

The Origin and Welsh Connection of the 24th (The 2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot Adrian Greaves

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. Since 1873, the Regiment has recruited mainly from Wales and continues to do so.

It was on 8th March 1689, that King William and Queen Mary signed the Proclamation for the raising of ten 'Regiments of Foot' to fight in Ireland against the Jacobites. Sir Edward Dering of Pluckley, a Kentish baronet, was given the task of raising one of these regiments from Kent, an event recorded by the memorial stone in Pluckley church which commemorates the event. In 1703 the regiment began its collection of battle honours under the colonelcy of John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, with deeds such as Rasmillies, Blenheim, Malplaquet and Oudenarde being recorded on the Regiment's colour.

In 1751 the regiment became known as the 24th Regiment of Foot. In those days, there were few permanent training depots and most regiments recruited soldiers from their immediate locality. The events in Scotland (in the 1750's) and Ireland (in the 1830's) created the need for sufficient soldiers and the growth of the large cities sourced 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.

After their return from the American War of Independence, the 24th Regiment of Foot, were based in Warwickshire. On the 31st August 1782 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'. The 24th Regiment were accordingly given the title '2nd Warwickshire' and were ordered to send a recruiting party to Tamworth as it was intended that regiments should cultivate a recruiting connection with the Counties whose names they took. No special link with the County Militia was established nor were any depots or permanent recruiting centres set up. At the same time, the 6th Regiment of Foot, a separate regiment, were given the title '1st Warwickshire'. The 6th Regiment of Foot subsequently became the Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1892), the Royal Warwickshire Fusiliers (1963) and The Regiment of Fusiliers (1968). The 24th Regiment have never been part of the 6th Regiment of Foot.

The 24th Regimental depot had recruited in the Counties of Brecknock, Cardigan, Monmouth and Radnor for the six years immediately prior to the Zulu War with most of the recruits going to the local 2nd Battalion. The 1st Battalion, though, 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. (1)

Following Isandlwana, a famous music hall song, *The Gallant 24th* by Lee and Green included the words;

In Zululand the twenty-Forth, a gallant little band
Of British soldiers bold and true, 'gainst legions made a stand.
Surrounded by their dusky foe, shut in both left and right,
'Gainst fearful odds they fought as none but Englishmen can fight.

The name they made will never fade
And all with pride will tell
How England's gallant 24th
As heroes fought and fell.

Private Robert Jones VC 2/24th, born at Monmouth in Wales, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his part in the defence of Rorke's Drift. He clearly knew he was Welsh but when writing about his experiences, he innocently wrote in the language of his time,

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.

The emphasis on 'English' is understandable, simply because the language of the time emphasised the term 'Anglo' as meaning things 'British' and the term 'English' was similarly used in everyday parlance. In reference to the 24th Regiment, Lord Chelmsford's copious records always used the term 'English' as he did when referring to all matters relevant to the United Kingdom. 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, accordingly this Journal includes the excellent article on the subject by writer Norman Holme. (2)

Following the Zulu War, the 1st Battalion returned to England, Queen Victoria expressed a wish to see the Isandlwana Colour, and with her own hands placed upon it a wreath of immortelles, directing that a silver replica should always be borne round the staff of the Queen's Colour of both battalions, to commemorate the devotion of Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill and the noble defence of Rorke's Drift by B Company of the 2nd Battalion. This silver wreath, with the Sphinx won in Egypt, was adopted in 1898 as the cap badge of the Regiment. It also appeared as the centre badge of the Regimental Colour, encircling the Roman numeral XXIV. This Queen's Colour was carried by the 1st Battalion until 1933, and now hangs in the Regimental Chapel in Brecon Cathedral. Beneath it, in an oaken case, is Queen Victoria's original wreath.

The Regiment was honoured to carry the title 24th (The 2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot until 1st July, 1881 when measures were taken to give County names to infantry regiments of line. The 24th Regiment thus became the South Wales Borderers. This was originally the title of one of the Militia battalions which since 1873 had been under the command of the officer commanding the Brigade Depot at Brecon.

In 1936, the Chillian Wallah 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. The spirit of the 24th Regiment is strongly maintained by the Royal Regiment of Wales (24th/41stFoot). It is one of the outstanding regiments of the British Army and one with a distinct Welsh flair. Its motto is proudly displayed on the Regimental Colour, *Gwell Angau na Chywilydd* Death rather than Dishonour.

References.

1. *The Red Soldier*, Fred Emery, Hodder & Stoughton 1977
2. *The Silver Wreath*, Norman Holme, Samson Books 1979

See also Journal 22 for subsequent views on the subject.