

3rd Battalion The Monmouthshire Regiment TA

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 7-B09-08

Page: 1 of 5

The 3rd Battalion was mobilized for war as part of the 53rd (Welsh) Division in Northern Ireland. It trained in Northern Ireland in 1940 and returned to England in 1941. In the summer of 1942, it was transferred to the 11th Armoured Division and trained for armoured warfare. It was destined for North Africa and its advance parties actually embarked. They were lost to the Battalion when this move was cancelled in England until it landed in Normandy on 14th June 1944.

NORTH-WEST EUROPE, 1944-1945

THE ODON

The first battle was an unsuccessful attempt to break out of the Normandy bridgehead. The brigade task was to seize Hill 112. Unfortunately while moving through a gap in the enemy defences in the dark without guides and with inadequate maps, the battalion lost its way and strayed into the village of Mouen. In the morning it moved to its correct position, leaving 'C' Company in the village to cover the withdrawal. C Company was suddenly attacked by superior German forces with tank support - the company put up a gallant resistance but only fourteen men eventually fought their way out and rejoined the battalion.

BOURQUEBUS RIDGE

Another attempt was made to break out of the bridgehead east of Caen. The Germans were softened up by a heavy bombardment and the battalion showing much skill and dash captured Cuverville and Demouville in quick succession. It then launched an attack on the village of Bras near Bourquebus where a tank attack had failed. The advance was over two miles of open country littered with tanks knocked out in the armoured battle. Bras was strongly defended and the battalion together with the 8th Rifle Brigade fought a fierce battle in the village under a withering German artillery barrage. The village was taken but casualties were very heavy. In these three successive attacks the battalion lost over a hundred men. This breakthrough, like its predecessors, failed and the battalion then moved into the Bocage country.

THE SOULEUVRE

The battalion now took part in a third attempt to break out of the bridgehead. With the 8th RIFLE BRIGADE and tanks of the 23rd HUSSARS they advanced through Septs Vents, where C Company fought a sharp successful engagement, to St Ouen des Besaces. Then a reconnaissance unit of the Household Cavalry found an unguarded track through woods, which enabled them to penetrate well behind the German defences and to cross the Souleuvre river undetected. Into this salient the battalion went mounted on the tanks of the FIFE AND FORFAR Yeomanry. They made contact with the enemy near Beny Bocage, which fell to armoured cars and tanks the next day. The battalion moved on behind the tanks, fighting a running battle with the retreating enemy, and took up positions with the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry around Sourdevalle on Bas Perier Ridge. The 8th Rifle Brigade and the 23rd Hussars were established two thousand yards to the left on the same ridge.

LE PERIER RIDGE

These units on the ridge formed a small peninsula surrounded by the enemy on three sides. Their lines of communication were extremely vulnerable. The Germans now began to build up their forces around them and parties of Germans even operated in their rear. On 5th August enemy shelling began and was followed by a fierce tank and infantry attack. The battalion's tanks were driven back through the forward positions. D and C Companies were then attacked by enemy infantry and some of them managed to penetrate as far as Battalion Headquarters - but the battalion held its ground and the enemy were beaten off. The battalion's losses in this and the previous actions were so heavy that some platoons were down to half strength. The next day the 1st NORFOLKS began to relieve the battalion. They too, had suffered heavily and the two battalions together did not reach the strength of one full battalion, while the FIFE AND FORFARS had only twenty tanks left. The relief was under way when heavy enemy shelling began. Since this was clearly the prelude to an attack, it was decided that both battalions should stay. Lieutenant-Colonel Orr of the 3rd Monmouthshire took command of the combined Norfolks and Monmouthshires. Only fifteen minutes later the German attack came in. After heavy hand to hand fighting the enemy overran first the forward positions

3rd Battalion The Monmouthshire Regiment TA

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 7-B09-08

Page: 2 of 5

on the left and when a counter attack drove them off, those on the right. Both sides had tank and artillery support. The Germans got to within two hundred yards of Battalion Headquarters whose personnel turned out to man posts in the suffocating atmosphere of burning vehicles and houses and exploding ammunition, but the battalions held their ground and before night the heart went out of the enemy attack and he withdrew. The losses on both sides were heavy - of the five hundred and fifty men of both battalions who fought this battle, one hundred and sixty were killed or wounded.

For gallantry in this action Lance Corporal S Bates of the Norfolks was awarded the VC and Major J France of the 3rd Monmouthshires, a posthumous DSO. He was one of the four company commanders who became casualties in the ten days of action in the Bocage. By successfully holding the ridge the combined battalions prevented the enemy from regaining the commanding feature of the area and enabled the British line to be consolidated by the advance of troops on the flanks.

ANTWERP

After Bas Perier the battalion began a relentless and exhausting pursuit of the now rapidly retreating Germans. Reinforcements arrived, but after twelve days of continuous skirmishing and patrolling, the battalion was reduced again to half strength. Again reinforced they pushed on, crossing the Seine and the Somme meeting sporadic resistance, and everywhere receiving a delirious welcome from the population. Finally they reached Antwerp. There they passed through welcoming crowds to fight an action in the dock area where they held vital sluice gates against a German counter attack and engaged in some fighting near Mescem.

