

6th Battalion The South Wales Borderers

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 3-B09-03

Page: 1 of 4

The 6th Battalion was raised in Glanusk Park, Breconshire, in July 1940. Almost none of its men had had any military training. It trained as an infantry regiment until April 1942, when it suddenly became a tank unit - 158th Regiment Royal Armoured Corps (The South Wales Borderers). Psychiatrists weeded out those unsuitable for the new role. In this capacity the battalion sailed for Bombay in October 1942, and trained in India as a tank regiment until March 1943, when to the great disappointment of all ranks, it was reconverted to infantry.

It now trained as an amphibious assault unit and moved to Calcutta to attack Akyab. But this attack was cancelled and the battalion was sent to Burma to fight as an ordinary infantry regiment in the Arakan. In spite of a chequered career and many disappointments it was now to prove its worth.

BURMA, 1944-1945

MAYU TUNNELS

There were only two roads through the Arakan and one had been designed as a railway and ran through a series of tunnels from Maungdaw to Buthidaung on the Mayu River. The Japanese were in control of this road and so could pass men and supplies quickly from one side of the Mayu hills to the other. The battalion arrived in the area on 20th March and its first objective was the capture of the two tunnels used by the Japanese for storage and gun emplacements. The enemy were subjected to three days of shelling and dive bombing and then B Company began a determined attack, which involved the taking of four enemy positions camouflaged in thick bamboo, which lay one after the other on a spur commanding the approach to the feature over the first tunnel. The battle developed into fierce hand to hand fighting, in which B Company pressed on doggedly. Sergeant Woodhouse won a DCM for capturing an enemy post single handed when its fire decimated his section.

In two and a half hours B Company drove back the enemy and established themselves over the first tunnel. The Japanese however, remained in the tunnel underneath. Meanwhile, D Company attacked a spur on the other side of the tunnel in support but failed to take its objective and suffered a number of casualties. This spur was named 'Tredegar Hill', for most of the men killed came from Tredegar in Monmouthshire. Earth from this hill now stands in a casket in the chambers of the Tredegar Urban District Council.

The next day a Sherman tank was brought up to fire into the mouth of the tunnel. The effect was spectacular - bodies and debris were blown out of the other end of the tunnel and ammunition stored inside exploded and burned for hours. Next day the tunnel was occupied and aptly named '24th Tunnel'. The Japanese abandoned Tredegar Hill without further fighting. For this action, which cost the battalion eleven killed, Major Crewe-Read commanding B Company was awarded an MC and an Indian water-carrier who helped evacuate wounded received an MM.

SAHMAW CHAUNG

By July 1944, the Japanese army in Burma was being pressed from the east by the 14th Army from Manipur, by an American and Chinese force in the north and by the Chinese from Yunan. On 4th July 1944, the battalion was sent to Ledo to reinforce the American Chinese forces operating in North Burma under General Stillwell. It was flown to the Myitkina area and set off towards Mogaung, supplied by air, living on American rations and supported by Chinese artillery. The division had had to leave its transport behind for the duration of the monsoon, and the battalion had only a few jeeps adapted to run on the railway line, and eight mules.

From Mogaung (on the Myitkina-Mandalay-Rangoon Railway) the battalion began a nine months march, the first hundred miles of which lay down the railway which ran along a narrow corridor in thick jungle, in one of the world's wettest and most unhealthy areas.

