

Summary of Service:

3rd May 1939: Palestine as part of 16th Infantry Brigade, 8th Infantry Division. 3rd November 1939: Palestine as 14th Infantry Brigade, 6th Infantry Division. 28th November 1939: Egypt as part of 22nd Infantry Brigade, 6th Infantry Division. 18th February 1941: Assigned to CREFORCE as force reserve, Island of Crete until 1st June 1941. June 1941: North Africa as part of 14th Infantry Brigade, 6th Infantry Division. July 1943: Sicily landings. May 1944: Italy as part of 168th Infantry Brigade, 56th (London) Division. 22nd September 1944: Reduced to cadre but within 3 months was re-established and assigned to 61st Infantry Brigade, 6th Armoured Division in Italy and Austria.

NORTH AFRICA 1940-1942
MIDDLE EAST 1941
CRETE, CANEA, WITHDRAWAL TO SPHAKIA

After trying to keep the peace between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, 1st WELCH was assigned to Egypt, arriving at Mersa Matruh in November 1939. In the following June Mussolini's forces in Libya became the new enemy, and the battalion eagerly awaited the chance of showing 'the Eyeties' what Welsh soldiers could do. But that chance was not yet to come, for they were moved back to Alexandria, soon to confront a more formidable enemy elsewhere.

The threat to the strategic island of Crete, valuable as a refuelling base for the Royal Navy and the RAF, became serious in early 1941 when the Germans occupied Greece. Reinforcements for the British and ANZAC garrison were hastily sent in from Egypt. Among these were the 1st Battalion The Welch Regiment who disembarked on 18th February; they mustered 21 officers and 830 other ranks. The next few months were spent peacefully enough, preparing defensive positions and digging slit trenches. The expected onslaught came on 14th May 1941 - saturation bombing by 600 Luftwaffe aircraft which destroyed airfields, pulverised defences and silenced nearly all the 60-odd AA guns on the island. Well dug-in in the Suda Bay area around Force Headquarters, 1st WELCH endured six days of this ordeal with remarkably few casualties. On 20th May the Germans launched their airborne assault with waves of Junkers 52 troop-carriers spewing out their hordes of paratroops, and swarms of gliders crash-landing throughout the island. Six of these planed down about 400 yards from B Company's position: Captain Evans personally shot up two with a Bren and the troops in the other two were effectively dealt with on deplaning by the rest of his Company. When fifty parachutists occupied a deserted monastery nearby, these were overcome by three platoons of D Company who took twenty-five prisoners. Bitter and confused fighting followed in all sectors. Advancing on a building believed to be held by paratroops, C Company came under heavy machine-gun fire. Corporal Myrddin McTiffin located the gun and boldly led his section to silence it. All his men fell, but he went on unscathed and with his bayonet killed the entire crew of seven, thus allowing his company to continue. In World War I for similar acts of valour VCs were awarded. As it was, Corporal McTiffin was later awarded the Military Medal.

Undeterred by heavy casualties, the Germans continued to send in wave after wave of fresh airborne troops, and within a week they were virtually in control of Crete. 1st WELCH losses were equally heavy. By 20th May B Company had lost more than half its strength while the other companies were in little better shape.

The Battalion's last stand came on 28th May when, virtually isolated in their Suda Bay position, they were overwhelmed by the onslaught of nine German battalions. After a desperate fire-fight, the remnants withdrew in scattered groups, but not all of them managed the forty-mile mountainous trek to the British base at Sphakia. The Pioneer Platoon was surrounded and captured; C Company was reduced to two officers and twenty men. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan, was last seen firing a Bren to cover the withdrawal: he too was captured. Some 300 survivors, many of them wounded, eventually reached Sphakia where the Navy was organising evacuation. But here Major Gibson, now in command, was ordered to send a composite company of 200 men to support the commando battalion holding the last rearguard position. These marched off under Major Griffiths and were not seen again. Subsequently it was learned that after holding off attacks they received orders from Force Headquarters to surrender. On 1st June 1941 all that remained of 1st WELCH disembarked at Alexandria: they numbered 7 officers and 161 other ranks. They had left behind in Crete some 250 dead, while 400-odd had been marched into captivity. In September the strength was made up with a draft of 700 officers and men from home.

