

16th (Service) Battalion (Cardiff City) The Welsh Regiment

World War I

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Summary of Service:

November 1914: Raised at Cardiff by the Lord Mayor and Corporation. November 1914: Formed at Porthcawl. 30th December 1914: to Colwyn Bay, North Wales in 130th Brigade part of 43rd Division. 29th April 1915: formation became 115th Brigade part of 38th (Welsh) Division. August 1915: to Winchester. December 1915: landed at Le Havre, France. 7th February 1918: disbanded in France.

The Regimental History states that the Cardiff City Battalion [which must not be confused with the 11th (Cardiff Pals) Battalion The Welsh Regiment] probably owed its origin to a suggestion made to the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, Alderman Dr JT Richards, by General Sir Francis Lloyd, who in 1914 was the General Officer Commanding the 53rd Welsh Division. The suggestion made, was that a battalion be raised which would be sponsored by the City of Cardiff, in consequence of which it would bear the City's name as part of its title. Such was the patriotic feeling of the time, that the idea was most readily accepted, and steps were taken to immediately implement it.

At a meeting held on the 19th November 1914, the City Corporation voted £500 for publicity purposes, and with the approval of the Military Authorities, recruiting for the battalion commenced. Closely involved with all these proceedings was Captain Frank Gaskell, 3rd Battalion The Welsh Regiment. Captain Gaskell, a Barrister in civil life had served in South Africa 1900-1901 with the 1st Volunteer Service Company The Welsh Regiment, and was at that particular point in time recuperating at his Cardiff home from a face wound received a few weeks earlier when on service with the 2nd Battalion in France. Shortly after the commencement of recruiting he was gazetted to command the new Battalion, a position which he held until killed in action some 18 months later.

Recruiting took place in the face of intense competition from other battalions which were also being raised at that time, nevertheless the battalion drew in as both officers and other ranks many well known City, and Glamorgan County personalities, the Police and Sporting fraternity being particularly well represented. Initially, the battalion trained at Porthcawl, but on 30th December 1914, the officers and 600 other ranks marched through the City. Following an inspection by the Lord Mayor, the battalion entrained and moved to Colwyn Bay, North Wales, in which area the new 38th Welsh Division was concentrating for basic training.

By the 11th January 1915, the battalion had been recruited to its War Establishment of 1,070. Styled the 16th (Cardiff City) Service Battalion The Welsh Regiment, it was Brigaded with the 17th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers, 10th and 11th Battalions South Wales Borderers in 115th Brigade of the Division.

In August 1915 the battalion moved South to Winchester. Quartered at Hazeley Down Camp they commenced a period of Musketry Training on the Larkhill and Bulford Ranges. By November, the 38th Division was considered ready for active service and was inspected by Her Majesty The Queen on Salisbury Plain. This event, although held in England, was an important milestone in Welsh military history, and was attended by almost all the members of The Welsh National Committee and many hundreds of relatives and friends from all over the Principality. After the inspection, the whole battalion entrained for Cardiff, where on arrival they were given a rousing reception. After the usual ceremonial and march past, the men were given 24 hours leave prior to returning to Winchester to await the final movement order for France.

The Diary of Private Link records the next stage: "We marched in Full Kit to Southampton Docks and embarked on the *SS Margarett* - a Paddle Steamer. We were packed like Sardines, and after dark sailed for France. It was at very rough night, and nine out of ten, were ill. We got to Le Havre at 7 am on Sunday." In France, the Battalion's first casualties were suffered, not in Trench Warfare, but in Bombing (Grenade throwing) Practice - Pte Oakley Jenkins of Ton-yr-Efail was killed and several officers and men injured. On 19th December, following a period of trench instruction in the Line with the Guards Division, the battalion took over a section of the Trenches; in the Moated Grange Sector, near Neuve Chapelle. From that date until the following June, the battalion held in its turn various sections of the Line from Gienchy to Laventie thereby gaining considerable experience of Raiding and Trench Warfare.