THE NEDDERIJN

The battalion now moved into Holland. In September 1944 Airborne forces were dropped at Arnhem and Nijmegen and the Guards Armoured Division led a driver over the Escaut Canal to join them. The 11th Armoured Division's role was to protect the right flank of this drive as far as the Maas. The battalion moved steadily forward-at Deurne in a brisk action they killed twenty Germans and took forty prisoners for the loss of one man killed. On 25th September the battalion had just occupied St Anthonis when Lieutenant-Colonel Orr was killed, together with the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Royal Tanks. They were standing at a cross roads with the Brigadier and were fired on by German armoured vehicles which suddenly careered through the village. The battalion remained in southern Holland until mid-November mostly in defensive positions constantly patrolling and generally in close proximity to the enemy.

VENLO POCKET

By late November the Germans had been driven east of the Maas except for a few pockets, one of which was at Broekhuizen where they held the village and nearby 'Kasteel' - an old fort surrounded by a moat. The battalion attacked these German positions on 30th November. The Germans were thought to be weak and only a two company attack was launched. A Company attacked the 'Kasteel' and C Company, Brockhuizen. The infantry went in along a path cleared for them by flail tanks. They had to cross seven hundred yards of open country. Halfway they came under withering artillery fire followed, when the tanks withdrew, by accurate machine gun fire the more devastating since they were confined to the narrow paths cleared by the flails. The Germans were well entrenched in the cellars of the village and in the 'Kasteel'. Both A and C Company commanders were killed and most of the other officers and senior NCOs and many of the men. The remainder were pinned down to whatever cover they could find and isolated as the wireless transmitters were damaged. The Intelligence Officer and the Second-in-Command were both shot down trying to reach them. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Stockley, unable to find out what was happening went forward on foot to investigate. He reached A Company's forward troops. Seeing the seriousness of the situation he rallied the men and tried to lead a gallant attack on the Kasteel. He was killed, revolver in hand, leading his troops, on the bridge over the moat.

The Commanding Officer of the 15th/19th HUSSARS now came forward to investigate the position in his tank. As a result, D Company with only sixty men was now ordered into the battle with tank support.

3rd Battalion The Monmouthshire Regiment TA

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 7-B09-08

Page: 3 of 5

The tanks fired at the Kasteel while D Company advanced; arriving at Kasteel they swung around and with tank support attacked Broekhuizen from the west. The Germans were unprepared for an assault from this direction and D Company reached the village. With the tanks they cleared the houses, no mean feat since there were over two hundred Germans in the village entrenched in a veritable maze of dugouts, trenches and reinforced houses. While the village was being cleared, a task which took the whole of that night, the Kasteel was attacked by tanks firing at point blank range and then captured by the survivors of A Company.

Victory had been obtained at a heavy cost. Of the three hundred men who fought, one hundred and forty had fallen, including ten officers, of whom eight were killed. D Company and the tanks of the 15th/19th had retrieved an apparently hopeless situation in the face of heavy odds.

THE RHINELAND THE HOCHWALD

The battalion stayed in Holland most of the winter. In February it moved into the Cleve area just south of the Rhine and east of the Reichswald. There it advanced skirting the Hochwaldberg and suffering heavily from artillery fire, but pushing doggedly on to form a bridgehead over the anti-tank ditch which formed the main defence of the Schlieffen line. Here some heavy fighting took place, which left A and C companies so much under-strength that they had to be amalgamated.

In March the battalion was withdrawn to Belgium to equip for the great drive into Germany.

IBBENBUREN

After the Rhine was crossed the 11th Armoured Division moved into the bridgehead and began to advance into Germany. The 3rd Monmouthshires were ordered into the Teutoburgerwald, a wooded range of hills east of the Dortmund-Ems Canal, where heavy opposition had been encountered. The battalion's task was to clear a two-mile area of thickly wooded steep hills to open the Ibbenburen road. It was a task of unusual difficulty. The thick undergrowth and steep rough ground made it impossible to use tanks and the woods upset wireless communication. The enemy was composed of a battalion of officer cadets from a training school in Hanover who not only outnumbered the battalion, but who fought with all the fanaticism born of despair. Battalion Headquarters was established at the bottom of the hills only five hundred yards from a bridge over the Dortmund-Ems Canal. The four rifle companies advanced at dawn on 2nd April 1945 along a track in the woods. They took their first objective - a peak - with some difficulty and advanced on another, which overlooked the road. They then ran into heavy opposition and found themselves fighting in thick undergrowth. It was difficult to keep the men together and the enemy engaged in hit and run tactics in which they would strike and disappear into the woods. The battalion reached its objective but a counter attack drove them back with heavy casualties. They were pushed back to the first objective, to which meantime Tactical HQ had been moved. In the close fighting which followed even the Commanding Officer took part, using a Bren gun. The battalion stood firm and reorganised in defensive positions. At the suggestion of the Germans a truce was organised while the wounded were collected. The men spent a wet night in shallow fox holes in the forest. Lieutenant-Colonel Sweetman returned to Battalion Headquarters at the foot of the hill to report that the battalion was sadly depleted and could not take its objective. He was immediately greeted by a German attack on Battalion Headquarters and Support Company. The attack came in on three sides and was met by the whole force including cooks, drivers, clerks and mechanics. They stood their ground until relieved by tanks. Those on the ridge were holding out in the face of continuous enemy attacks. This force inflicted heavy losses on the enemy and continued fighting though it had lost contact with the rest of the battalion. It was finally relieved by a battalion of the Dorsets, who advanced into the forest supported by an artillery barrage. This attack disorganised the enemy and forced him to withdraw. In the Teutoburgerwald the battalion's losses were the heaviest it ever suffered. The task which it had been allotted took an infantry brigade three days of hard fighting to achieve. The battalion could be proud of its attempt to dislodge a superior and determined enemy.

