

4th Battalion The Welch Regiment TA

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 6-E05-03

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Summary of Service:

3rd September 1940: Mobilised at Llanelli as part 160th (South Wales) Infantry Brigade; 22nd December 1939: Moved to Banbridge, County Down, Northern Ireland; November 1941: Moved to Ross-on-Wye; March 1942: Moved Faversham, Kent; 18th June 1944: To Normandy as part of 160th Infantry Brigade, 53rd (Welsh) Division; 4th May 1945: Hamburg; Spring 1946: Erwitte, Germany as part 49th (West Riding) Division; 1st March 1947: Reformed as part of the Territorial Army at Llanelli.

The 4th Battalion The Welch Regiment were at Annual Camp at Porthcawl during the last two weeks of July 1939 and on their return to Llanelli, the 15th Battalion, their second line, which had only recently been formed took over the camp from them. War clouds were gathering and on 3rd September, Prime Minister Nevill Chamberlain broadcast to the nation that 'We are at war.' The next few days at Llanelli were very hectic, and in early in September 1939 the battalion moved to Gowerton, where mobilisation took place. In later that same month 4th WELCH with 1/5th WELCH moved to Haverfordwest, where training and fitness were the order of the day. In December there were rumours of a move overseas. France was generally expected, but on 22nd December 1939, the battalion moved to Banbridge in County Down, Northern Ireland, where 1/5th WELCH and 2nd Monmouths had been sent some time previously. Thus the 160th (South Wales) Infantry Brigade was once complete. From Banbridge the battalion moved to Keady in County Armagh where they were stationed in an old derelict linen mill. In November 1941, the 53rd (Welsh) Division moved back to England with 4th WELCH being stationed at Ross-on-Wye. After some months another Divisional move took place, this time to Kent, where the battalion was based at Faversham. The battalion had several moves in Kent, with most of the time being spent on exercises co-operating with tanks on the South Downs. Shortly before D-Day, the battalion was visited at Herne Bay by Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, and Maj Gen DP Dickinson, Colonel of the Welch Regiment.

NORTH-WEST EUROPE, 1944-1945 **FALAISE**

On 18th June 1944, 4th WELCH left Herne Bay in two parties. The marching troops sailed from Newhaven in a cross channel steamer on 21st June. Battalion Headquarters, Support Company and the battalion transport sailed from Tilbury and entered Seine Bay on the evening of 26th June with the replica 'Sospan' at the masthead representing the town of Llanelli. On arrival the battalion was ordered to move into the Odon bridgehead to relieve 9th Cameronians. In the first 12 hours the Germans mounted a full scale attack using tanks on the battalion position. By the afternoon of 29th June the impetus of the German attack had slowed down. The battalion had successfully passed the first test. On 20th July 160th Brigade were hold Baron Hill (the famous Hill 120), the high ground East of Gavrus, when two forward companies of 1/5th WELCH were attacked three times by German infantry with Tiger tanks, and on the third attempt the enemy were successful. The Germans were able to establish themselves in defensive position in Le Bon Repos. On 23rd July, 4th WELCH carried out a successful counter-attack using two companies supported by Crocodiles (flame throwing tanks) and artillery fire. They penetrated as far as Esquay and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. As a result of losses suffered by the Royal Welch Fusiliers near Evrecy, the brigades were re-organised 1/5th WELCH joined 158th Infantry Brigade and were replaced in 160th Brigade by 6th RWF.

On the 18th September when the Brigade passed through the Junction Canal bridgehead North of Lommel – some 36 miles East of Antwerp - they moved to the area Wilreit-Luykgeste. At Wilreit the 4th WELCH made a very successful attack to clear a wood, in the course of which several officers and men were killed.

Postel was occupied and on the 24th September, moving North, the outskirts of Reusel were reached. This was heavily defended and an advance by one Company of the 6th RWF only succeeded in occupying the Southern fringe of the village. This place was to prove a hard nut to crack. The 6th RWF renewed their attack the following day, but were unsuccessful. The village was again attacked on the night of the 25th/26th September by the 4th WELCH, but it was not until the 3rd October that the 6th RWF passed through the 4th WELCH and occupied the place. The fighting for Reusel was exceptionally bitter. At one time the 4th WELCH held one end of a Church and the Germans the other. Orders were given in Welsh so that the Germans would not know the plan. A withdrawal was ordered, with companies out of contact with each other. Although Reusel was a set back, it was learned later that 4th WELCH had accounted for 500 out of 600 original German paratroops.

