Wales and Japan in WW1

Why did the men of the South Wales Borderers become comrades in arms with the Japanese - who would become bitter enemies 25 years later? Martin Wade investigates.
THE soldiers are British and wearing pith helmets. They are striding ashore bearing rifles and ammunition, but watching them are Japanese soldiers who, if slightly bemused, are clearly not hostile.
The First World War was barely a month old when soldiers from Gwent went to fight alongside Japan - the only British soldiers to do so. Throughout the 19th century, Germany and other European powers established colonial possessions in China. As Britain had Hong Kong, so other wanted ports from where they could export their goods to that vast market.

China was forced to transfer the city Kiaochow and the surrounding area in the north-east of the country to Germany in 1898 on a 99-year lease. Germany then built the city and port of Tsingtao which became a base for the German Navy in the Pacific Ocean. It was also garrisoned by 4,000 troops.
Because Britain viewed this as a threat, it began to forge close ties with Japan and in 1902 signed an alliance with her, who had her own territorial ambitions in China.

The Japanese were ready for war with Germany. Hostilities had just broken out in early August, when they sent an ultimatum to Germany, demanding it withdraw its warships from Chinese and Japanese waters and hand over Tsingtao. They refused and on 23 August 1914 Japan declared war on Germany.

Eight days later around 20,000 Japanese soldiers with over 140 guns were landed and a bombardment of the port began.
Although allied to the Japanese, Britain was suspicious of their intentions in the area and sent a naval force and 1,500 soldiers

under the command of Major-General Nathaniel Barnardiston. These were the 2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers and a detachment of the 36th Sikhs. They were sent from Tientsin in northern China where they had been based prior to war breaking out.

The South Wales Borderers arrived in Laoshan Bay along the coast from Tsingtao on September 23 with summer kit only, as shown by their appearance in shorts, more suited to tropical Hong Kong. They had only light cotton shirts and shorts with one blanket and a waterproof cape per man. The weather was worsening as autumn in north-east China approached. They had to sleep in the open on the night of September 25th. The roads were poor and the autumn rains had turned them into mud.

The battalion's food supplies had not arrived and the men were issued with only one biscuit apiece. Their kit with 'luxury items' like waterproof sheets and basins did not arrive until 5 October. But this was not to be their only challenge. As the smaller force, the South Wales Borderers came under the command of the Japanese Lieutenant General Kamio and there was something of a cultural chasm between the two armies. The Japanese habit of going to the toilet anywhere in the open contrasted markedly with the discipline the British had for digging latrines away from where men ate and slept.

In contrast, the Japanese saw the British as 'smelly barbarians' for their laxness in personal hygiene. In the Imperial Army body odour was frowned upon and the men would bathe frequently. This contrasted with the habits of the British soldier.
There were problems too of 'friendly fire' at least from the Japanese. Due to similarities in uniform, the Japanese often fired on any unfamiliar looking Europeans, mistaking the Welsh soldiers for Germans.
A Lance Corporal Thomas was in a convoy that came under

German shellfire. As he took cover, he was shot at by Japanese who mistook him for a German, hitting him in the shoulder and the hand. Soon after, he fell on his wounded shoulder causing an aneurysm which killed him later that day. He was first man in the battalion to die in the First World War.

After this tragedy, the soldiers started to wear a piece of white cloth on their helmets as a means of identification. A better solution came when British soldiers were issued with a Japanese-style smock which they wore over their uniform. This at least stopped Japanese sentries firing long enough for them to identify the British as friendly.

The difficulties between the two armies were compounded by having few who could communicate with each other. The South Wales Borderers had one interpreter, an officer who had lived with his family in Japan where his father was a merchant.
However, efforts were made by the Japanese to smooth relations between the two sides. The South Wales Borderers were honoured by a visit from an aide of the Emperor himself in late September. He made a speech praising the co-operation between the two armies and said the Emperor and the Empress were sending a gift of sake for the officers and 5,000 cigarettes for the men. The cigarettes were issued five per man.

There were many men from Monmouthshire who were among those fighting with the South Wales Borderers, some of them with distinguished service histories. The British army was not yet the vast force of millions of conscripts it would become later in the war.
Edwin Hulbert of St Woolos in Newport enlisted in 1897 and served in the Boer War, where he was a prisoner-of-war. He survived the battalion's time in China and then in Galipolli only to be killed in 1917 France, where he is buried at Doullens.
Private Frederick Hillier of Newport was a builder's labourer who

enlisted when he was 18, wounded at Gallipoli, he served in France, winning the Distinguished Conduct Medal. He survived the war and served in the army until 1923, returning then to 33 Lucas Street and his wife Annette.

The Japanese laid siege to the port, using the tactics which had served them well in the Russo-Japanese War nine years earlier when they had besieged and taken the Russian possession of Port Arthur. Their experience in bombardment and digging bunkers was much admired by the British, but it did not stop them suffering 300 casualties by early October.

The campaign also saw the first aircraft to be shot down in aerial combat when a German pilot Oberleutnant Pluschow, flying the beleaguered Germans' only plane fired his revolver at a Japanese plane and forced it to crash. After careful preparation of defensive positions and gun emplacements, the Japanese started shelling Tsingtao on 31 October. The German garrison, despite being heavily outnumbered, held out for over two months before finally surrendering on 7 November and handing over the port three days later.

The Japanese suffered 236 killed and 1,282 wounded; 12 British were killed and 53 wounded. The German defenders lost 199 dead and 504 wounded. With the port’s capture British forces were withdrawn. The battalion later served in Gallipoli, where many of them were killed.
It was the strangest of battles with which to begin the war to end all wars, and it was the only time these allies, although wary of the other, would fight side by side. Casualties were mercifully light and in what would surprise many British soldiers captured by the Japanese in the Second World War, the 4,700 German prisoners were treated well and with respect in Japan until they were finally released in 1920.

St Mary's Church, Angle Pembrokeshire

Grave to Japanese sailors who went down with the Hirano Maru when it was torpedoed by an enemy U boat on Oct 4, 1918. Built in 1908 in Nakasaki by Mitsubishi Dockyard. It was en route from Liverpool to Yokohama. 292 casualties included a number of children.