The first battle was at Sahmaw Chaung. The Japanese held Sahmaw village and railway station. The Battalion task was to outflank a foothill known as Hill 60 and to capture a point to the west where a track forded the Sahmaw river. This would cut the Japanese line of retreat from the main attack. The battalion spent thirty-six hours in an assembly area, drenched by rain and hidden in long grass only a thousand yards from the enemy, and in the early morning of 5th August, they began the attack - A and B Companies on the right flank, C and D on the left, and HQ in the centre. The advance was over flat ground with little cover except grass some three feet long. The Japanese were in strong positions in a chaung with steep banks running at right angles to the line of advance. They poured fire on to the centre column and the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Cresswell and his staff had to crawl into a ditch only thirty yards from the enemy. The flanking companies were held up by heavy fire and suffered many casualties. A and B Companies reached their objectives by dint of

6th Battalion The South Wales Borderers

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 3-B09-03

Page: 2 of 4

hard fighting and a bayonet charge. C Company's leading section was wiped out except for its Bren gunner who, with Lieutenant Harris and Sergeant Carr, attacked the enemy position, killing about ten Japanese, and enabling the company to take cover, but they could advance no further. Colonel Cresswell and his staff crawled back some six hundred yards and then withdrew the left and centre columns who crawled back under cover of a smoke screen.

The next day the Japanese positions were heavily shelled and A and B Companies were then able to occupy them without much opposition.

The battle had been fought in intense heat and discomfort and it cost the battalion four officers and seventeen other ranks killed and fifty-eight wounded-but it had achieved its purpose. The Japanese line of retreat had been cut and three MCs, one DCM and four MMs had been gained into the bargain.

After Sahmaw Chaung the battalion continued to advance in heavy rain. All supplies had to be dropped on to dropping zones. By the end of August, after ten days of being wet night and day and sending out constant patrols, battalion strength from casualties and sickness had been reduced to about three hundred and fifty men.

PINWE

In mid-October, with the end of the monsoon the battalion was rejoined by its cooks and transport, artillery was brought up by road from India and supplies were landed at airfields instead of being dropped from the air. The battalion continued its advance down the railway corridor, fighting innumerable small actions. Early in November it was moving down a track running parallel to the railway. Around Pinwe the Japanese decided to make a stand and at Gyobin Chaung the 24th Regiment fought a five-day battle with the Japanese 128th Infantry Regiment.

It began on 13th November, when A Company captured Gyobin Chaung and 'B' Company passed through them. Finding the Japanese strongly entrenched the two companies consolidated their position some three hundred yards ahead of the rest of the battalion. That night the Japanese established a block between these forward companies and the rest of the battalion. The following night they set up another block in the rear of the battalion HQ box, thus cutting A and B Companies off from the battalion and cutting the whole battalion's supply line, except for a devious route through the jungle. A and B Companies were frequently attacked and ran short of food, and medical supplies. Battalion HQ box was mortared and grenaded from two directions. Wounded could not be evacuated and water had to be carried through Japanese positions from a muddy patch a mile away in the jungle. C Company finally fought its way through to A and B Companies with supplies but failed to get back to the battalion box and had to remain with B Company. Further attempts to reach companies from HQ box failed. In this crucial situation the companies were ordered to withdraw into the battalion box. This difficult operation was accomplished at night with great skill and without loss. The companies made their way through jungle around the Japanese block, carrying their wounded. On the 18th, a small stream was discovered nearby and a way was found through the jungle to evacuate the wounded. Supplies, however, were still crucially short. An attack was therefore launched on the Japanese posts in the rear of Battalion HQ box. This succeeded, but some enemy positions remained commanding the track, and the supply trucks had to run the gauntlet of their fire. In the excitement the first trucks overshot the battalion box and almost reached the Japanese positions on the other side. The first truck was lost but fortunately was hit by a shell as the Japanese were driving it into their lines, but the second was gallantly retrieved under cover of an attack by a platoon of B company and a smoke screen - it had seventeen bullet holes in the front seat.

Meanwhile all men armed with automatics launched an attack firing from the hip. They swept right up to the original A and B Company box killing some fifty Japanese.

The following day the battalion was relieved. In two weeks of fighting it had suffered one hundred and fifty-seven casualties, but it had accounted for one hundred and fifty Japanese in killed alone.

