

Sherwood Foresters – World War II



The 2nd Battalion landed in France with the British Expeditionary Force in September 1939 and took part in the early stages of the 'Phoney War' and the advance into Belgium. The 1/5th, 2/5th, and 9th Battalions also joined the BEF, the former as lines of communication troops and the latter two for pioneer duties. All three of these battalions were totally ill-equipped for the operational tasks they eventually had to perform in the retreat to the Channel Coast. At one period, the 2nd, 2/5th and 9th Battalions were together defending the Dunkirk perimeter before the successful evacuation. At the same time the 1/5th Battalion, after a period of fighting alongside the 51st Highland Division, was evacuated from Cherbourg.

In April 1940, the 8th Battalion had landed in Norway as part of the ill-fated attempt to assist the Norwegian Army against the Germans. This battalion had received little training and was not fully equipped; a situation made worse when the ship carrying its vehicles and heavy equipment was sunk. The Battalion became involved in a withdrawal through mountains and deep snow, pursued by ski troops supported by aircraft and tanks; the remnants eventually being evacuated to Scotland.

In June 1940, the 1st Battalion was moved from Palestine to reinforce the Garrison of Cyprus, where they suffered their first war casualties in an air-raid. Early in 1942 the Battalion was moved to Egypt, converted to a motorised role and joined the Desert Army. Unfortunately, after a sharp engagement in the Knightsbridge Box, the Battalion was ordered to surrender when the Garrison in Tobruk capitulated.

The 1/5th Battalion, after a year in England, sailed for the Far East and arrived in Singapore on 29 January 1942 just prior to its capture by the Japanese.

As a result of these early defeats, many Foresters spent long years in captivity. Those of the 1/5th Battalion suffered horrendously at the hands of the Japanese while working on the notorious Burma-Siam Railway; 450 officers and men of this Battalion died in captivity.

Our fortunes turned with the 8th Army's victory at El Alamein in November 1942. The 14th Battalion took part with distinction in this battle. It had been originally formed as the 50th Battalion in 1940, but was renumbered after a few months and then, in July 1942, had been converted to a motor battalion. In January 1943, the 2/5th Battalion, by now renamed the 5th Battalion, joined the 1st British Army in Tunisia and was followed shortly by the 2nd Battalion.

The Battalions took part in severe and difficult fighting, in particular at Sedjenane and the Medjez Plain, and suffered many casualties before the remnants of the German Armies capitulated at Cap Bon.

The 5th Battalion were next in action in Italy at the assault landing at Salerno in September 1943. They suffered heavy casualties there and later in the difficult and fiercely resisted fighting advance up to the Cassino area.

The 2nd Battalion took part in the assault landing at Anzio in January 1944 where they were joined later by the 14th Battalion and took part in what was probably the toughest fighting of the whole war. After the fall of Rome, the 2nd, 5th and 14th Battalions continued the difficult fight up the length of Italy, adding a further eleven battle honours to the seven earned in North Africa.

In December 1944, the 5th Battalion was despatched to Greece to help quell the civil war which had started there after the German withdrawal. Meanwhile, the 14th Battalion had been disbanded and many of its officers and men were posted to the 2nd and 5th Battalions. At the end of the war, the 2nd Battalion was in Palestine and the 5th back in Italy from where they moved into Austria with the liberation armies. The 1st Battalion was meanwhile re-forming in England.

Brief mention should now be made to some of the other battalions of the Regiment. The 9th Battalion had been converted to an armoured car role after Dunkirk, but was disbanded in October 1944. The 12th and 13th Battalions had been sent to India, where the 12th became a Jungle Training Unit providing officers and men for the 14th Army's campaign in Burma and the 13th was converted to 163rd Regiment Royal Armoured Corps. They were both disbanded in India, the 13th Battalion in September 1945 and the 12th Battalion in February 1946.

The 8th Battalion, after retraining in Northern Ireland and a period of defence of the South East coast of England, was converted to a pre-OCTU at Wrotham, where it gave valuable service in training large numbers of potential officers. The 6th and 7th (Robin Hoods) Battalions in their respective anti-aircraft roles as 40th Searchlight Regiment (later 149th LAA Regiment) Royal Artillery and 42nd SL Regt Royal Artillery, did their share in the air defence of the UK and then later operating in North West Europe. The Robin Hoods were awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre for their actions in the Antwerp Box shooting down V1 and V2 Bombs.

The requirement for infantry in World War II was considerably less than in World War I and the casualties were, thankfully, correspondingly lower. A total of 26,940 officers and men served in the Foresters, of whom 1,520 were killed or died of wounds and about three times that number were wounded. The Foresters won 25 battle honours, ten of which are emblazoned on the Queen's Colours. The VC was posthumously awarded to Captain J. H. C. Brunt MC, who at the time was serving with the 6th Battalion The Lincolnshire Regiment. Some 400 other Foresters received awards for gallantry and outstanding war service.