

Summary of Service:

3rd May 1939: Palestine as part of 16th Infantry Brigade, 8th Infantry Division. 3rd November 1939: Palestine as 14th Infantry Brigade, 6th Infantry Division. 28th November 1939: Egypt as part of 22nd Infantry Brigade, 6th Infantry Division. 18th February 1941: Assigned to CREFORCE as force reserve, Island of Crete until 1st June 1941. June 1941: North Africa as part of 14th Infantry Brigade, 6th Infantry Division. July 1943: Sicily landings. May 1944: Italy as part of 168th Infantry Brigade, 56th (London) Division. 22nd September 1944: Reduced to cadre but within 3 months was re-established and assigned to 61st Infantry Brigade, 6th Armoured Division in Italy and Austria.

NORTH AFRICA 1940-1942
MIDDLE EAST 1941
CRETE, CANEA, WITHDRAWAL TO SPHAKIA

After trying to keep the peace between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, 1st WELCH was assigned to Egypt, arriving at Mersa Matruh in November 1939. In the following June Mussolini's forces in Libya became the new enemy, and the battalion eagerly awaited the chance of showing 'the Eyeties' what Welsh soldiers could do. But that chance was not yet to come, for they were moved back to Alexandria, soon to confront a more formidable enemy elsewhere.

The threat to the strategic island of Crete, valuable as a refuelling base for the Royal Navy and the RAF, became serious in early 1941 when the Germans occupied Greece. Reinforcements for the British and ANZAC garrison were hastily sent in from Egypt. Among these were the 1st Battalion The Welch Regiment who disembarked on 18th February; they mustered 21 officers and 830 other ranks. The next few months were spent peacefully enough, preparing defensive positions and digging slit trenches. The expected onslaught came on 14th May 1941 - saturation bombing by 600 Luftwaffe aircraft which destroyed airfields, pulverised defences and silenced nearly all the 60-odd AA guns on the island. Well dug-in in the Suda Bay area around Force Headquarters, 1st WELCH endured six days of this ordeal with remarkably few casualties. On 20th May the Germans launched their airborne assault with waves of Junkers 52 troop-carriers spewing out their hordes of paratroops, and swarms of gliders crash-landing throughout the island. Six of these planed down about 400 yards from B Company's position: Captain Evans personally shot up two with a Bren and the troops in the other two were effectively dealt with on deplaning by the rest of his Company. When fifty parachutists occupied a deserted monastery nearby, these were overcome by three platoons of D Company who took twenty-five prisoners. Bitter and confused fighting followed in all sectors. Advancing on a building believed to be held by paratroops, C Company came under heavy machine-gun fire. Corporal Myrddin McTiffin located the gun and boldly led his section to silence it. All his men fell, but he went on unscathed and with his bayonet killed the entire crew of seven, thus allowing his company to continue. In World War I for similar acts of valour VCs were awarded. As it was, Corporal McTiffin was later awarded the Military Medal.

Undeterred by heavy casualties, the Germans continued to send in wave after wave of fresh airborne troops, and within a week they were virtually in control of Crete. 1st WELCH losses were equally heavy. By 20th May B Company had lost more than half its strength while the other companies were in little better shape.

The Battalion's last stand came on 28th May when, virtually isolated in their Suda Bay position, they were overwhelmed by the onslaught of nine German battalions. After a desperate fire-fight, the remnants withdrew in scattered groups, but not all of them managed the forty-mile mountainous trek to the British base at Sphakia. The Pioneer Platoon was surrounded and captured; C Company was reduced to two officers and twenty men. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan, was last seen firing a Bren to cover the withdrawal: he too was captured. Some 300 survivors, many of them wounded, eventually reached Sphakia where the Navy was organising evacuation. But here Major Gibson, now in command, was ordered to send a composite company of 200 men to support the commando battalion holding the last rearguard position. These marched off under Major Griffiths and were not seen again. Subsequently it was learned that after holding off attacks they received orders from Force Headquarters to surrender. On 1st June 1941 all that remained of 1st WELCH disembarked at Alexandria: they numbered 7 officers and 161 other ranks. They had left behind in Crete some 250 dead, while 400-odd had been marched into captivity. In September the strength was made up with a draft of 700 officers and men from home.

