

Summary of Service:

3rd September 1939: Agra. December 1939: Bombay, Claba and Deolali. October 1941: Baird Barracks, Bangalore. March 1942: Madras. July 1942: Conjeevaram as part of 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 19th Indian Division. March 1943: St Thomas Mount, Madras. September 1944: Burma campaign. April 1946: Maoulmein as part of 48th Indian Infantry Brigade, 17th Indian Division. 5th October 1947 embarked Rangoon in transport Lancashire; 1st November 1947: Disembarked Liverpool by train to Woodfarm Camp, Malvern; 21st April 1948: Battalion disbanded.

In 1939 the 2nd Battalion The Welch Regiment was serving at Agra, in India, when war was declared. If there was a flurry of initial excitement at the prospect of active service, this soon evaporated. Weeks passed into months with no hint of an overseas posting: routine remained virtually unchanged and the only effect of war was the loss of more experienced officers, Warrant Officers and NCOs drafted to units earmarked for the Middle East or elsewhere. Meanwhile the Battalion moved from Agra to Bombay, from Bombay to Bangalore, and normal peace-time training continued. In October 1941, at Bangalore, all the transport mules were handed over, to be replaced by 15-cwt trucks and '3-tonners'. This seemed to foretell active service; but no orders arrived. Next February, however, after the Japanese had overrun Malaya and invaded Burma, there was a surge of excitement when 2nd WELCH were rushed to Calcutta, there to embark with 2nd BORDER and 1st NORTHANTS, under orders for Rangoon. The Brigade sailed on 7th March and had scarcely cleared the mouth of the Hooghly when Rangoon fell to the Japanese and the operation was aborted. Frustrated, 2nd WELCH returned to Bangalore, and thence to Conjeevaram in Madras. It was almost unbelievable that a fully-trained, regular Battalion should be kept virtually kicking its heels in India when their comrades of the 1st Battalion had been heavily in action for more than a year. Nevertheless another two years were to pass before 2nd WELCH confronted an enemy.

By March 1943 the Battalion had been allotted to its fighting formation, the 19th (Indian) Division, the 'Dagger' Division, under the inspiring leadership of Major General TW Rees (a Welsh-speaking Welshman). Together with the 4th/4th and 4th/ 6th GURKHA RIFLES, they formed the 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade, and during the arduous months of intensive jungle training firm bonds of friendship and mutual respect were established between Welshmen and Gurkhas. Preparations for the Burma operations went ahead. Mules reappeared to oust the heavy Motor Transport vehicles; American Jeeps were issued; Sten guns, 2-in. and 3-in. mortars were added to the weaponry; slouch hats and jungle-green dress replaced topis and khaki drill.

BURMA 1944-1945

At long last the years of frustration were over and in October 1944, 2nd WELCH and their Gurkha comrades arrived at a perimeter camp at Mile 13 on the Imphal-Kohima road. The 19th Division now formed part of the 14th Army, its task being to drive eastwards across the Chindwin to Katha where the Mandalay road and railway met the Irrawaddy. The Chindwin crossing was unopposed, and the columns pushed ahead along the jungle tracks. From now on all supplies were dropped by air, which meant additional hard labour clearing the dropping zones. On entering the Zibyu mountain range there was more wearisome toil as precipitous tracks had to be made up to allow the pack-animals to scale them. No enemy was met until the end of November (after some fifty miles of jungle sloggng), when 2nd WELCH contacted a small Japanese rearguard. The subsequent brief fire-fight was 'more strenuous than dangerous'; no casualties were suffered by the Battalion and the Japanese withdrew without leaving any dead behind. This seemed a tame introduction to an enemy held to be ferocious and unyielding, and when 2nd WELCH, leading 62 Brigade, entered the Division's first objective, the town of Pinlebu on 16th December 1944, they found it abandoned by the Japanese. But more serious business was soon to come. On 20th December the Brigade had secured the Kawlin airfield, some 30 miles west of the Irrawaddy, when 2nd WELCH were ordered to push east and cut off a Japanese force withdrawing towards the village of Kyaukpyintha, nearer the Irrawaddy. On approaching the area A and B Companies were held up by heavy machine-gun fire; an attempt to outflank the enemy failed, and with nightfall both sides resigned themselves to sitting it out and hurling grenades. One officer and six men of 2nd WELCH were wounded. On the following day artillery and mortar concentration enabled D Company to work round the rear of the enemy position, but they too became pinned down by machine-gun fire on their flanks, eventually withdrawing after dark. Next morning a patrol pushed forward to find the enemy gone. This action cost 2nd WELCH three men killed and one officer and eleven men wounded. By now jungle ulcers and fever were taking their toll:

so much so that at the end of December C Company had to be temporarily disbanded, the few fit men being distributed among the other three companies.

