

24th (2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot

Its Welsh links

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The 24th Regiment has served this Country continuously for over 300 years. In the process, 23 soldiers have been awarded the Victoria Cross; the highest number awarded to a line regiment. For the last 130 years, the Regiment has recruited mainly in Wales and continues to do so.

The successor unit, 2nd Battalion The Royal Welsh, is currently based in Tidworth in Wiltshire and three of its rifle companies will have served in the front line Afghanistan during 2010.

It was on 8th March 1689, that King William and Queen Mary signed the Proclamation for the raising of 10 Regiments of Foot to fight in Ireland. Sir Edward Dering, a Kentish baronet, was given the task of raising one of these Regiments which in 1751 became known as the 24th Regiment of Foot. In those days, there were few permanent training depots and most regiments recruited soldiers from wherever they were stationed. The events in Scotland (in the 1750s) and Ireland (in the 1830s) and the growth of the large Cities always provided the majority of recruits for the British Army. Wales was only sparsely populated until the expansion of the coal, iron and steel industries in the late 19th century.

The 24th Regiment most certainly had a link with Warwickshire and this commenced on 31st August 1782 when a Royal Warrant conferred County titles on all regiments not already possessed of special designations such as "The Queen's" or "The King's Own". It was intended that regiments should cultivate a recruiting connection with the Counties whose names they took, and the Twenty Fourth, who were given the title "2nd Warwickshire", were ordered to send a recruiting party to Tamworth after their return from the American War of Independence. No special link with the County Militia was ever established nor were any Depots or permanent recruiting centres set up in Warwickshire.

[Incidentally, the 6th Regiment of Foot, a separate regiment, at the same time were given the title "1st Warwickshire". The 6th Foot subsequently became The Royal 1st Warwickshire Regiment (1832), The Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1881), The Royal Warwickshire Fusiliers (1963) and The Regiment of Fusiliers (1968). The 24th Regiment has never been part of the 6th Foot.]

The Regiment was honoured to carry the title "24th (2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot" until 1st July 1881 when again measures were taken to give County names to infantry regiments of the line. The 24th Regiment, who had established their Depot in Brecon in 1873, became "The South Wales Borderers Regiment". This was the title of one of the Militia battalions that since 1873 had been under the command of the Officer Commanding the Brigade Depot at Brecon.

The 24th Regiment had recruited in the Counties of Brecknock, Cardigan, Montgomery, Monmouth and Radnor for six years before the Anglo-Zulu War. The Welsh influence in the composition of the two battalions of the Regiment in 1879 can be seen by the typical Welsh names of some of the more junior soldiers. There were thirty-four named "Davies", twenty-four named "Evans", fifty-six named "Jones" and fifty-one named "Williams". Private John Williams who was awarded the Victoria Cross at Rorke's Drift came from Cwmbran in Monmouthshire.

It was the 1964 film 'Zulu' which suggests the title of the Regiment in 1879 was 'The South Wales Borderers' and that Welshmen formed the major element of the defenders at Rorke's Drift – neither was true. Only about 30 soldiers of the 120 men defending the mission station were Welsh born – and further two were born in Warwickshire.

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In 1936, the Chillianwallah Colours of the 24th Regiment that were carried in the Second Sikh War of 1849 and which had been laid up in St Mary's Church, Warwick since 1868, were removed to the Regimental Chapel in Brecon Cathedral. The Church Council of St Mary's Church, understandably, was not inclined to part with the Colours but the Regiment applied for a faculty for their removal. The case was argued before the Chancellor of the Diocese of Coventry on 6th May 1936, and judgement was given in the Regiment's favour.

If fate had taken another turn the 24th Regiment might have become an established regiment of Warwickshire. Had this happened, the Regiment would have been just as proud to be Warwickshire "Lads" as it has been to be Brecon "Boyos".

The spirit of the 24th Regiment is strongly maintained by The Royal Welsh. It is one of the outstanding regiments of the British Army, one with a distinct Welsh flair. Its Welsh motto is proudly displayed on the Regimental Colour – "Gwell Angau na Chywilydd" – "Death rather than Dishonour".

