I/5th Battalion The Welch Regiment TA World War 2 Fact Sheet: 6-E05-04

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Summary of Service:

3rd September 1940: Mobilised at Pontypridd as part 160th (South Wales) Infantry Brigade and moved to Cowbridge; 24th October 1939: Haverfordwest; 19th December 1939: Moved to Portadown, County Down, Northern Ireland; 4th April 1940: Newry; 11th November 1941: Moved to Hereford; December 1941: Moved to Glanusk, Crickhowell; February 1942: Moved to Stourbridge, Worcestershire; 20th-28th June 1944: To Normandy as part of 160th Infantry Brigade, 53rd (Welsh) Division; 3rd August 1944: Transferred to 158th Brigade, 53rd Welsh Division; 3rd May 1945: Schonningstedt; 4th May 1945: Hamburg; 11th June 1945: Duisberg, Germany; 1st March 1947: Reformed as part of the Territorial Army at Pontypridd.

In 1936, Battalion Headquarters of 5th WELCH, Headquarter Company and A Company were located at Pontypridd, B Company at Mountain Ash, C Company at Aberdare and D Company at Merthyr. A new company, based at Maesteg, was added to the battalion in November 1938. Following the duplication of the Territorial Army in March 1939, C Company was raised at Cardiff and D Company at Treharris.

On 3rd September 1939, the Battalion moved from their peacetime locations to Cowbridge, where billets were indifferent. Here training was handicapped by lack of weapons, ammunition, transport and training areas. A large number of coal miners were also drafted back to the pits.

On 24th October 1939, the Battalion moved to Haverfordwest where it had been stationed during the early days of the First World War. Having made all arrangements for Christmas at Haverfordwest, the Battalion was moved to Portadown in Northern Ireland on 19th December. On the 4th April 1940, the Battalion moved from Portadown to Newry in County Down.

During the spring and summer of 1941, training was stepped up and night exercises took place across very difficult country in the Mourne Mountains. On 11th November 1941, the Battalion was ordered from Newry to Hereford.

The Battalion's stay at Hereford was short, and after being there for about a month, orders were received to move to Crickhowell, where it relieved a battalion of Belgians, who took over the billets in Hereford.

At Crickhowell, the Battalion was quartered in Glanusk Park, Battalion Headquarters and the Officers' Mess occupying a large mansion, and the soldiers being accommodated in huts in the grounds. In February 1942, the Battalion moved from Crickhowell by road to Stourbridge, Worcestershire, where it remained for five or six weeks.

On the 4th April 1942, the Battalion arrived at Milstead, Kent, where it remained for about 18 months. The move of the Division by road took two days, the Battalion spending a night at a Staging Camp near Reading.

During its stay in Milstead, the Battalion took part in two large exercises - Exercise TIGER (19th-31st May 1942) and Exercise SPARTAN (2nd-13th March 1944). During these exercises, all ranks were forbidden to purchase anything from shops, and conditions were made as much like active service as possible.

The Battalion spent a month in July and August 1943 under canvas with 10th Royal Tank Regiment at Findon Park, near Worthing, where exercises involving co-operation with tanks were carried out on the South Downs training area. Later in the year, the Battalion moved by road from Milstead to Colchester where it remained for about a month, quartered in McMunn Barracks. The Battalion then returned to its old billets in Milstead.

The Battalion's long stay in Milstead came to an end in October 1943, when it moved by road to Dymchurch in Romney Marshes. After about three weeks there, another move was made to Herne Bay, where the Battalion remained until it moved to the concentration area prior to moving overseas in July 1944.

OPERATION OVERLORD

Between the 16th and the 28th June, 1944, the various parts of 1/5th WELCH left the UK for Normandy. 28th June marked the completion of the arrival of the Battalion in Normandy. The following day, 29th June, found the Battalion together for the first time at a village called Subles. The days of training and waiting were over. For the next 10 months 5th WELCH was to be in action almost continuously.

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In early moves 160th Brigade relieved 46th (Highland) Brigade in the Southern portion of the salient suffering casualties due to mortar fire including the Commanding Officer 1/5th WELCH.

FALAISE

On 21st July 1944, 1/5th WELCH was holding a position at Baron, the high ground East of Gavrus. The two forward companies were on the slopes of the high ground towards Le Bon Repos (Hill 112). During the afternoon and evening the enemy launched three infantry assaults supported by Tiger tanks. The first two were beaten off; but the third was supported by six Tigers, overrun one company and part of the other. These companies stood their ground, but there were casualties elsewhere and the Germans were able to dig themselves in at the crossroads at Le Bon Repos. 1/5th WELCH reported 118 soldiers missing. Two days later 4th WELCH carried out a successful counterattack on the position.

On 12th August 1944, the 53rd Division crossed the Orne at Grimbosq and 1/5th WELCH captured Fresney Le Vieux after hard fighting. Four days later the battalion fought a lively action at Martigny. In this action Captain Tasker Watkins, commanding B Company, earned the Victoria Cross. This gallant officer led his company across field strewn with mines and booby traps, and reached his objective in the face of heavy fire. Later B Company, by then reduced to a strength of 27, repelled a strong-attack.