BENGHAZI

Having refitted after the Crete debacle, the Battalion, 1st WELCH was involved in the fierce struggles for Benghazi in January 1942. In the face of Rommel's onslaught, Benghazi was evacuated and on the 28th January 1st WELCH, with the remainder of the garrison, were ordered to withdraw to the Egyptian frontier. The Battalion had already been split into individual companies and detachments, and each group was forced to make its own way across hundreds of miles of mine- and German-infested desert. Commanding Officer, Colonel Jack Napier, with seventy men of Headquarters and B Companies, had only covered some twenty-five miles when they were completely surrounded by German tanks and lorried infantry and compelled to surrender. C Company had joined up with other units of the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade, and after eluding enemy patrols in the night, managed to motor 250 miles in 30 hours without opposition, eventually arriving within the lines of the Free French and Polish Brigade at Mechili on 30th January.

Meanwhile, at 2045 hours on the 28th January, A and D Companies, already mauled in the defence of Benghazi, set out under Major JT Gibson (Second-in-Command) to break through the German lines. The column of 150 'soft' vehicles and carriers was unmolested until at 0300 hours next morning they encountered a formidable road block. It was heavily covered by mortars, machine guns and armoured cars. With his rifle platoons backed up by the Punjabis and the carriers of the Central India Horse, Major Gibson made several valorous attempts to break through, but the only result was loss of his own men and vehicles. By 0400 hours it became obvious that further attack was suicidal, and the only option to avoid surrender and capture was dispersal and a life saving footslog across the desert. And so, after destroying vehicles, those fit to face the gruelling task split into small parties and set off into the dark waste (many, both British and Indian, had already reached the limit of endurance and had to be left to fall into enemy hands). The epic feats of some of the scattered groups of officers and men marching more than 200 miles through hostile territory, enduring heat, cold, thirst and hunger, are recounted in detail in the Regimental History.

SICILY 1943 **ITALY 1943-1945**

Of the 700-odd soldiers of 1st WELCH who fought at Benghazi, 214 survived to face the task of refitting and building up anew for the second time in a year. Reinforced, they were posted to the Sudan and spent a quiet spell at Khartoum. In March 1943 they went to Palestine where they immediately began training for their special role in the invasion of Sicily and Italy. This was one of the 'Beach Brick' units tasked with the organisation and flow of men and materials on the beaches in an assault landing. After full-scale 'wet' exercises in the Gulf of Akaba, the Battalion, now known as 34 (Welch) Brick, carried out their unglamorous but essential duties in the successful Operation HUSKY, the landing on Sicily on 9th July 1943. The Italian opposition was minimal, and there were no casualties, although in the run-in the Battalion Headquarters landing craft was shelled and sunk. With Sicily occupied, the next objective was the landing on the 'toe' of Italy across the Messina Straits. This took place on 3rd September, with 34 (Welch) Brick performing their beach tasks. Again there was virtually no resistance, other than long-range German shelling. The Italians, now utterly demoralised, surrendered in droves, and five days later their High Command formally capitulated. But Hitler was by no means prepared to see his southern flank breached, and with the more formidable Wehrmacht adversary the bitter fighting of the Italian campaign was only just beginning. While the 8th Army were slowly pushing up the peninsula, 1st WELCH were dismayed to find themselves (with the other 'Bricks') despatched back to Egypt for guard duties. Here at least they were gratified to provide an escort for Winston Churchill, attending a three-power conference in Cairo.

1st WELCH then became involved in a little-known episode of the war in the Middle East. Stationed at Alexandria were some Greek troops evacuated from their homeland when it was overrun. They were known as the 1st Greek Brigade Group, and comprised three infantry battalions, one Anti-Aircraft Battery, a troop of field guns, three Stuart tanks and some Bren carriers. In April 1944 the whole group 'mutinied'; that is, they refused to take any orders from the British, and shut themselves up in their camp. A spokesman declared that they merely wished to be left alone to conduct their own affairs; but if force were used against them, they would reply in kind. Since all attempts at negotiation failed, Operation RABBIT was mounted, in which the mutineers were attacked by a force including 1st WELCH, battalions of the London Scottish and London Irish Rifles, and some squadrons of the Royal Tank Regiment. At dusk on 20th April the infantry advanced; B