BENGHAZI

Having refitted after the Crete debacle, the Battalion, 1st WELCH was involved in the fierce struggles for Benghazi in January 1942. In the face of Rommel's onslaught, Benghazi was evacuated and on the 28th January 1st WELCH, with the remainder of the garrison, were ordered to withdraw to the Egyptian frontier. The Battalion had already been split into individual companies and detachments, and each group was forced to make its own way across hundreds of miles of mine- and German-infested desert. Commanding Officer, Colonel Jack Napier, with seventy men of Headquarters and B Companies, had only covered some twenty-five miles when they were completely surrounded by German tanks and lorried infantry and compelled to surrender. C Company had joined up with other units of the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade, and after eluding enemy patrols in the night, managed to motor 250 miles in 30 hours without opposition, eventually arriving within the lines of the Free French and Polish Brigade at Mechili on 30th January.

Meanwhile, at 2045 hours on the 28th January, A and D Companies, already mauled in the defence of Benghazi, set out under Major JT Gibson (Second-in-Command) to break through the German lines. The column of 150 'soft' vehicles and carriers was unmolested until at 0300 hours next morning they encountered a formidable road block. It was heavily covered by mortars, machine guns and armoured cars. With his rifle platoons backed up by the Punjabis and the carriers of the Central India Horse, Major Gibson made several valorous attempts to break through, but the only result was loss of his own men and vehicles. By 0400 hours it became obvious that further attack was suicidal, and the only option to avoid surrender and capture was dispersal and a life saving footslog across the desert. And so, after destroying vehicles, those fit to face the gruelling task split into small parties and set off into the dark waste (many, both British and Indian, had already reached the limit of endurance and had to be left to fall into enemy hands). The epic feats of some of the scattered groups of officers and men marching more than 200 miles through hostile territory, enduring heat, cold, thirst and hunger, are recounted in detail in the Regimental History.

SICILY 1943 **ITALY 1943-1945**

Of the 700-odd soldiers of 1st WELCH who fought at Benghazi, 214 survived to face the task of refitting and building up anew for the second time in a year. Reinforced, they were posted to the Sudan and spent a quiet spell at Khartoum. In March 1943 they went to Palestine where they immediately began training for their special role in the invasion of Sicily and Italy. This was one of the 'Beach Brick' units tasked with the organisation and flow of men and materials on the beaches in an assault landing. After full-scale 'wet' exercises in the Gulf of Akaba, the Battalion, now known as 34 (Welch) Brick, carried out their unglamorous but essential duties in the successful Operation HUSKY, the landing on Sicily on 9th July 1943. The Italian opposition was minimal, and there were no casualties, although in the run-in the Battalion Headquarters landing craft was shelled and sunk. With Sicily occupied, the next objective was the landing on the 'toe' of Italy across the Messina Straits. This took place on 3rd September, with 34 (Welch) Brick performing their beach tasks. Again there was virtually no resistance, other than long-range German shelling. The Italians, now utterly demoralised, surrendered in droves, and five days later their High Command formally capitulated. But Hitler was by no means prepared to see his southern flank breached, and with the more formidable Wehrmacht adversary the bitter fighting of the Italian campaign was only just beginning. While the 8th Army were slowly pushing up the peninsula, 1st WELCH were dismayed to find themselves (with the other 'Bricks') despatched back to Egypt for guard duties. Here at least they were gratified to provide an escort for Winston Churchill, attending a three-power conference in Cairo.

1st WELCH then became involved in a little-known episode of the war in the Middle East. Stationed at Alexandria were some Greek troops evacuated from their homeland when it was overrun. They were known as the 1st Greek Brigade Group, and comprised three infantry battalions, one Anti-Aircraft Battery, a troop of field guns, three Stuart tanks and some Bren carriers. In April 1944 the whole group 'mutinied'; that is, they refused to take any orders from the British, and shut themselves up in their camp. A spokesman declared that they merely wished to be left alone to conduct their own affairs; but if force were used against them, they would reply in kind. Since all attempts at negotiation failed, Operation RABBIT was mounted, in which the mutineers were attacked by a force including 1st WELCH, battalions of the London Scottish and London Irish Rifles, and some squadrons of the Royal Tank Regiment. At dusk on 20th April the infantry advanced; B

Company of The Welch took their objective without loss, capturing several Greeks and putting the rest to flight. A half-hearted counter-attack by Greek carriers and two armoured cars was driven off by rifle fire and showers of grenades from A and B Companies, and contact was established with 2nd RIFLE BRIGADE, who had also captured their objective. But a hard core of mutineers was still holding out, and at midnight the Royal Tanks mounted a tank attack. In the pitch blackness the squadrons strayed off course and ran into a salt marsh, where their vehicles became bogged. However, the resultant din and roar of engines as they extricated themselves so overawed the remaining Greeks that they surrendered unconditionally. The only British casualty in Operation RABBIT was one officer of The Rifle Brigade killed by a stray bullet.

