

## 2nd Battalion The Monmouthshire Regiment TA

### World War 2

Fact Sheet: 7-B09-07

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This territorial battalion was mobilized at once on the outbreak of war. In October 1939, it went to Ballymena in Northern Ireland where collective training began. It returned to England in 1941 and began a period of migrations and ever-intensifying training. Morale and expectancy rose steadily until by May 1944, the battalion was ready and fit for war. During May the King inspected it and watched a demonstration of the well known method of 'blowing in' slit trenches with grenades, a variation of 'digging in' which the battalion had devised during its training.

### NORTH-WEST EUROPE, 1944-1945 THE ODON

The battalion went to Normandy with the 53rd (Welsh) Division towards the end of June 1944. It moved into battle positions near the river Odon on 30th June and spent a most exhausting and trying month in which it took part in no battles but suffered a steady drain of casualties from enemy shelling, and from patrolling- so severe was this that at the end of the month casualties had reached over one hundred and fifty. Two unpleasant weeks were passed on Hill 112 between the Odon and the Orne.

A description of life in a slit trench on Hill 112 is here quoted from the Regimental History:-

*From where the hedgerows stopped and the naked area of the hill began, about 1,000 yards was visible in every forward direction. Within that area the explosion of shells and mortar bombs was a regular feature of the landscape..... At first sight it would appear that 112 was unoccupied, the reason being that every sane man was in his slit-trench. After a time one would see helmets and the occasional runner, signaller mending a broken line, or other figures on essential duty moving about- all ears- from hole to hole. Those on the crest were completely imprisoned in their holes during the hours of light. Everyone of these slits had been torn by sweat and labour from a grudging Mother Earth because her soil on 112 was a compounded mass of quartz, flint and rock bedded under a superficial layer of sand. Mine was an individual affair, just large enough to lie down in with knees bent, and deep enough to take me up to the shoulders standing. Lumps of quartz or flint stuck out of the sides and on the bottom was spread a gas cape and a blanket, supplemented at night by my greatcoat. These things were at all times full of sand which showered down from the walls at every move. Standing up, my chest was level with the ground, but this was possible at one end only for I had covered up the rest of the slit with branches, rough turf and spoil from the trench . . . (as) protection . . . from flying fragments of German metal.*

*All too vivid... is the memory of the night when my next door neighbours in this slit trench colony had a shell come at a slant slap into their home in the ground. On such tragedies one felt nothing but blazing anger at the cause of the war and I remember a senior officer standing up against the starry sky and, over the moans of the wounded, shaking his fist and threatening the enemy with all that they eventually got in the Falaise Gap'.*

### FALAISE

In the battle of the Falaise Gap the battalion fought three separate actions - at Le Logis they had the task of clearing the village and seizing the high ground beyond it. This was successfully accomplished in spite of stiff German resistance which caused heavy casualties. At Leffard they again cleared the village in the face of heavy enemy fire. These actions were extremely hard fighting in which the battalion lost more men than in any of its later large scale battles and as a result A and B Companies had to be amalgamated and a new 'B' Company formed of men of the 54th East Lancashire Regiment which had been disbanded. Lieutenant F Evans, a Canadian officer commanding a platoon of C Company distinguished himself at Leffard by reaching his objective with only seven men, who proceeded to drive off a counter attack launched by some forty Germans. This was typical of the spirit and determination of the battalion in these two battles.

The third action near Falaise was at Nécy. Here the battalion made a silent night advance through sleeping Germans, who came out of their billets in the morning to find themselves faced by the 2nd Monmouthshires. The anti-tank guns lagged behind and the battalion blockaded the roads with farm carts and carriers and laid grenades. A nasty moment came however when three German Tiger Tanks appeared, passed unscathed through D Company's barrage of pistol and Bren gun fire, knocked aside a half-track truck and the Commanding Officer's carrier blocking the road and went careering through C Company and battalion HQ and headed towards B Company. Here the second tank exploded a necklace of Hawkin's grenades and swerved into the bank, the third tank ran into it and wedged its gun in its blanket bin. B Company fired on the tanks and their crews baled out. By midday the Germans had been mopped up and the battalion was firmly established in the area, a strong position which dominated Falaise from the south-east. Casualties had been light and the battalion had captured over a hundred prisoners, two tanks and many vehicles.