On the 6th October the Brigade moved North East to a defensive position about Elst between Nijmegen and Arnhem. This had been a difficult period for the whole Division.

THE LOWER MAAS

The Germans still had considerable forces in Southern Holland and 'sHertogenbosch - the old fortress town of Bois le Duc - stood at the intersection of numerous waterways on the main Tilburg-Utrecht road, a very important road for the Germans both for supply and for escape. 53rd (Welsh) Division was ordered to capture the town.

The Divisional plan was to attack due West with two Infantry Brigades forward; 71st astride the main road and 160th, which included 6th RWF, 4th WELCH and 2nd Monmouths, astride the railway line. The 158th Infantry Brigade was to pass through and clear the town.

160th Infantry Brigade was faced with an advance of about 8,000 yards through strongly held enemy positions which looked extremely forbidding in the photographs.

On 21st October 4th WELCH moved to an assembly area near Oss and at 0430 hrs on the 22nd began to move up to the start line which was to be crossed without pausing. The leading Companies, C and D crossed at 0630 hrs and the Germans evidently mistook them for the daily routine patrol to which they had become accustomed. For the first three hundred yards there was a certain amount of cover; tanks and 'Crocodiles' were to follow when the leading companies were 150 yards beyond the start line and artillery support was to open up at the same time.

Everything worked very well and German defensive fire did not come down until C and D Companies were 150 yards beyond the start line. They moved as fast as they could keeping just under the enemy artillery range. As the forward companies approached Nuland the 'Crocodiles' dashed past throwing out flame, although some of them were held up by the boggy ground, and 4th WELCH went in with fixed bayonets and grenades. In the course of this attack, C Company went right through what the sappers afterwards described as one of the most heavily mined fields they had seen, yet not one mine exploded during the advance.

By 0700 hrs C and D Companies were fighting from house to house in the village and by 0745 hrs Nuland had been cleared. Two battalions of Germans were now on the run and the roads were being cleared of mines at top speed to allow transport to come up. At 1100 hrs A and B Companies went through and continued the advance steadily against sporadic opposition, chiefly from concealed spandau posts. By nightfall, the forward Companies had reached a lateral road 500 yards from the start line and 2,200 yards beyond Nuland. Seldom can any operation have been so like a training exercise in the precision with which the plans worked out. It was a lesson in 'text book' tactics.

A great advance had been made on the first day of the attack, the final objective of which was 'sHertogenbosch, and the crust of the German defences had been shattered. Amongst the prisoners taken by D Company 4th WELCH was the Regimental Commander, responsible for the defence of 'sHertogenbosch and some of his staff.

For their share in the operations leading to the capture of 'sHertogenbosch 4th WELCH received a personal message of congratulation from the Army Commander, General Montgomery.

THE ARDENNES, THE OURTHE

On 3rd January, the Battalion moved to the area of Trou-des-Chiens once more with a counter attack role. It was here that the Germans were putting up the stiffest fight in the salient. It even seemed possible that they might mount a counter attack on a big scale.

They were holding the high ground South of Rotton with infantry and tanks and, on 4th January, 4th WELCH moved to Rotton which was to form the Battalion base for an attack through the Forward Defensive Line with the object of capturing the high ground 1,200 yards beyond the existing front line. Meanwhile 158th Infantry Brigade had been counter attacked during the night and had suffered severe casualties. Vital ground had been lost and 4th WELCH was placed under command of this brigade in relief of 7th RWF and with the task of recovering the positions.

On the high ground there were strong pockets of Tiger tanks with infantry support, very cleverly sited in culverts running to the East. It was impossible to bring our artillery fire to bear because of the steep trajectory needed to clear the high ground. If the attack had gone in

without artillery support very heavy casualties would have resulted and so it was decided to attack from the North instead of from the West.

