

THEY FOUGHT NON-STOP FOR A MONTH

They are sitting in the ruins of a German village trying to bask in the reluctant March sunshine. They are shaved and their boots are clean. They have a hot meal inside them, a great content in their minds.

They come from the Fifty-third Welsh Division. If you have not heard of it and its notable deeds that is entirely because Security has cautiously hidden its identity much longer than I think necessary.

Out here, however, the Fifty-third is spoken of with deep respect, especially by the German Army, whom it has recently beaten.

Glory – and Death

And today, the ban being lifted I can at last reveal that of all the tough fighting on the British and Canadian sector between the Maas and the Rhine the most sustained was endured by the Fifty-third Welsh.

And if we are to get the matter quite straight it must be said that English regiments are well-represented in that division. There was plenty of glory – and of pain and death- for all. But the Welsh went in on the first day and stayed until the last, and from what I saw of them during that terrible month I know that no troops fought more gamely anywhere.

They went into action on that grey morning of February 8 with their ears deafened by our mighty barrage. They went straight into the grim Reichswald forest, and they knew already that the armour which might have made their task easier was bogged down and that the aircraft which would have made it easier still were grounded in the mists.

Forty men were wounded in the first clash. Men of the Field Ambulance hand-carried the wounded, because the only available road was “Chewing Gum Alley”, a clinging morass that all of us who ever trod it will ever remember with loathing. Meanwhile, the men of the 53rd were plunging deeper into the fortified forest – into the mud, into the enemy – and the sappers kept a way to them open through the mud bath.

Amphibious ducks and weasels were aiding them by taking up supplies and taking out the wounded through the floods to the north, and the front-liners slogged ahead deeper and deeper into the enemy’s forest defences, fighting sometimes from tree to tree, halted often, going back never.

Corporals as Cos

Sometimes battalions were temporarily out of touch, sometimes corporals became commanding officers because all the officers were killed or wounded.

The artillery thunder by day and night was such as to make sleep impossible. Even when the Welsh finally burst out of the wood into the daylight again and had their first brief rest of less than a day, they were only 100 yards from where shells were dropping.

They went on to Gocg and finished the task there that others had begun. I saw them there and although the paratroop opposition was still tough they were almost elated because they were out of the forest, out of “Chewing Gum Alley”. They said to me, “Don’t call us the Fifty- Third Welsh any more, call us the Fifty-third Woodland.” There it was that Private A. Williams of Ynyaybwi, South Wales, told us of the capture of a German colonel and his men. “As I came up to search him for weapons,” he said, “he must have thought I looked threatening, because he said: ‘Are you an English gentleman?’ I said, ‘Of course I am – and a Welsh one too.’”

Those Road Mines

There, too, Lieutenant A. Cowan, of Bradford, talked of the huge problem facing the Sappers.

“In on stretch of two miles,” he said, “Jerry had blown the road in seven places. The craters were huge, and there were more prepared charges which had failed to explode and which we had gingerly to remove.

“These charges were composed of a hundred pounds of TNT, six feet underground, with a layer of shells on top of that and a layer of mines on top of that again. Still, we managed to get the road open and keep it working.

They were still at it on St David’s Day, the day of the Welsh. Some of them found some leeks and wore them and went into action and died. The Scots alongside them saluted their comrades’ day with bagpipes.

There were house to house fighting and counter-attacks. The paratroopers fought fanatically, but they had always finally to give best to the hard fighting 53rd.

One German soldier came in to surrender and said if we would let him go back he would bring back 200 of his comrades. We took a chance. He returned with 20 others. He was told that was not enough. He went back and came back with another 40.

Not many of the Germans surrendered, however. Most of them fought on in a way which we should describe as heroic if it had been on our side, but which, since it happened against us, is usually described as fanatical.

Anyway, it was fierce – almost as fierce as the Welsh fought.

40 Miles of it

They made the first contact with the American spearhead probing up from the Ninth Army front and it was right that they should have that honour. They had certainly paid for it with so many dead and wounded.

They went on and on and it is only now, with the Rhine’s left bank secured at last, that they are out of the battle.

They have foot-slogged 40 miles in a month. They have fired 1,000,000 rounds of machine-gun ammunition alone. They have had the longest, bitterest sustained fighting of the war, and they are today, very, very tired.

And yet, as they sit here in the ruins drinking interminable mugs of tea, they seem, apart from that weariness, entirely unaffected by their experiences.

Man, it seems can get used to anything, and always endure a little more. If there is any maximum of endurance, however, then the men of the 53rd who fought in Normandy and in the Ardennes and before Hertogenboach have surely set it in the Rhineland.