The battalion was soon to see more serious fighting. In May 1944, at Alexandria, they received the welcome orders to abandon their 'Brick' duties and resume their normal role as a combat battalion, joining the 168th Infantry Brigade in the 56th (London) Division. By now, despite fierce German opposition, the Allies had succeeded in their steady advance up the Italian peninsula, and when 1st WELCH landed with their Brigade at Taranto on 17th July, Rome had been occupied by US forces. But this seemed only to stiffen opposition in the north, where the natural features of ravines, mountains and rivers, offered ideal defensive positions for Kesselring's twenty divisions. The main barrier to the 8th Army's advance was the series of defences known as the Gothic Line, running some 200 miles from La Spezia on the western coast to Rimini on the Adriatic Sea. The task of the 8th Army under General Sir Oliver Leese was to break through the Line at the Rimini 'Gap' and then join up with the US 5th Army for an advance to the Po valley.

CORIANO, CROCE **RIMINI LINE, CERIANO RIDGE**

1st WELCH with their 168th Brigade comrades of London Scottish and London Irish they were to endure bitter fighting for the next eight months. Their first serious action came in early September with the 'push' of 56th Division in the Croce area, south of Rimini. On 6th September 1944 the Battalion was ordered to support 7th Armoured Brigade in an attack on Croce itself. The Germans were in a formidable craggy position, difficult for tanks, and the armour was held up both by the terrain and the fearsome 88 mm anti-tank guns. As a result, 1st WELCH could only sit it out under heavy shellfire, which killed four men and wounded ten - their first casualties of the Italian campaign. Two days later there was a more successful, if more costly, action when the Battalion attacked the strongly-held village of Casa Menghino, near Croce. In the face of very fierce fire from Spandaus and mortars, C Company drove out the enemy, to capture the position and with it many prisoners and eleven Spandaus. But they lost twenty-five killed and twenty-eight wounded. Croce itself was finally occupied, and 168th Brigade had succeeded in establishing a springboard for the advance of their 56th Infantry Division. The operations had lasted six days, during which the Brigade was under almost constant shellfire. The Battle Honour 'Croce' was well earned. For the next two weeks 1st WELCH and 168th Brigade were continuously engaged in overcoming enemy strong-points in the San Marino-Rimini sector, during which they suffered heavy casualties, but captured several hundred prisoners and much equipment, arms and stores.

On 21st September 1944 the depleted Brigade was withdrawn into reserve. By now 1st WELCH could parade only 320-odd all ranks. Two days later the Commanding Officer, Colonel Brooke, was aghast to receive orders from the Divisional Commander that his Battalion was to reduce to a cadre of five officers and sixty other ranks, which would be sent home to reform. The remainder would be transferred as reinforcements to The London Scottish, London Irish and The Queen's in 169th Brigade. In other words, 1st WELCH was being 'cannabilised' to repair the rest. Amid gloom and despondency the Battalion dispersed, Colonel Brooke with the cadre moving to billets on the Adriatic coast south of Ancona, where they spent two unhappy months speculating on the future. But if the Commanding Officer could only obey orders, he felt he had a duty to fight for his Battalion. In October, command of 8th Army passed from Leese to Lieutenant General Sir Richard McCreery, with whom Colonel Brooke succeeded in obtaining an interview. To his intense gratification the new Army commander rescinded the reduction and ordered 1st WELCH to reform as a combat Battalion. There followed a flurry of re-transfers of those transferred, while reinforcements came from the Infantry Training Depot at Caserta and a disbanded Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment which had many Welshmen from South Wales. By 13th December 1944, 1st WELCH was again operational with 37 officers and 738 other ranks. Another boost to Regimental pride was the announcement of several immediate awards for bravery in the Croce fighting.

The end of 1944 saw a period of static warfare set in throughout northern Italy. In the face of stubborn opposition, the Allies had not been able to break out into the Po valley, nor to break through along the Adriatic plain, and it seemed that stalemate had been reached. The bitter winter of snow and rain evoked cynical comments about 'sunny Italy' from the British soldiers. For the next four months the Battalion was occupied in defensive positions along the Senio River, beating off constant enemy thrusts. On the night of 16th/17th January B Company, with supporting troop of the 4th Hussars, were heavily attacked by SS troops who had crossed the river Senio under cover of darkness. After a fierce fire-fight lasting nearly five hours, the Germans were put to flight, leaving behind thirty dead and sixty wounded in the Company position. B Company suffered only fourteen men wounded. This was just one of several similar actions which, together with constant patrolling, gave little respite to the Battalion. When relieved and withdrawn to billets in Ravenna on 6th February 1944, 1st WELCH had been almost continuously engaged for thirty-nine days. They had lost ten men killed, two officers and 76 ranks wounded.

