

The Welsh question – yet again!

By Dr Adrian Greaves

A number of members have asked me about the composition of the 24th Regiment at the time of Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana with regard to the nationalities of the two participating battalions. The question arose following the memorial service for David Rattray at Southwark Cathedral when, during his address to the congregation, Brigadier Aitken stated that many of the names in the regiment today such as Evans, Jones and Williams reflected those from Wales who fought at Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana. Having served in The Welch Regiment as an Englishman, the question is not an issue simply because, at the time of the Anglo Zulu War in 1879, the 24th Regiment was The 2nd Warwickshire Regiment and it stayed that way until 1881 when it became The South Wales Borderers. *QED*.

But back to the question; in my book *Rorke's Drift* I carefully analysed the nationalities of those present as part of my lengthy research. No one can challenge the fact that the 24th Regiment in 1879 was the 2nd Warwickshire Regiment. Going back in time, the Royal Warrant of 1st July 1751 listing precedence gave the regiment seniority as the 24th Regiment. The 24th raised a second battalion in Lincolnshire in 1756 which was used in 1758 to form the 69th Foot. The 2nd Battalion was reformed in Warwick in 1804 being disbanded in 1814; it was further re-formed in 1858.

A Royal Warrant of 31st August 1782 conferred county titles on all regiments not already possessed of special designations such as 'The Queen's' or 'The King's Own' but this soon lost any relevance as, since the 1790s, authority had been given to regimental recruiters to recruit wherever they wished. Interestingly, there was no insistence or suggestion that regimental depots, set up in the 1870s, should be established within a nominated location, neither was the location required to be reflected in their title. The 2nd Warwickshire Regiment's depot was established in Brecon in 1873 – clearly, it could have been anywhere.

The 24th had no special depots for recruiting; had it tried recruiting in Wales or specifically Brecon it would have encountered a logistical problem as Wales was sparsely populated until the expansion of the coal, iron and steel industries in the late 19th century. For example, until 1880, Brecon had a static population of only 5,000 people covering a wide rural area with 2,551 males of all ages, so the number of fit men of recruiting age was, therefore, very small.

The 24th Regimental depot certainly recruited in the counties of Brecknock, Cardigan and Radnor but for the six years immediately prior to the Anglo Zulu War but looked further beyond to the neighbouring English counties, especially Monmouth, with most of the recruits going to the local 2nd Battalion. The 1st Battalion had seen continuous service in various Mediterranean garrisons for the eight years prior to arriving in South Africa on the 4th February 1875. At this point in time, the 1st Battalion's link with Wales was, at the very best, tenuous; indeed, its Regimental March was *The Warwickshire Lads* composed for the Shakespearean Centenary Celebrations at Stratford-on-Avon in 1769.

Private Robert Jones VC, 2/24th born at Monmouthshire (then an English county), was awarded the Victoria Cross for his part in the defence of Rorke's Drift. To ponder whether he was English or Welsh probably never occurred to him but when writing about his experiences, he wrote,

On the 22nd January 1879, the Zulus attacked us, we being only a small band of English soldiers. My thought was only to fight as an English soldier ought to for his most gracious Sovereign, Queen Victoria, and for the benefit of old England.

In view of the subsequent change in designation of the 24th into the South Wales Borderers in 1881, it is worth considering the actual representation of Welshmen then serving in the two battalions at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. With regard to the 1/24th lost at Isandlwana, there was virtually no connection with Wales, as the battalion had neither served in the UK since 1867 or ever recruited from Wales. Indeed, when the news of the loss of the 1/24th reached Britain, *The Daily News* commented; 'Death had prematurely visited hundreds of peaceful

and happy homes in England', which sadly ignored the high proportion of Irishmen serving in both battalions.

