

## **Brecknockshire Battalion, The South Wales Borderers TA**

### **World War 2**

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The Brecknockshire Battalion was re-constituted out of the 3rd (Brecknockshire & Monmouthshire) Battalion The Monmouthshire Regiment TA on 1st June 1939. The battalion was only three months old when war on Germany was declared on Sunday 3rd September. The responsibility for creating a fighting force rested initially on the Adjutant - Major BA Blackden. Some difficulties soon occurred:

- (1) A War Office directive ordered the immediate release from the army of all miners in the unit. The fact that many of these men had not worked underground for years did not seem to matter. On 21st September these men – some 50 to 60 – were on their way home.
- (2) Most of the men below Medical Category A1 were posted to Brecon.
- (3) Young soldiers below the age of 18 – roughly twenty in all – were transferred to the Royal Engineers at Botley in Hampshire.

Following the departure of these groups, the battalion at Gwernyfed Park camp was well below strength. Nevertheless company training continued each day with two companies away on guard duty at Cardiff and Newport Docks. On 20th October 1939 the Brecknocks received its first intake of 87 recruits mainly from the Manchester area; this was followed by 17 men from 1st Battalion The South Wales Borderers in December and on 17th January an intake of about 90 men mostly from the Monmouthshire valleys. The new Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel OM Wales, arrived on 20th January 1940 and he was to have an important influence on the future shape of the battalion. Now began a period of strenuous training. Any officer or senior NCO who was below standard was removed and replaced by younger and more experienced men.

Two further groups departed the battalion at this time. Some 50 or so men were transferred to the Pioneer Corps in February for duty in Belgium and in April came a call for volunteers to form a new Independent Company (No. 9) based at Ross-on-Wye. Men of good character and of a high standard of physical fitness were needed. In the event forty men were finally sent to Ross but some later returned to the battalion having failed to meet the standard required.

Then, early in May 1940, the Germans invaded the Low Countries and on 14th May, the Dutch were ordered to cease resistance. The Brecknocks entrained at Hereford Station and arrived at Rugeley in Staffordshire to a tented camp about 2 miles above the town. At the end of the month there was another move to Blundellsands, North of Liverpool. A significant event of the short stay at Rugeley was the arrival without any warning of 400 men evacuated from the BEF at Dunkirk France who struggled up the hill to the camp. The stay in Blundellsands was short and battalion moved down nearer to Liverpool to Bootle Golf Course. Here on 15th June the battalion received the largest draft of 250 recruits from Infantry Training Centre at Brecon. This intake brought the battalion up to war-time strength. The next day the battalion suffered its first fatal accident casualty – 3911315 Private Sydney Wald from Swansea was tragically killed first after coming off guard the day after he arrived in the battalion.

Training went ahead with renewed zest. The Commanding Officer set high standards. On Saturday 31st August 1940, the battalion suffered its first air raid. A bomb landed just outside A Company lines and unfortunately 3911369 Pte JJ Evans from Bridgend who was lying in his tent was killed instantly. Four other soldiers in the company were badly injured and they did not return to the battalion after being released from hospital. Six days later A Company was again the target and 4079485 LSgt GE Jones from Talgarth, who was lying in a slit trench was killed when a bomb landed just outside and blew the trench in on him. 3911322 Pte JJ Bainbridge, who was standing up, escaped with nothing more than stock.

Air raids were a regular feature of the remainder of the battalion's stay in Liverpool. C Company, under command of Major RFF Gillespie, was credited with having shot down an enemy aircraft laying mines in the Mersey. The Bren gunner responsible was Cpl WG Humphries from Abertillery.

At last the time came for the battalion to leave Liverpool for the South. On 31st October, the Brecknocks left Liverpool in pouring rain and moved to the South with an overnight stop at Oakengates. By

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contrast the next day produced glorious weather - brilliant sunshine and bright autumn colours - the journey through the Cotswolds, Stow-on-the-Wold, Farringdon, Burford to Ascot was unforgettable. The Commanding Officer was unable to travel with the battalion as he had been unexpectedly taken to hospital with pneumonia.

For members of the battalion the stay at Ascot Race course was memorable for a number of reasons. First, it was the first time for many soldiers to sleep in a bed since joining the battalion. Secondly, they were able to eat off china plates instead of mess-tins. It did however take some time to adjust to the silence due to absence of Anti-Aircraft guns which had been active protecting Liverpool docks. In February the battalion was visited by Their Majesties King George and Queen Elizabeth.

On 28th February 1941 the Brecknocks moved into Blenheim Barracks in North Camp, Aldershot. Two months later they moved on to an encampment in the woods at Petworth Park in Sussex where the battalion was inspected by the Divisional Commander. Then in early June Brecknocks were on the move again to Chichester. A glance at the map will show that since leaving Ascot, the battalion was getting nearer to the South Coast - 'the Front Line'. Battalion Headquarters was located at Mapson's Farm Sidlesham with the three rifle companies were deployed at East and West Wittering, Brecklesham Bay and Selsey with one company in reserve at Birdham. Practising road blocks, early morning runs and route marches were the order of the day. The strength of the battalion by now had reached about 900. The summer of 1941 was a glorious one and nothing occurred to interrupt this training. At end of the year, the battalion moved down to Pondbury Barracks in Dorset. Colonel Wales left the battalion on promotion and at the same time the Battalion Medical Officer, Lt T Jenkins Davies also went overseas. The new Commanding Officer was Lieutenant Colonel J Digby Welch who sported a monocle.