THE SHWELI MYITSON

'At Myitson the British 36th Division will be annihilated' read captured Japanese documents. The battalion had left the railway corridor at its southern end, crossed the Irrawaddy and moved down the east bank to Myitson where the division had to cross the Shweli River. Three bridgeheads were established some distance apart from each other. Across the river HQ 26th Brigade and their

6th Battalion The South Wales Borderers

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 3-B09-03

Page: 3 of 4

transport moved into No. 2 bridgehead. On 14th February 1945, a strong enemy attack developed and A Company was sent into the bridgehead to reinforce a company of the 9th Royal Sussex Regiment until Brigade HQ could be evacuated. The next day Tactical HQ and part of C Company joined them. In spite of heavy shelling and Japanese attacks on the perimeter, Brigade HQ was successfully evacuated. The Japanese continued to press the attack all day and managed to cut off A Company who were subsequently ordered to disengage to the south. HQ and C Companies and the Royal Sussex gave no ground and the battalion mortars broke up the Japanese attack firing three thousand rounds in four hours, though two of the six mortars were permanently cooling off in the river. Casualties were heavy and had to be evacuated across the river at night. On the 17th, the Japanese launched an attack at No. 1 Bridgehead at Myitson and the battalion force at No. 2 crossing suffered much shelling, bombing and sniping. Finally, orders were received for the force to withdraw at night, abandoning heavy equipment. This involved infiltrating north up the river to the ferry crossing at No. 3 bridgehead, passing between the Japanese established on the sand banks in the river and the main enemy force on the banks, and joining B Company who crossed by the ferry and established a bridgehead at No. 3 crossing. The withdrawal was so successful that the force passed unchallenged between Japanese posts. In the week's fighting the battalion had suffered eighteen dead and forty wounded-but it had accounted for forty Japanese killed and an unknown number of wounded.

The Japanese failed to retake Myitson and withdrew south, pursued by the battalion. Early in April the 24th were flown from Moriglong to south of Mandalay which had fallen in March. They moved into the Kubyin Forest Hills to clear the Japanese fleeing towards Siam from the South Shan states. They fought their final battle of the war at Myittha Gap in the last days of April 1945, and as usual, acquitted themselves well. Early in May they made the long journey back to Poona. The battalion could recall with pride its fifteen months of action in Burma in which it had covered some five thousand miles, most of it on foot.

In July it joined the force being gathered at Bangalore for the invasion of Malaya. But with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki the Japanese surrendered on the 14th August, before this force was ready. The battalion sailed early in October for Balawan as part of the reoccupation army in Sumatra. Here it served as a Guard of Honour when the British and Dutch flags were broken. It then moved to Medan where it was occupied in disarming and evacuating the now fully co-operative Japanese, and in protecting the Dutch against Indonesian terrorists. This involved guard and escort duties, patrols and skirmishes with an enemy armed with anything from blow-pipes and poisoned arrows to machine guns.

The battalion was formally disbanded on 15th March 1946, but in spite of this its remnants were still patrolling and raiding early in April.

Locations of Sixth Battalion

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| 4 July 1940 | Raised at Dering Lines, Brecon |
| 10 July 1940 | Glanusk Park, Crickhowell, Brecknockshire |
| 17 September 1940 | Swansea, Glamorgan |
| 24 February 1941 | Boston, Lincolnshire, 212nd Infantry Brigade, Lincolnshire Division. |
| 7 June 1941 | Spalding, Lincolnshire |
| 23 November 1941 | Stratton Lodge, Woodbridge, Suffolk |
| 27 February 1942 | Orwell, Ipswich, 212nd Independent Infantry Brigade |
| 12 April 1942 | Felixstowe, Suffolk |
| 24 May 1942 | Upminster, Essex |
| 15 July 1942 | Re-designated 158th Regiment RAC (The South Wales Borderers) |
| 29 October 1942 | Sailed for India |
| 17 December 1942 | Arrived India |
| December 1942 | Nira, 225nd Armoured Brigade, 32nd Indian Armoured Division. |
| March 1943 | Kharakvasla, Poona; |