The 2/24th certainly had a small proportion of Welshmen serving in its ranks (born, or living in Wales when recruited), the composition of B Company 2/24th and the four soldiers of the 1/24th when they defended Rorke's Drift is as follows:

1st Battalion 4

England 1 Staffordshire
Scotland 1 Midlothian
Ireland 1 Dublin
Other 1 Peshawar, India (of British parents)

2nd Battalion

England 47

1 each from; Cheshire; Gloucestershire; Leicestershire; Nottinghamshire; Surrey; Sussex; Worcestershire; Yorkshire.
2 each from; Kent; Middlesex.
3 each from Herefordshire; Warwickshire.
4 from Somerset.
9 from Lancashire.
11 from London
5 from Monmouthshire. (This county became Welsh in 1976 following the boundary re-organisation – it was English in 1879)

Ireland 13

1 each from Antrim and Limerick
2 each from Clare; Cork; Kilkenny; Tipperary
3 from Dublin

Wales 5

1 each from Breconshire and Pembrokeshire.
3 from Glamorgan.

Other 1 (France – of British parents)

With regard to the 24th's Rorke's Drift VCs, Bromhead was born in France (to a Lincolnshire family), Hook was from Gloucestershire, Allen was born in Northumbria (and considered himself a 'Scotchman' by birth), Hitch was a Londoner, and William Jones was from Worcestershire, Robert Jones and John Fielding (alias Williams) were from Monmouthshire (an English county) and Fielding was anyway Irish, although hailing from Abergavenny! Jones, meaning 'son of John' (Oxford Names Dictionary) is, of course, a famously English name too - hence its use in 'Dad's Army'!

Which neatly brings us to the question of Welsh names, or names commonly associated with Wales, and a count of soldiers with these names within the two battalions make interesting reading. Of course, I accept there are numerous problems using such a rough and

completely unscientific method; being named with a Welsh sounding name has absolutely nothing to do with one's origins i.e. Pte. Griffiths VC (killed at Isandlwana) has a Welsh name but he was born in Ireland, was attested in Warwick and joined the Regiment at Tamworth. With regard to the 1st Battalion, and to a lesser extent the 2nd Battalion, after Isandlwana the battalions were reconstructed with (mainly) recruits from other regiments, which makes any analysis virtually impossible.

Medal records are equally ambiguous; many of those 24th recipients were posted back to other units after the war. Were these their original units which the authorities trawled after Isandlwana to replace the losses in the 1st Battalion? They have the South Africa Medal for serving with the 24th, but, if this were the case, nominally this would not have been their original unit. Many have no clasp, which appears to indicate that they did not cross into Zululand. Rorke's Drift defenders were a curious exception as they were all given the clasp yet many didn't cross into Zululand. It raises another interesting question: as the 2nd Battalion did not arrive in South Africa until 1878, why did they have 1877-8-9 on their medal bar? So the answer to the original question remains elusive and complex; further research is required if anyone wishes to take the matter further.

Nevertheless, if one considers the Welsh or Welsh-sounding names of casualties at Isandlwana, then a rough indication can be found. I offer the following:

Casualties with Welsh names at Isandlwana

(I accept there may be other Welsh names that I am unaware of.)

1st Battalion.

Davis 4, Edwards 4, Evans 2, Griffiths 1, Hughes 5, Jenkins 3, Jones 6, Lewis 2, Lloyd 1, Morgan 2, Parry 2, Thomas 2, Watkins 1, Williams 10.

One might think that ownership of the 24th Regiment's Colours might clarify the matter but this is equally unhelpful. In 1936, the Chillianwalla 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 might have become an established regiment of Warwickshire and the question of Welshness would never have arisen.

On St David's Day the 1st March 2006 The Royal Welch Fusiliers (23rd Foot) amalgamated with The Royal Regiment of Wales to form The Royal Welsh (lineage 23rd, 24th, 41st, 69th Foot). The former titles will be kept in the battalion designation, i.e. the 1st Battalion, The Royal Welsh (Royal Welch Fusiliers), the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Welsh (The Royal Regiment of Wales), with the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Welsh being part of the Territorial Army.

So we are left with a meaningless if academic question, and the reality of a fine regiment. The spirit of the 24th Regiment is strongly maintained today by The Royal Welsh. Regardless of names or origins, the regiment is one of the outstanding regiments of the British Army and, since becoming The South Wales Borderers in 1881, one with a distinct Welsh flair. Its motto is proudly displayed on the Regimental Colour – "Gwell Angau na Chywilydd" - Death rather than Dishonour.