Amongst the battalion's losses during this period was the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel FH Gaskell. He was, mortally wounded when visiting a forward position on the night of 15th May 1916. A sniper's bullet struck his ammunition pouch causing it to explode, and he died of his wounds at Herville two days later. The battalion also lost 1 officer and 38 soldiers killed in action and

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two officers and 78 soldiers wounded. Colonel Gaskell was succeeded as Commanding Officer by the senior major, Major Frank W Smith DCM. World War I was Colonel Smith's third experience of active service, having served in Matabele war with the South African Police and also in the Anglo-Boer war with the 4th Glamorgan Company of the Imperial Yeomanry. A member of the Glamorgan Constabulary, he had later served as a Squadron Sergeant Major and Regimental Sergeant Major of The Glamorgan Yeomanry. Mobilised in 1914, he left his Bridgend Inspectorship and mustered with the Yeomanry. Shortly thereafter he was gazetted Quartermaster and Honorary Lieutenant in the 2/1st Glamorgan Yeomanry, but later transferred to the City Battalion when it came into being. One of its first Company Commanders, he later proved himself to be a very fine and courageous Commanding Officer, and one who was liked and respected by all ranks.

On the 11th June 1916 The City Battalion together with other units of the 38th Division withdrew from the Line and commenced the move South to the Somme in preparation for the great Offensive of July 1916. As will be realised, it is impossible to describe in any detail the active service record of the battalion within the confines of a short article, but two of its exploits can not be ignored - the first being the Battle for Mametz Wood, the Calvary of so many Welshmen, and the second, the part it played during the Third Great Battle of Ypres at Pilckem and Langemarck.

The attack on Mametz Wood was part of the great Somme Offensive which had been launched on 1st July 1916 in an attempt to break the stalemate which existed on the Western Front. It was the 38th Division's first involvement in a major battle, with the City Battalion supported by 11th Battalion South Wales Borderers attacking the Hammerhead of the Wood commencing on the 7th July. The attack has since been described as a "Disastrous, Chaotic and badly Commanded affair" - a costly failure for the Division as a whole, with casualties comparable to those suffered by other units in the opening stages of the Somme offensive on 1st July.

Caught by frontal and enfilade Machine Gun fire - Guns which the preliminary Bombardment had failed to silence, the City Battalion succeeded only in getting to within 200 yards of the Wood. 'Cut to Ribbons' would be an apt description, as the casualties suffered on the 7th July amounted to 5 officers and 131 soldiers killed, and 6 officers and 138 soldiers wounded. On the 11th July, the battalion was again thrown into the struggle for the Wood - a vicious melee amongst shell-torn trees and undergrowth. By the time the exhausted Division was withdrawn on the 12th July, another 7 officers and 71 soldiers of the battalion had been added to its casualty list.

Although costly, the attack had not been altogether futile. The battalion, together with other units of the Division had in five days of extremely hard fighting succeeded in clearing the Germans from the greater part of the Wood - an achievement for which they received little praise or credit. The measure of their success was to be better understood at a later date as the Army gained more experience of the difficulties and hazards of woodland fighting. After Mametz, the Division spent some time in the Courcelles sector until in August 1916 they were moved up to Ypres to take over trenches in the North Western part of the Salient. In December 1916, 115th Brigade, which included the City Battalion took over the Boesinghe sector. The battalion front line was the bank of the Yser Canal, with the Germans on the other - a stones throw apart.

With short breaks for rest and training the Battalion remained in the Boesinghe sector until June 1917, during which period they made quite a name for themselves due to their success in raiding across the Canal. On relief of the Division by the Guards at the end of the month the battalion went to St Hilaire to train for its next great trial, the forthcoming Third Battle of Ypres.

The Battle of Pilckem Ridge is the name given to the first phase of the Third Battle of Ypres, and which extended over the period 31st July to 2nd August 1917. At the commencement of this Battle the City Battalion were in Reserve, but were soon called upon to move forward due to the stiff German resistance which 115th Brigade experienced. It is worth noting that the furthest point of advance in this opening phase, namely the line of the Steenbeek, was reached by B Company of the City Battalion under Captain WJ Foster, one Platoon under Sgt Brown holding its position there for four days. Brown, recommended for the Victoria Cross, was killed shortly thereafter, but the four survivors of his platoon were all awarded the Military Medal. On relief at the end of this phase, the battalion withdrew with the Division to rest and refit at Proven unaware that probably the severest of all the ordeals which it had been called upon to face, was yet to come.

On completion of the reorganisation, the Battalion was moved up to occupy old German positions on top of the Pilckem Ridge. There they lay in support of 114th Brigade until ordered to move up to jumping off positions for the opening stages of Phase 2 - The Battle of Langemarck. The

