ground than any other in the assault.

The landing in Normandy was the beginning of an arduous eleven months in which the battalion fought its way across Europe till it ended up in Hamburg in May 1945.

SULLY

The first serious battle was an attack on the Chateau de Sully in the heart of the Bocage country. This chateau was heavily defended and A and B Companies fought a bitter and spirited action, but they were driven back by a German counter attack and the arrival in their rear of Germans retreating before the advancing American army. The battalion was forced to

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withdraw under a smoke screen, but next morning it discovered that the Germans had abandoned the chateau.

CAEN

For the next few weeks the battalion took part in bitter fighting, constantly attacking objectives which it could not hope to take in order to hold down German troops which could otherwise have reinforced the enemy forces around Caen. Casualties were heavy and the advance painfully slow - 4,000 yards in a month. The strain was tremendous. The battalion was under constant fire and both sides patrolled ceaselessly. One notable diversionary attack was launched by the battalion in the area of Granville and the Bois de St. Germain, where the enemy occupied a strong defensive position. The attack began on the morning of 8th July and by evening the battalion had wrested from the enemy a large lozenge-shaped area nearly half a mile long, but defended only by two weak companies at each end. The ground between them could not be covered, and that night the Germans managed to cut off both B and D Companies and in the morning they overran a platoon of D Company. Neither food nor ammunition could be got to these companies for many hours but they both held firm in spite of heavy losses. The battalion suffered about one hundred and thirty casualties in this battle-but it succeeded in pinning down enemy reserves badly needed in Caen. Regular contact with B and D Companies was established next day but for ten more days the battalion held this difficult position overlooked by the enemy with the forward troops only twenty to thirty yards away from them. Gradually by dint of constant patrolling and with the help of excellent artillery support the battalion gained the upper hand and forced the Germans to withdraw.

FALAISE

By the 1st August the battalion had taken St. Germain d'Ectot and the position became much more fluid; the German defence had begun to crack. The battalion crossed the Orne on 10th August and moved towards Falaise, after bitter fighting. It suffered heavy casualties at Courts Genets and Fourneaux-le-Val where B Company distinguished itself in a spirited action typified by the behaviour of Private R Jenkins who single-handedly seized a machine gun by its muzzle and took its crew prisoner.

RISLE CROSSING

Late in August the battalion reached Pont Audemer on the River Risle. The river flowed through the centre of the town, all bridges had been blown and the Germans held the far bank from which they dominated both banks and shelled the town. The division was held up at the river and 56th Brigade of which the battalion formed a part was ordered to effect a crossing at night. The 24th was the only battalion to succeed in this task.

The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Barlow decided to try and find a ford across the river. He contacted the French Resistance Movement and found a guide with whom he set off, taking a reconnaissance party. They went in and out of shops and offices and under desks when they passed exposed windows, until they reached the river at a place which the guide said was fordable. This could not be verified without giving the plan away to the enemy. The route was marked by tapes and that night A and B Companies followed the tapes in single file and in pitch darkness with shells bursting all round them. They forded the fast flowing river, pushed through the buildings opposite, which still contained Germans and established themselves on the hills behind. There they threatened the German rearguard. They remained in this isolated position until relieved by another brigade which had crossed the river further south. The whole operation had required great coolness and efficiency on the part of all ranks.

