

In June 1950, Communist forces of North Korea, aided and abetted by China, invaded the Western-inclined Republic of South Korea, which had been set up by the United Nations after the Japanese defeat. For the first and only time in its undistinguished history, the UN resolved to combat force with force, and four American divisions were hastily sent out to aid the puny South Korean forces. Later Britain contributed her 28th Commonwealth Division, under UN command. This comprised British, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian troops, supported by naval and RAF elements.

In November 1951 the 1st Battalion The Welch Regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel HH Deane, disembarked at the South Korean port of Pusan. Before leaving home, the Commanding Officer had taken the precaution of enquiring from the South Korean Legation in London whether there were any restrictions on the import of live goats. None at all, replied the Minister, adding his 'Best wishes and grateful thanks to the Regiment'. And so the usual curious throngs of locals at Pusan docks were bemused to see the newly-arrived British soldiers led down the gangway by Taffy IX.

The Battalion mustered 38 officers and 746 other ranks and was allotted to 29th British Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brigadier AHG Ricketts DSO OBE. The two other Battalions were 1st Battalion The Royal Norfolk Regiment and 1st Battalion The Royal Leicestershire Regiment, with the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards providing armour support. Also under Brigade command were batteries of 14 Field Regiment RA and sappers of 55 Field Squadron RE. The battalion included a number of soldiers drafted from 1st Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers and 1st Battalion South Wales Borderers to bring it up to full strength.

Within seventy-two hours of disembarking, The Welch were ordered to take over a reserve sector from 1st Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment who, the previous April, had won renown and been awarded two VCs for their heroic stand on the Imjin River. But although the year that 1st WELCH spent in Korea was marked by many individual acts of dash and bravery, the Battalion as a whole had no opportunity for such heroics. Instead, after moving up to a forward position around Yongdong, they were to endure four bitter winter months of arduous, if often unrewarding, patrol activity in conditions not unlike those in the Western Front in World War I. In temperatures down to forty-five degrees of frost, officers and men lived and slept in their bunkers, under constant shelling and mortaring. Daily and nightly fighting or 'lay-up' (ambush) patrols and wiring fatigues took up most of the time; all too often the wily Chinese did not allow themselves to be caught, and the report was 'NTR' (nothing to report) or 'NC' (no contact). But on occasions there was contact that resulted in casualties to both sides, and awards for 1st WELCH.

On 10th January 1952 Corporal MJ Keogh was second-in-command of a daylight patrol under 2nd Lieutenant AR Bentham when, on reaching their first objective, they were ambushed by about twenty enemy who killed four men and wounded the patrol leader. Corporal Keogh now found himself in command without any wireless contact, for the No 88 set had been damaged and its operator killed. Having scattered the enemy with his Bren and Stens, he sent back a runner to Company Headquarters and remained in position for four hours, beating off further attacks until a relieving party arrived, whom he covered on to the objective. He then led his surviving men to the scene of the ambush, collected the wounded subaltern and the dead and brought them back to Company lines. 'From the time his patrol commander was wounded Cpl Keogh showed a high degree of initiative in what was a very difficult situation. His men were naturally shaken after the ambush, but he rallied them and encouraged them and in every way set the highest example ..'. Thus wrote Colonel Deane when recommending this NCO for an MM. Corporal Keogh in fact received a Mention in Despatches. There were several other instances when acts of gallantry and leadership were similarly transmuted by War Office from the Commanding Officer's recommendation.

On the night of 24th/25th May 1952 a fighting patrolled by Captain RC Taverner was engaged in a fierce fire-fight at close range, Captain Taverner and his corporal, second-in-command, being severely wounded. The young Bren Gunner, Lance Corporal Ellaway, was blown down the hillside by a grenade, but, quickly recovering, he assumed command, drove the enemy back and then organised the evacuation of Taverner and the corporal. Although he had strained his back in the early fall, he personally helped to carry Taverner ('a heavily-built officer') to a stretcher in rear, and then returned to recover two more wounded. Utterly disregarding his own safety, '.....his first concern was to get to grips with the enemy, and later to get the wounded back ... There is no doubt that he was directly instrumental in saving his Officer.' So ran the Citation for the MM which Lance Corporal TP Ellaway subsequently received.

The Korean conflict has been described as a platoon commander's war, for the encounters were mostly fought out by small sub-units on patrol between the forward lines. Many of the young subalterns in 1st WELCH were National Service conscripts who earned great respect for the way they proved their qualities of leadership in challenging situations. 2nd Lieutenant John Davey took out numerous fighting and 'lay-up' patrols during his twelve months in Korea, and was later rewarded with an MC and a regular commission. Later he became Brigadier KJ Davey CBE MC DL and Colonel of the Regiment. Other National Service platoon commanders included 2nd Lieutenants John Bowler and Ian Powys, both of whom received the MC for their patrolling endeavours.

The strength of patrols naturally varied according to tasks, from one officer and half a dozen soldiers for a short-range recce to one and twenty-five or more for a fighting patrol. The latter would be armed with six LMGs (Brens) besides Stens, rifles and grenades, while three signallers were laden with their No. 88 wireless sets. For rations each man carried two tins of American-issue C7 rations and two tins of self-heating soup, together with six bars of chocolate and six packets of chewing gum. During the heat of the summer months the chocolate tended to melt, and also induced thirst, so boiled sweets were substituted. In addition to each man's field dressing, a supply of morphia tablets was carried by the patrol leader.