ARGENTA GAP

The final allied offensive was launched in April, when, in his Special Order of the Day, Field-Marshal Alexander, Supreme Allied Commander, assured his troops that the Germans were now 'very groggy and only need one almighty punch to knock them out for good'. 1st WELCH now had the honour of being transferred to the elite 1st Guards Brigade, with 3rd Grenadier Guards and 3rd Welsh Guards, an element of 6th Armoured Division, and with this formation they added their weight to the final 'punch'.

The offensive opened on 9th April 1945 with the assault crossing of the Senio River. This had been preceded by saturation bombing and artillery concentration which crushed all opposition, so that the 8th Army were able to push on through the Argenta Gap towards the next formidable obstacle, the River Po. For the 1st Guards Brigade this proved something of an anti-climax, for when 1st WELCH in their DUKWs (amphibious vehicles) were ferried across the 500-yard stretch of water on the morning of 25th April, the enemy seemed to have vanished. 'The Po that morning presented an astonishing sight ... the river was alive with every variety of craft: DUKWs pounding along like paddle-steamers, storm boats whipping to and fro at high speed, and the large rafts, constructed by the Sappers in record time, ploughing their erratic course with heavy loads of vehicles and returning with batches of very surprised German prisoners.'

Next day, from their position around Saguedo, just south of the Adige River, 1st WELCH were able to see the dust clouds raised by the US 5th Army columns as they pushed on eastwards from the newly-captured Verona. The Germans were now indeed 'very groggy', caught between the pincers of the 5th and 8th Armies. As 1st WELCH raced ahead in their lorries with 6th Armoured Division, they met only pockets of easily-overrun resistance, but also droves of surrendered enemy who had no stomach for further fighting.

By 28th April 1945 New Zealand forces had entered Padua; the next day they reached Venice. On the 30th April, 1st WELCH crossed the Adige River, unopposed, and that night billeted peacefully in the town of Noale, having covered nearly ninety miles since noon. The Wehrmacht now seemed to have disappeared, apart from groups of dejected prisoners, and the last few days of the campaign proved more of a triumphal progress than the climax of a hard-fought offensive. Motoring on through Udine and along the fine Highway 13, the Battalion was greeted not by enemy fire, but with volleys of flowers and bottles of wine by the cheering Italian populace, who had long since abandoned any regard they might have had for their former allies.

Taking the lead of the 1st Guards Brigade, 1st WELCH entered Cividale on 2nd April 1945. This town, only some six miles from the Yugoslav frontier, was found to be already occupied by Marshal Tito's troops and some Italian partisans (together with 1,000 German prisoners), and a delicate situation arose when the Yugoslav commander demanded the withdrawal of the British soldiers. But by the exercise of great tact and patience, Colonel Brooke persuaded his new-found 'friends' that the town should be amicably shared. When the rest of the Brigade arrived, 1st WELCH moved forward to Caporetto, where the inhabitants were predominantly Serbs, and pro-Tito. There was no welcome here, only sullen stares, and more dispute with the Yugoslav General. However, Brooke's tact secured another victory, and that evening the Union Flag and the Red Star of Tito flew side by side.

On the evening of 5th May 1945 the battalion radio picked up the BBC announcement that Germany had surrendered unconditionally. The Italian campaign and World War 2 in Europe were

1st Battalion The Welch Regiment

World War 2

Fact Sheet: 6-E05-01

Page: 5 of 5

over. The ten months of fighting from the toe of Italy to the frontier of Yugoslavia had cost 1st WELCH 14 officers and 157 other ranks killed or died of wounds or sickness.

This extract is taken from *A History of The Royal Regiment of Wales (24th/41st Foot): 1689-1989* by JM Brereton, Cardiff (1989)

Commanding Officers, First Battalion

26th August 1939

Lieutenant Colonel FW Ford *OBE*

12th June 1940

Lieutenant Colonel A Duncan *MC*

16th July 1941

Lieutenant Colonel VJL Napier (*SWB*)

24th January 1942

Lieutenant Colonel JT Gibson

28th April 1943

Lieutenant Colonel OG Brooke *DSO MBE*

12th November 1945

Lieutenant Colonel DLC Reynolds *OBE*

23rd July 1947

Lieutenant Colonel EM Davies-Jenkins *OBE*