LE HAVRE

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By September 1944 the Allied armies had liberated Paris and Brussels and were sweeping towards Germany but every port from the Seine to the Baltic was still in German hands and strongly fortified. The lines of communication of the victorious armies were becoming strained to the limit. The battalion was amongst the forces ordered to seize the great port of Le Havre. It was a brilliant attack completed in thirty-six hours. The 24th was given one of the toughest enemy positions to take, consisting of three woods on a ridge. In each wood the enemy had huge concrete dug-outs some thirty feet deep surrounded by trenches and protected by mines and wire. D, A and B Companies were ordered to capture these woods, D taking the first wood, A the second, and B the third. They were to be aided by flails, flame throwers, assault vehicles and tanks which were to clear a path through the mines and overcome pillboxes. The vehicles suffered heavily at once. D Company led the attack and in spite of heavy fire, crossed a minefield, went over the wire, forced the Germans in the trenches to surrender and captured those in the dug-out. A Company next moved forward to pass through D Company and take the second wood but it was disorganised by heavy fire. Ten minutes later Major Collins brought up B Company to take the third wood-but finding A Company could not take the second wood unaided, he moved his company around to avoid the defensive fire which had wrought such havoc in A Company and helped mop up the second wood before, aided by flame throwers, he captured the third wood. By nightfall all objectives had been taken and next evening the battalion moved into the streets of Le Havre. The town fell the following day, the 24th distinguishing itself by being the first to reach the sea on the other side of the town. A number of MMs were won in this action-one of them by Private G Gallagher who single-handedly stalked six Germans, charged them with fixed bayonet and took them prisoner.

ANTWERP-TURNHOUT CANAL

On 22nd September the battalion made a memorable journey from Le Havre to Belgium cheered for all three hundred miles by the local population. After dark on the night of September 25th the battalion established itself in a shallow bridgehead over the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal. No sooner had D Company finished digging its positions than it was attacked by Germans led by a man shouting in perfect English 'Stop firing, you bloody fools'. Two platoons were overrun and the other forced to withdraw, but the forward sections stood firm and all linked up again the next morning. Meanwhile B Company fought a notable action securing farmhouses and a pillbox on the road which the Germans had planned to use as a start line for the attack on D Company. B Company platoons were wide apart and the enemy infiltrated between them. Then at six o'clock the whole company was attacked. Everyone from the Company Commander, Major Collins, to the Company Clerk fought back. The battle lasted three and a half hours until tanks arrived and drove off the enemy who left fifty dead and seventy prisoners.

A Company was also attacked that morning but with tank support the enemy were easily driven off. For the rest of the day the battalion withstood heavy shelling. The next day B Company was again attacked, tanks arrived to help them and the enemy was driven off with heavy loss. This defeat cracked the German defence. The battalion had fought a spirited action, perhaps the best they had ever fought, and Major Collins was awarded an MC and three other members of B Company won MMs.

ZETTEN ARNHEM, 1945

By late October after several months of continuous fighting, the battalion was in Holland. They spent an arduous and miserable winter on the 'island'- a waterlogged lozenge of land between Arnhem and Nijmegen overlooked by the enemy from higher ground to the north. The enemy was only twenty yards from the forward troops-whose positions could often only

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be reached by boats or Dukws. Clothes, bedding and feet were wet most of the time and patrolling often had to be done in boats. Near Zetten the battalion set out to dislodge the Germans from the 'castle', a stone building surrounded by a moat. The infantry attacked but drew heavy fire and the battalion's carriers, with much courage, went right up to the building and sprayed it with small arms fire from a stationary position, in spite of a rain of armour-piercing ammunition fired by the enemy. Guns and tanks continued the bombardment but the building did not catch fire until Major Gillespie had the bright idea of using mortar smoke bombs. This caused a blaze and the next day the castle was taken. But Zetten fell to the enemy while the battalion was resting and the castle had to be re-taken by the 24th-in this second battle they took two hundred and eight prisoners for only forty-six casualties.

The battalion's stay on the 'island' ended with the capture of Arnhem in which they assisted on 13th April. During this period a number of decorations had been won and the battalion had acquitted itself well in depressing and difficult circumstances. On 26th April, the battalion joined the 53rd (Welsh) Division near the Elbe. On 4th May it moved unopposed into Hamburg-and was encamped in the city when the war with Germany came to an end on 8th May, 1945. In the eleven months' campaign the battalion's casualties had come to over 100 per cent of its establishment.