KYAUKMYAUNG BRIDGEHEAD

The next objective of 19th Indian Division was to clear the Shwebo area and establish bridgeheads on the Irrawaddy River, preparatory to an all-out thrust on Mandalay. On 5th January 1945 2nd WELCH arrived within twelve miles of the Irrawaddy. Since the previous November they had covered some 350 miles from the plains of Imphal, nearly all of it on their own feet. Next day, B and D companies moved forward and a patrol of D under Lieutenant A Murrow crossed the river to carry out a reconnaissance on the east bank. This small body of 2nd WELCH were the first British troops to cross the Irrawaddy since the retreat from Burma in 1942. They returned with valuable intelligence, but Lieutenant Murrow was killed by a sniper. On 14th January 1945 the 19th Division established a bridgehead on the east bank of the river, and next day a second bridgehead was secured eight miles downstream at Kyaukmyaung. The actual crossings were effected without casualties, but consolidation proved more difficult. Suspecting (erroneously) that the whole of the British IV Corps would follow 19th Division, the Japanese concentrated all available forces in the area, consisting of two infantry divisions supported by regiments of artillery and tanks.

The battle of the Kyaukmyaung bridgehead was fought out for a whole month, from 14th January to 14th February 1945, and 2nd WELCH were constantly engaged with their 62nd Brigade. At first holding positions on the west bank of the river, they suffered severely from artillery fire, but launched several attacks across the river. On one of these A Company captured a strongly-held Japanese position, with much ammunition, stores and valuable documents, losing only four men wounded. Among the Japanese dead were discovered the horribly mutilated bodies of two of the Battalion's men who had been taken prisoner earlier.

With the arrival of reinforcements from Imphal on 20th January 1945, it was possible to reform C Company, who promptly carried out a successful reconnaissance on the far side of the river. On the night of 28th/29th January 2nd WELCH crossed the Irrawaddy at the Kyaukmyaung bridgehead and two days later took over a section of the perimeter at Yeshin, two miles into the jungle. Continuously opposed by enemy ambushes, and the difficult terrain, the Battalion took nearly ten hours to cover those two miles. For the next fortnight the dispersed companies were subjected to almost continuous shelling and sniping, while movement between the positions nearly always involved clashes with parties of Japanese who remained exceedingly active by night as well as by day. On 3rd February 1945 the 4th/6th GURKHAS Rifles passed through 2nd WELCH, and with tank support attempted to clear the main enemy position. But the Japanese put down such a devastating concentration of artillery fire, from 105 mm and 150 mm guns, that both Gurkhas and tanks were halted, with heavy casualties. 2nd WELCH, too, suffered as the shelling fell among their positions, but this did not deter them from going to the aid of their Gurkha friends, and there were several acts of gallantry as wounded Gurkhas were brought back under fire. This day's action cost 2nd WELCH 19 killed and 32 wounded, while the 4th/6th GURKHA Rifles lost 22 killed and 87 wounded.

It was not until 14th February 1945 that the Battalion was relieved and pulled back for a much-needed rest. The final two weeks at Yeshin proved the most trying period of the campaign. As General Lomax wrote: 'Shelling was almost continuous ... The water supply was contaminated by Japanese corpses and the bodies of 120 mules ... There were clouds of flies, breeding as fast as only flies can. The mosquitoes were merciless. Constant harassment by small parties of Japanese made it almost impossible to use mosquito veils. The stench of decomposing flesh was overpowering and repulsive. It was impossible to bury all the bodies, and paraffin was used for speedy cremation. The health of the Battalion began to suffer.' To add to these sufferings, the air drops included Indian and not British rations, for the rear supply base was under the mistaken impression that the Gurkhas had relieved 2nd WELCH. Thus the Welshmen had to make do with a strange diet of dried fish, lentils, peas, nuts and hard biscuits.

MAYMYO

By March 1945 the 14th Army had the Japanese on the run. But, though retreating, the Japanese still showed plenty of fight, as 2nd WELCH discovered in several major clashes. On 5th March their 62nd Brigade was ordered to capture Maymyo, some 25 miles from Mandalay, two other brigades being tasked with an attack on the latter. The approach march of sixty miles through the mountainous area of the Shan Hills was one of the stiffest tests the Battalions had yet experienced. The route (along opium-smugglers' trails) involved a climb of 4,000 ft up an almost precipitous track wide enough for