While patrolling was the main operational task of the Battalion throughout the campaign, there were rare occasions when a large-scale, all-arms attack was undertaken. One of these was appropriately code-named Operation 'Maindy', (Maindy Barracks in Cardiff was the name of old Welch regimental depot) which took place on the night of 23rd/24th June 1952. B Company, commanded by Major TJ Jackson, was ordered to attack a strong Chinese position on a feature known as Hill 227. It was believed to be held by about 140 enemy in a complex of bunkers, and an assault by another unit in January had been repulsed with many casualties. The Company was supported by a squadron of 5 DG and three batteries of Gunners, together with a detachment of Sappers from 55 Field Squadron RE. The attack went in just before first light on the 24th, with two platoons 'up', the other in reserve with TAC HQ. The left Platoon succeeded in capturing their bunker objective after a fierce exchange of LMG fire and grenades, during which the Platoon commander was wounded, but remained in action. While consolidating, they were subjected to further assaults by machine guns and grenades. Meanwhile the right Platoon had cleared three bunkers, but on exploiting they came under a hail of grenades which killed the leading section commander. While the two leading sections were thus engaged, the right Platoon commander moved up in support but as he was about to attack another bunker he was severely wounded by 'burp' fire. By this time the other Platoon commander had received a second wound which put him out of action. The Platoon Sergeant was likewise hit and the wireless operator was killed by a mortar bomb. Learning that both Platoon commanders were casualties, the Company commander went forward and consolidated the survivors of the platoons, before organising a section-by-section withdrawal which was successfully carried out. Operation 'Maindy' cost B Company two men killed and twenty-two wounded, including two subalterns. During the early stages of the attack the artillery put down supporting fire to silence some long-range mortars, but their FOO, with Company Headquarters, was killed and the wireless operator was wounded. The enemy casualties were estimated to be sixteen killed and many more wounded. These could only be estimated, for the Chinese always made every effort to evacuate casualties - as did 'own troops'. In fact all B Company's dead and wounded were safely brought back to base. For his part in this action, Major TJ Jackson received an immediate DSO.

After a 'rest' period in reserve (when the opportunity was seized to organise a Rugby match with a battery of New Zealand Gunners), the Battalion moved back to the front line along the Imjin River. This was in July, and apart from clashes with enemy patrols, it was High Explosive that became the chief threat. The PLA (Chinese People's Liberation Army) were well equipped with artillery, much of it 122mm calibre, and seemingly inexhaustible stocks of ammunition, and throughout July and August they appeared to be concentrating their 'hates' on 1st WELCH. The War Diary reported that one morning seventy-six shells fell in C Company's position within thirty minutes, while 'about 120 shells fell in A Company's area between 1500 and 1845'.

On 17th July 'the three fwd Companies received about 300 shells, mostly of 122mm calibre'. Such laconic entries occur and recur, and one can only marvel that the Battalion was not destroyed. But thanks to all the back-breaking work on bunkers with their revetted walls and turf and stone covered roofs, casualties were slight. Some bunkers survived direct hits without any hurt to occupants.

1st Battalion The Welch Regiment

Korea 1951-1952

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The Korean summer brought another hazard with the arrival of the monsoon. In June the Imjin River rose 40ft, washing away roads and bridges. Bunkers were flooded, 'fighting bays became swamps, and communication trenches resembled miniature rivers'. Bunkers that had withstood all that shelling succumbed to the assaults of nature and collapsed. One soldier was buried and drowned as he lay asleep after his spell of 'stag'. Yet another endemic threat in the summer months was malaria, but this was combated by the new Paludrine drug, much more effective than the Mepacrine of the Burma campaign, and with none of the unpleasant side-effects. As in Slim's Army, every officer and soldier was ordered to swallow one Paludrine tablet every morning with the result that malaria was never a problem.

On 26th October 1952, The Welch found themselves withdrawn to a staging camp by the Imjin River, actually astride the 38th Parallel. Two days later the Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion Duke of Wellington's Regiment arrived, and, having handed over to him and his Battalion on 2nd November, 1st WELCH moved by train to Pusan, where they had disembarked for their campaigning almost exactly twelve months previously.

The Korean conflict was the last full-scale war to have been fought by the Welch Regiment, and the Battle Honour 'Korea 1951-52' is the latest carried by the present day regiment 'The Royal Welsh' although units of the regiment have been in Iraq and Afghanistan in more recent times. Those twelve months had brought their inevitable casualties, and their well-earned decorations. Perhaps 1st WELCH were fortunate in losing only one officer (2nd Lieutenant Stephen Burgess), but they also lost thirty other ranks killed and five officers and fifty-nine other ranks wounded (two of the latter subsequently died). Decorations included three DSOs (Colonel Deane, Major Jackson and Major AG Roberts), three MCs (2nd Lieutenants Davey, Bowler, and Powys), three MMs and numerous Mentions in Despatches.

On 16th November 1952, at the United Nations Military Cemetery overlooking Pusan harbour, 1st WELCH paraded for a solemn memorial service to their thirty comrades who now lay buried there. After wreaths had been laid by Colonel Deane and the RSM, Last Post and Reveille were sounded by the Battalion's buglers.

This extract is taken from 'A History of The Royal Regiment of Wales 1689-1989' by JM Bereton, Cardiff (1989)