Locations of Second Battalion

21 December 1936	Londonderry, Northern Ireland
October 1939	Barnard Castle, Co Durham, 148th Brigade, 49th Division.
10 April 1940	British North West Expeditionary Force to Norway, 24th Guards Brigade
5 June 1940	Evacuated from Norway to Newton Stewart, Northern Ireland
September 1940	Omagh, Co. Tyrone, 148th Brigade, 61st Division.
24 February 1941	Loughermore, Dunadry, Co. Antrim, 148th Independent Brigade Group
11 December 1941	Basildon House, Pangbourne, Berkshire, unallocated
4 January 1942	Allocated to 7th Infantry Brigade, 3rd Division
7 April 1942	Twelfth House, Maidenhead, Berkshire
5 June 1942	Shingham, Swaffham, Norfolk
17 June 1942	Duke's Ride, Thetford, Norfolk
14 August 1942	Consett, Co. Durham; 7th Brigade, 9th Armoured Division.
14 October 1942	Greystoke Castle, Penrith, Cumberland
4 December 1942	Consett, Co. Durham
16 March 1943	Scampston Camp, Rillington, Malton, Yorkshire
8 July 1943	Wadhurst, Tunbridge Wells, Kent
7 October 1943	Hunstanton, Norfolk
7 January 1944	Kirkleatham Hall, Redcar, Yorkshire
20 January 1944	Shortridge Hall, Alnmouth, Northumberland
4 March 1944	Dovercourt, Harwich, Norfolk, 56th Independent Brigade.
25 March 1944 - 7 April 1944	On exercise in area of Inverary, Scotland
8 April 1944	The Barracks, Christchurch, Hampshire

27 May 1944	Camp B4, Pennerley Camp, Beaulieu, Brockenhurst, Hampshire
6 June 1944	D-Day landings, Le Hamel, Arromanches, Sully Caen (8 July); Bayeux; Villers Bocage; St. Germain-d'Ectot (1 August); allocated to 59th Division, 12th Corps; Falaise (17 August); Pont Audemer (26 August); Caudebec-en-Caux, Rouen; Le Harve (10-12 September); Abbeville; Ypres; Alost; Turnout (25 September); Antwerp; Wilemstadt (7 November); allocated to 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division (12 November); Helmond Venlo (22-25 November), Nijmegen (30 November); Arnhem (13/14 April); Osterbeck; Wageningen; Rotenburg, allocated to 158th Brigade, 53rd (Welsh) Division. (26 April); Bothel (26 April); Luneburg (2 May); Geesthacht (2 May); Ost Steinbeck (3 May); Hamburg (4 May), Lippstadt, Westphalia, 49th (West Riding) Division.
4 June 1945	Army of Occupation; Erwitte
December 1945	Army of Occupation; Solingen
June 1946	Harding Barracks, Wuppertal, 160th Brigade, 53rd Welsh Division.
August 1946	
30 November 1946	Woodfarm Camp, Malvern, Worcestershire
22 January 1947	Rorke's Drift Day - Battalion's last parade
16 April 1947	Battalion lapsed into suspended animation
31 May 1948	Battalion officially disbanded.

Commanding Officers, Second Battalion

4 May 1939 - 24 October 1940	Lieutenant Colonel P Gottwaltz <i>MC</i>
24 October 1940 - June 1942	Lieutenant Colonel RI Sugden
June 1942 - 8 June 1944	Lieutenant Colonel RW Craddock <i>MBE</i> , Buffs
9 June 1944 - 2 December 1944	Lieutenant Colonel FFS Barlow <i>MVO</i>
2 December 1944 - 7 December 1944	Major JT Boon (temporary)
7 December 1944 - 26 April 1945	Lieutenant Colonel DR Wilson, Lincolns
26 April 1945 - 4 May 1945	Major HP Gillespie (temporary)
4 May 1945 - 15 August 1946	Lieutenant Colonel JO Crewe-Read
15 August 1946 - 16 January 1947	Lieutenant Colonel AJ Stocker <i>DSO</i>
16 January 1947 - March 1947	Lieutenant Colonel DL Rhys <i>MC</i>