

After the Anglo-Zulu campaign in 1879 the 1st and 2nd battalions South Wales Borderers continued to serve at home and abroad; the 2nd Battalion serving in the South African War of 1900-1902. The 3rd Militia answered the call to arms and volunteered for overseas service in South Africa. The Volunteers grew in popularity and strength, and the Edwardian summers saw the neat white-tented camps of the "weekenders" in the fields that surrounded Brecon. It really was the thing to do. The friendly summer camps were to change in a few short years to a soldiering that was deadly serious.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, the reservists were quickly mobilized; the 1st Battalion was serving in France and the 2nd Battalion after first fighting the Germans in China found their way to Gallipoli. They adapted well to the new and vicious warfare and acquitted themselves well. Brecon mushroomed as a military centre and grew rapidly to accommodate the new wartime battalions that were speedily formed. But the centuries of military exposure had equipped the Brecon townsfolk for the experience, and they took it in their stride. At various times, all the Battalions were stationed in Brecon, recruiting, training or reforming. Recruiting continued throughout the Border counties, but this time, by virtue of the large number of men required, the Borderers spread the net wider, and the accents of Birmingham, Shropshire and West Wales could be heard in the ranks. Temporary campsites sprung up around Brecon, mostly in hatted accommodation or tents. The small railway station coped with the constant flow of troop and supply trains, while the country lanes were noisy with the movement of troops and horses. The war brought prosperity to the town, but it did not noticeably grown in size, apart from the temporary campsites.

And then, suddenly in 1919, it was all over. The wartime battalions were disbanded, the men went home, and soon Brecon settled back into its role of County town and the Depot of the South Wales Borderers. The original garrison of the 1st and 2nd Battalion recommenced their peacetime soldiering of home and foreign duty. Peacetime recruiting started, slowly at first, for the taste of war had deterred many of the young men. But the economy of the country contributed to the swelling of the ranks, and the Borderers benefited, as did all the Services, from the Depression of the Thirties.

Battalions found themselves up to strength, and the pubs of Brecon found new khaki-clad customers, who bore the blue scars of the mines, and had the hardness of the industrial areas. Soon, these recruits were to be the hard-core backbone of the Regiment, as are all NCOs. And they would be needed very soon.

Brecon was growing in stature as a military centre, and in 1939, when the new national militia was called up; Dering Lines (named after the first Colonel of the 24th Regiment) was built to accommodate the influx of troops. The both the militia and rifle volunteers had used the Site for many years as a camping and training ground.

At the same time, the War Office, seeking a new Artillery training range, chose Sennybridge, a hamlet eight miles west of Brecon on the road to Llandovery, and five miles from the site of the original Roman fort (The Gaer). From that day onward, generations of Royal Artillerymen (and many from other countries) have fired their guns on the ranges of Sennybridge.

At outbreak of war in 1939, Brecon had already assumed a wartime appearance, for in that summer the Territorial Battalions were in camp around the town, and the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the South Wales

Borderers were at wartime strength. They were soon to grow, and the Borderers gained the 5th, 6th and 7th Battalions. The 1st Battalion served in the Middle East, while the 2nd Battalion served in Norway. After the Dunkirk the Battalions were strengthened but after the invasion scare had passed, the 5th, a Home Defence Unit was disbanded and the 7th was eventually transferred to the Royal Artillery. The Depot of the South Wales Borderers (that is, the Barracks) played its part as the 21st Infantry Training Centre - eventually serving all Welsh line regiments. The Home Guards of Brecon and Monmouthshire were affiliated to the Borderers.

The South Wales Borderers carried on with their preparation for D-Day, and the training was punctuated by such emergency work as helping with the harvest, clearing air raid debris and even sweeping snow from the roads. When the tide of war started to turn, the inevitable happened. Practically overnight the town was empty, save for a few holding companies and the regular cadre. The debris of departing soldiers remained, but they were already at the invasion ports, waiting for the 6th June 1944. And Brecon, garrison town that it always had been quickly changed gear and settled back as they had done for hundreds of years

More Interesting Facts
Brecon as a garrison town
Fact Sheet: 10-S05-01
Page: 2 of 2

The 2nd Battalion of the South Wales Borderers, and 2nd and 3rd Monmouths took their part in the bitter campaign, which drove the Germans out of France, Belgium and Holland, while the 6th Borderers were amongst the forces that reconquered Burma from the Japanese.

At home the Brecon Battalion was a draft finding unit and the 1st Battalion amalgamated with the 4th Monmouthshire, serving as a training unit. Fortunately the war did not see such slaughter as the First World War, but it cost the South Wales Borderers 1,024 casualties, many of them Brecon born. In 1945 the 1st Battalion South Wales Borderers proceeded to Palestine, and thence to Cyprus where in took charge of camps for illegal Jewish immigrants to Palestine.

But at home, the military role of Brecon was changing. The establishment of the Dering Lines and Sennybridge ranges had perpetuated its broader role as a training area, and the town, in peacetime, played host to more than its local county regiment.

The South Wales Borderers now reduced to one battalion continued to play its peacetime role of commuting between Brecon and foreign service. In 1947 the freedom of the Borough was conferred on the Regiment, but in 1949 the regiment was in Eritrea and in 1953 in Germany. In 1955 the 1st Battalion served in Malaya and in 1957 in Singapore. Finally, amalgamation with the Welch Regiment at Cardiff Castle with the new Prince of Wales as Colonel-in-Chief.

What of the town? Brecon, the garrison town. It has seen many changes. In the late fifties, with the formation of the Welsh Brigade, it even lost the Borderers recruits, for the new Brigade Headquarters at Cwrt-y-Gollan, near Abergavenny had accommodation for the entire component regiments of the Welsh Brigade. Which left the old Barracks deserted, except for the pensioner sergeant who served at the Barracks Museum. There was, of course, the Dering Lines, which had become an Infantry Training Centre, and the ranges at Sennybridge. But the Barracks were empty, and that didn't seem quite right. And the 24th regiment had gone. Today, Brecon has once more become a military centre, the largest in Wales. The Barracks now accommodates Brigade Headquarters for Wales. Dering Lines, where 'The Infantry Battle School' is located, now trains all the NCOs for the infantry of the British Army and is recognized as a centre of excellence by other NATO and Commonwealth countries who send their best soldiers to take part in the challenging courses. Sennybridge has become more important as the end of the cold war, more Regular Army units are now based in the UK. For the Army never really leaves Brecon.

