

15th Battalion The Welch Regiment TA

World War 2

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In March 1939, owing to the threatening world situation, the Government decided to double the establishment of the Territorial Army. Accordingly a 2/4th Battalion The Welch Regiment came into existence, its basis being B, C and D Companies of the parent battalion. It formed, together with 2/5th Battalion and 4th Battalion Monmouthshire Regiment, the 113th Infantry Brigade of 38th (Welsh) Division.

Shortly after its formation, in response to local representations, it was renumbered 15th Battalion The Welch Regiment thus preserving a connection with the Carmarthenshire Battalion of the 1914-1918 War. This resulted in much local encouragement and support including the very handsome gift of a complete set of band instruments from the citizens of Carmarthen. In common with all duplicate units of the Territorial Army the new Battalion suffered greatly from a lack of both instructors and weapons and equipment, but the personnel, both those taken over from the 1/4th Battalion and those directly recruited, showed great enthusiasm. The Battalion carried out its first annual training in camp at Dan-y-graig, Porthcawl in August 1939. Having returned home, the soldiers returned back to Dan-y-graig days later when the general mobilisation of the Territorial Army was called.

All personnel were soon absorbed in the guarding of vulnerable points throughout South Wales, but as these were gradually taken over by other units, training was resumed.

The shortage of efficient instructors and equipment and even of adequate clothing continued. Considerable difficulty was experienced with the miscellaneous collection of impressed vehicles provided. The Battalion remained, with Headquarters in Porthcawl, in these circumstances throughout the winter of 1939-40. Little real progress was made until the spring of 1940 when the Battalion was again united in Dan-y-Graig Camp.

Thereafter work was hard and continuous and although material was short and no specialist weapons or equipment available, progress was normal until early June 1940, when the training routine was upset. First the Battalion had to receive, accommodate and sort out 2,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force straight from Dunkirk and immediately thereafter 1,000 further men of the Royal Dutch Army. Secondly, it took over responsibility for the defence of two RAF stations, St Athan and Llandow, upon each of which two rifle Companies were deployed. Battalion Headquarters and Headquarter Company moved to Llantwit Major nearby. In addition coast defence was organised and beach patrols furnished. An interesting light is thrown upon the training policy of the period by the fact that at St Athan (a technical training establishment) there were some hundreds of RAF personnel, all unarmed and untrained in the defence of themselves or their station. Digging and wiring went on apace and some of the first bombs dropped upon this country fell in the neighbourhood.

In August 1940, 38th (Welsh) Division moved to the Midlands in GHQ reserve and the Battalion occupied a tented camp in Shugborough Park near Rugeley, Staffordshire. Here took place higher formation training for which the previous preparation had been insufficient but the threat of imminent invasion made such a course essential if the Division was to carry out its operational role.

The training weaknesses of the formation were realised and, in November, after the Battalion had spent a short period outside Liverpool, the Division was concentrated in the Aldershot area for intensive training, the Battalion occupying Ramillies Barracks. Here Company and later Battalion training were carried out and with the facilities offered by Aldershot and with the arrival both of drafts to complete establishment and proper equipment, in particular transport, rapid progress was made. By the spring the Battalion had reached a very satisfactory standard of efficiency. For the first time, also, organised games became possible and the Battalion found an excellent Rugby XV which remained supreme in the Division throughout its existence. It also accounted for many distinguished outside teams, including the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

Throughout this period the Division retained its operational role and many visits were paid to its prospective counter-attack area upon the South Downs. In March 1941, as part of an inter-Brigade move, the Battalion proceeded to Sunningdale, near Windsor, but without change of role.

April to November was spent in Sussex, the Division having assumed a beach defence task. Some of the period was spent in actual forward localities, digging and wiring, and some in reserve positions further inland. The hopes that 38th (Welsh) Division would in due course proceed on active service as a division were not to be fulfilled, for it was reduced to lower establishment with the role of beach defence and the training and provision of drafts. In this capacity, from November 1941 to May 1943 it was stationed in Dorset and the Battalion occupied many pleasant but unexciting stations in that county. One action alone occurred. A party under Captain PM Kempson made a

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reconnaissance of the French Coast, and subsequently 3967173 Lance-Corporal FA Lax, was mentioned in despatches for his services during this operation.

Weymouth was bombed on 2nd April 1942, and the co-operation between the civil authorities and the military forces was outstanding. This was indeed a tribute to the attention which the Battalion had paid to this subject.

In May 1943 the Battalion moved to Sandwich in Kent without change of role, and in August was engaged in the organisation and conduct of the concentration areas for Exercise HARLEQUIN the full scale rehearsal for the invasion of Europe which took place in the following year. This was an administrative triumph and congratulations flowed in from Headquarters, South Eastern Command and from the Headquarters of lower formations.

15th WELCH moved to Hertford in October 1943 and shortly afterwards to Northumberland where it provided enemy for troops of Second British Army preparing for the following year's invasion of the continent. In January 1944 the Battalion assumed what was, in fact, its final role, for it formed the garrison of Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. Drafts were however still being despatched and by this time, few, if any, of the early members of the Battalion were left. They had been posted, some to other Battalions of The Welch Regiment, but many, to their regret, far and wide to other and various arms and units of the British Army.

Finally, the Battalion moved to Ballyedmond in Northern Ireland as a training and draft finding unit and there it remained until disbanded. The story of 15th WELCH is neither exciting nor inspiring. It is a story of a long period of very dull, but none the less very necessary duty, faithfully carried out. The careful and thorough training given to the large number of officers and men who passed through the hands of the Battalion was undoubtedly a very valuable contribution to the Army as a whole. None the less, all those who knew the Battalion and the spirit of its personnel in its early days must regret that it never had an opportunity to go into action as a unit.

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, 15th Battalion

5 May 1939 – January 1940
January 1940 – January 1941
January 1941 – October 1941
October 1941 – January 1944

Colonel WT Woods CB DSO MC TD
Lieutenant Colonel PH Phillips
Lieutenant Colonel W Goldsworthy MC
Lieutenant Colonel PF Pitt