On the night of 5th/6th January the 4th WELCH moved to Menil and early on the morning of the 7th the attack went in. The Brigade plan was as follows: In the first phase 4th WELCH were to attack and capture Authiers de Tailies. 1/5th WELCH was to secure the flank of the attack by clearing and holding a strip of wood to the SW of Waharday. In the second phase the 1st East Lancshires were to attack and capture the high ground in the area of Grimbiemont.

Snow was falling and weather conditions were very severe. The rough mountain country would have made movement difficult under any conditions, but snow, ice and cold made an advance seem at times, almost impossible. There was no cover from the icy wind and the only way to get any sort of protection from the weather was to dig a hole and to sit or lie in it. Only sheer determination took the Battalion up the icy tracks, through fields deep in snow and through the snow-covered forests.

The attack started at 0845 hrs against heavy shelling and mortaring as well as determined spandau fire. It was pressed relentlessly by the tough Welshmen of 4th WELCH and by noon the objective had been gained. On the left flank of the 4th WELCH was 1/5th WELCH who successfully cleared and held the wood which protected the flank of the attack and thus once more the two Territorial Battalions of the Regiment fought together in the same action. No sooner had 4th WELCH beaten the Germans than they had to fight the weather. Digging went on all through the night of 7th/8th January. Even had no digging been necessary, to sleep would have been fatal in the intense cold of an exposed position. Nothing could keep the circulation going but movement. Heavy snow was still falling and many of the trenches were filled with icy water. Every man had firstly to be able to use his rifle so that any elaborate form of protection was impossible. As well as physical exhaustion there were a number of cases of frostbite. That morale remained so high speaks highly indeed for the discipline and physical fitness of the Battalion.

On 8th January 1945, the enemy began to withdraw and the 51st (Highland) Division took over the pursuit. After handing over to Scottish units 4th WELCH concentrated in Rotton and on the 9th January moved to a rest area near Liege where the Battalion rejoined 160th Infantry Brigade. The Ardennes pocket had been completely cleared and no Germans were left on the West bank of Maas.

REICHSWALD

The next phase was to eliminate the enemy remaining between the Maas and the Rhine. The 53rd (Welsh) Division was to clear the Northern Half of Reischswald forest with the 51st (Highland) Division on their right moving around the Southern edge. On 6th February 4th WELCH moved to a concentration area near Driehuizen.

The first phase of the Divisional attack was to be undertaken by 71st Infantry Brigade who was to secure the main axis up to the Southern fringes of the forest. This entailed an assault over open country, filling in of anti-tank ditches and clearing minefields. 160th Brigade was then to pass through and breach the inner defences of the Siegfried line. 71st Brigade assaulted and 4th WELCH began to move up to their start line. It was raining and everyone was soaked to the skin. The going and navigation got more difficult inside the forest. The 4th WELCH attack began with D Company on the right and C on the left. The attack went very smoothly. At 1030 hrs 2nd Monmouths passed through 4th WELCH and at 1400 hrs 6th RWF followed. By midnight the second objective was reached. In four days 4th WELCH had advanced over ten miles, six of which were through thick forest which the Germans had believed impassable to any formed body. Throughout the battalion had been in almost continuous action and had taken part in four full scale attacks. Now they were subject to heavy shelling and mortar attacks on scale not experienced since Normandy. A major German counter-attack was expected. For eight days, the battalion maintained its positions. On 24th February 1945, 4th WELCH moved into the outskirts of Goch.

On St David's Day 1945, 4th WELCH helped 7th RWF in the capture of Weeze crossing the river Niers in assault boats. The Germans still held a deep bridgehead to cover their withdrawal over the Rhine at Wesel and 4th WELCH objective was the high ground near Alpon which strategically overlooked the whole enemy bridgehead. 4th WELCH was to pass through 2nd Monmouths and make their attack at noon on 6th March 1945. Every company met with the most desperate resistance from paratroops hidden in the woods. As soon as the final objective had been secured the full weight of the enemy's artillery and mortar fire came down on the battalion. The soldiers were