In support of the Airborne assault at Eindhoven and Arnhem on 17th September 1944, 53rd (Welsh) Division were given the task of forcing a crossing of the Junction Canal North of Lommel – some 36 miles East of Antwerp. That evening the I/5th WELCH crossed the Canal into the bridgehead. Soon after entering the bridgehead the Commanding Officer received wounds from which he subsequently died. His death was a sad loss to I/5th WELCH.

LOWER MAAS

For the assault on 's-Hertogenbosch I/5th WELCH and Ist EAST LANCS were to advance along the railway during the night and get into the North-Eastern outskirts of the town by first light of 24th October 1944. They began their night march over very difficult country in the early hours. All went well and by 4.30 am they had reached the outskirts of the city. However, on crossing a bridge over the Zuid Willems Canal one platoon came under fire from self-propelled gun, although this was quickly put out of action, two further self-propelled guns were brought forward by the Germans. Many of the platoon were killed and the remainder taken prisoner. Elsewhere D Company successfully rushed another bridge covered by smoke and mortar fire and took 25 German prisoners with two machine guns. By the end of 26th October the whole of 's-Hertogenbosch was in British hands

The next task was to cross the Wessem Canal near Grathem and form a bridgehead to the East. This task was given to 160th Brigade. 158th Brigade would pass through 160th Brigade and capture Baexem and then advance towards Nurhem and Buggenum. This was achieved by the afternoon of 16th November 1944.

The advance of 158th Brigade began on 4th January 1945 in a heavy snow-storm which was to last most of the day. I/5th WELCH attacked in the left centre and EAST LANCS on their right. By 1015 hrs the I/5th WELCH had secured the woods between Menil and Waharday; but, such was the snow and mud, that the only supporting weapons which could be brought forward were mortars, and machine guns, and these only by man-handling. The Commanding Officer and his Intelligence Officer were both wounded by mines. Opposition from enemy infantry and tanks was only moderate, but shell fire was heavy, and mines and booby traps plentiful.

REICHSWALD

The attack, along the Northern Part of the Reichswald Forest, was to be made due East, the opening phase along a one-Brigade front. 71st Brigade was to seize the Branden Berg feature and the high ground to South-East. 158th Brigade with 1/5th WELCH would pass through 71st to occupy and mop up the area of the Siegfried Line and then push on and seize the Stoppel Berg feature. At 0200 hrs on 9th February 1945, 158th Brigade, less 1st EAST LANCS, moved forward with 1/5th WELCH in the lead. By 0700 hrs the battalion was being seriously delayed by congestion of traffic on the tracks just inside the forest, and had passed many vehicles bogged down in the mud. Leaving his carriers and supporting armour behind the Commanding Officer decided to push on to the objective – the high ground West and North of the Gelden Berg feature. They were met with considerable opposition from German machine gun and mortar fire. By 1800 hrs the Division had captured all its

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objectives. It had been an operation against the weather rather than the German enemy. However on the afternoon of 12th February the enemy launched a counter-attack in considerable strength. The attack was carried out by elements of 115th and 104th Panzer Grenadiers supported by artillery, mortars and self-propelled guns. The attack was beaten off. Total casualties sustained by the battalion during the Reichswald offensive was 19 killed and 106 sick and wounded; whilst 130 enemy prisoners were taken.

The next task was to breakout of the bridgehead over the river Issel, through Dingden in North Westerly direction. The battalion attacked at midnight on 28th March and was successful in taking 32 prisoners; the remaining battalions now passed through to continue the advance leaving I/5th WELCH in reserve. Next, the battalion was to cross the river Dinkel and secure the area of Kloster-Epe towards Gronau. The battalion attacked on 2nd April without opposition, but lost the Commanding Officer when his jeep hit a mine. Then there followed the crossings of the rivers Weser and Aller. On 8th April the battalion moved into an assembly area at Memsen. The attack involved clearing Rethem, but after 2 days of concentrated fighting with artillery support the battalion failed to take the objective. A and C Companies had taken 20 wounded with a further 60 missing. Fortunately, many of the missing had in fact been taken prisoner. The battalion was badly depleted and was re-organised into 3 rifle companies.

On 3rd May 1945, news came that the Hamburg garrison has surrendered unconditionally. Next day 1/5th WELCH moved from Schonningstedt into the City. A month later the battalion moved to the Duisberg-Hamborn area relieving part of 17th (US) Division. On 7th June 1946, the battalion ceased to be operational. With re-constitution of the Territorial Army, the battalion was re-formed with Headquarter and Support Companies at Pontypridd; A Company at Aberdare; B Company at Mountain Ash; C Company at Treharris and D Company at Merthyr. Recruiting started on 1st May 1947.

This extract is taken from The History of the Welch Regiment 1919-1951 by Major General CEN Lomax CB CBE DSO MC, Colonel, Welch Regiment (published by 1952 by Western Mail and Echo).

Commanding Officers, First/Fifth Battalion

Lieutenant Colonel TM Phillips TD
Lieutenant Colonel WG Hewett MC
Lieutenant Colonel RA MacGeorge (Rifle Brigade)
Lieutenant Colonel FH Brooke
Lieutenant Colonel CER Hirch
Lieutenant Colonel ERG Ripley (KSLI) (killed)
Lieutenant Colonel JT Gibson DSO (died of wounds)
Lieutenant Colonel HD Nelson Smith MC (R Hampshire)
Lieutenant Colonel JS Morrison-Jones MC (killed)

Lieutenant Colonel WR Edmunds TD