In the summer of 1942, the whole battalion was tested. Each man had to undergo a battery of Intelligence Tests which lasted about 45 minutes. When the results were returned, the grade achieved by each man - SG1 to SG5 - was entered on their conduct sheet. A couple of weeks later all personnel of SG3 and above (unless operationally vital to their unit) were to be transferred to 6th Battalion South Wales Borderers and were replaced by an equivalent number from 6th Battalion. This exercise had a damaging effect on the morale of the Brecknocks. In July, Lieutenant Colonel Sugden replaced Lieutenant Colonel Welch in command. His stay was but short one and Lieutenant Colonel JW Hope took over command.

After 18 months spent in Hardy country, the Brecknocks were once again on the move back along the South Coast to Rye. Now the military situation was very different. The battalion had left Sussex in December 1941 when the outlook was still uncertain. They now returned after the North African campaign had been brought much success to British arms. Much of the tension of earlier days had disappeared and at Rye in addition to the training that still went on, the soldiers were able to help the local farmers gather in the harvest in what was a glorious summer and early autumn.

Then there were two moves in very quick succession. First, over the county border to New Romney in South West Kent. Here a tragic accident happened to 2Lt JH Wade who found himself in a minefield. He had joined the Brecknocks less than 24 hours previously and was being shown round our defensive positions. After a short stay at new Romney on to Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire. Here the battalion's notorious deserter - Drummer DC Price - who had been brought back to the battalion after an absence of almost three years. He escaped from custody and was never seen again. After a fortnight stay, the battalion was on the move to Alnwick in Northumberland. The whole journey was in convoy and necessitated an overnight stay at Catterick Camp. Here the harsher Yorkshire weather was in very marked contrast to the milder weather of the South-East. It was at Alnwick that the rumour broke that the 38th Welsh Division was not to be sent overseas, but was to be broken up. At the end of January 1944, the battalion entrained for Southampton en route for the Isle of Wight. Here the Brecknocks remained until June when the bulk of the battalion, in two large drafts, went over the Channel to Normandy where many were soon in action in the battles for Bayeux and Caen.

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#### Locations of Brecknockshire Battalion

1 June 1939	Re-constituted from 3rd (Brecknockshire & Monmouthshire) Battalion The Monmouthshire Regiment TA.
3 September 1939	Locking Camp, Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, 114th Brigade, 38th (Welsh) Division.
9 September 1939	Gwernyfed Park, Three Cocks, Brecknockshire (tasked to guard key points in Cardiff Docks)
27 November 1939	Hereford
21 May 1940	Rugeley Camp, Rugeley, Staffordshire
May 1940 - June 1940	Blundellsands, Liverpool
5 June 1940	Bootle Golf Course, Liverpool
31 October 1940	Ascot Racecourse, Ascot, Berkshire
28 February 1941	Blenheim Barracks, North Camp, Aldershot
25 April 1941 - June 1941	Petworth Park, Petworth, Sussex
June 1941 - November 1941	Sidlesham, Chichester (with companies at East Wittering, West Wittering and Selsey)
20 November 1941	Poundbury Barracks, Dorchester, Dorset
28 January 1942	Broadmayne Camp, Dorchester, Dorset
9 May 1942	Lyme Regis, Dorset
25 July 1942	Bridport, Dorset
17 August 1942	Bradford Down Camp, Dorchester, Dorset
3 September 1942	Long Bredy, Dorchester, Dorset
2 October 1942	Winterbourne Steepleton, Dorchester, Dorset
2 January 1943	Poundbury Barracks, Dorchester, Dorset
22 May 1943	Rye Hill, Rye, Sussex
25 August 1943	New Romney, Ashford, Kent
24 October 1943	Berkhampsted, Hertfordshire
14 November 1943	Ravensmead, Alnwick, Northumberland
23 January 1944	Whitwell, Ventnor, Isle of Wight
9 April 1944	Goldenhill Fort, Freshwater, Isle of Wight
14 July 1944	Battalion disbanded, the greater part of personnel re-enforced the efforts of 2 MONS and 3 MONS in Normandy.

#### Commanding Officers, Brecknockshire Battalion

1st June 1939 – 23rd December 1939	Lieutenant Colonel JG Rees <i>DSO MC DL JP, late 13th/18th Hussars &amp; The Welsh Horse Yeomanry</i>
20th January 1940	Lieutenant Colonel OM Wales <i>MC</i>
December 1941 – July 1942	Lieutenant Colonel JD Welch
July 1942	Lieutenant Colonel GB Sugden
May 1943	Lieutenant Colonel JW Hope
February 1944 – June 1944	Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Tate, 4th Bart., <i>late RWF</i>