From Falaise the 2nd Monmouthshires began sweeping towards Antwerp, clearing woods by day and moving at night. They liberated Merville where the population went wild with joy, and passed in September through Wytschacte, where the survivors of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Monmouthshires, amalgamated after the second battle of Ypres, had held the line in 1915. The battalion fought its next action at Voorheide on the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal.

#### **THE NEDDERIJN**

The attack went in in darkness and rain, three companies took the village of Voorheide. At 3 a.m. the Germans launched a vicious counter attack. The following description is quoted from an eye witness account in the Regimental History:-

*'The enemy ... counter attacked out of the dark, four companies for a time the village was in complete recipes for continued living were to stay in a slit and shoot Germans off the windy skyline or stay in a e dim windowsill. In the latter case the cost of bad shooting was a hand grenade thrown into the room. . . At one time Voorheide was held by both German and British, one on the outside of the houses, and the other inside. invitations to 'surrender-you are surrounded' were met by streams of good British verbal obscenities and a burst of automatic sten from skylight or cellar peephole. it was a victory of tenacity and courage in the face of dark odds. . . The outcome was a sort of sudden awakening to the fact that we had achieved a positive victory won by the personal guts of each fighting individual battling in his own particular corner of the common nightmare.*

*It was a 'Soldier's Battle' and a triumph for the fighting spirit of the battalion'.*

By morning the Germans had withdrawn with heavy losses. For this action the battalion won two MCs and one MM and earned the congratulations of the Divisional Commander.

#### **THE LOWER MAAS**

On 22nd October the battalion took part in the attack on 's-Hertogenboch. Its task was to clear the country around a straggling village street running along a dyke leading to the outskirts of the town. On the first day it advanced three thousand yards and took two hundred and fifty-five prisoners, winning four MMs into the bargain. On the second day A Company found itself faced with a tricky problem. The Germans' strength was on a slight rise where there were some houses and the road and the dyke ran together for a while. The road approach was exposed while the dyke one was close and the enemy unlocated. Major Deane, commanding the company, sent flame throwers in an all-out attack up the road and ordered the infantry in from the right after them in his words: *'The boys went in like demons and went straight through, shooting from the hip any Bosch who had not dived for cover from the flame, which was terrific. Not wishing to lose the advantage, I took the original left platoon forward immediately behind and slightly right of the attacking party and started mopping up. The right platoon saw what was happening and did likewise. . . . There were some scraps of really close infantry and tank co-operation and the whole party became a mass of fighting. The Bosch (those not near the flame) were still fighting, but our boys were on top of them and were really vicious-result : we killed many and captured forty-two, losing fifteen wounded and one killed'.*

In thirty-six hours fighting near 's-Hertogeaboeh the battalion covered nearly seven thousand yards and knocked out two German battalions. In this battle flame-throwers proved themselves a most effective weapon - the enemy were literally burned out of hideouts in houses, farmyards and dykes.

#### **THE OURTHE**

On 16th December 1944 the Germans launched a great offensive in the Ardennes which was checked by the American armies. The end of December 1944 found the battalion taking part in the counteroffensive launched against the Germans in the Ardennes. In deep snow and icy cold the battalion moved up to attack a hill overlooking Rendeux Bas and then the village itself. 'B' Company approached the village along a road cut in a precipitous cliff. The village lay in a valley beyond a bend in the road. 11 Platoon, the men exhausted by a day's fighting in icy, weather with no food, advanced along the road and 12 Platoon along the wooded cliff top. 11 Platoon came across a road block of trees round the bend. The leading section crossed this but found the trees were mined. They came under intense fire and took refuge in a water mill. There the fire was so heavy that every man was wounded and they were cut off from the platoon. They left the mill and took up positions in the icy water on the river bank from which they prevented the Germans from coming close enough to bazooka the tanks held up at the road block. Having prevented this, they then fired on the Germans in the village ahead of them. For nine hours they harassed the enemy in spite of their own wounds.

