

Major J.D.A.Syrett – Welsh Guards

John David Alfred Syrett was the son of Herbert and Rosina Syrett who lived at Fir Crest, Coast Hill, Westcott. John was born on 22nd April 1916 in London. He was educated at Stowe School and read law at Trinity College, Cambridge. He played rugby and cricket for his college and was a playing member of the Harlequins Rugby Club.

John had been a member of the Officers Training Corps at school and it was while he was at Cambridge that he received a commission in April 1936 on the supplementary reserve of officers Welsh Guards. He attended annual summer camps with the regiment and was called up for service under the Reserve and Auxiliary Forces Act on 15th June 1939. After call-up he served with the 2nd Bn Welsh Guards in London and Camberley, and the following year saw his first action in France.

By mid-May 1940 the British Expeditionary Force had been pushed back to the French ports and preparations were being made for its evacuation. On 21st May 1940 2nd Bn Welsh Guards were ordered to proceed overseas immediately. Their task was to defend Boulogne which was under attack from advancing German forces. They reached Boulogne at 10.00 hours on 22nd May and were in action later that day. The next day they were under continuous artillery, tank and dive-bomber attacks, but they held their positions until ordered to withdraw and hold a perimeter round the docks. The battalion was evacuated the following day, 24th May, but 453 men of the battalion remained as prisoners of war. The evacuation of the main British force from Dunkirk was completed by 25th May.

In May 1942 John Syrett, by then a Captain, was posted to the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards which was beginning its training for the eventual invasion of Europe which began on 'D-Day', 6th June 1944. Two weeks later the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards landed at Arromanches as part of 32nd Guards Brigade. After assembling at Bayeux, the battalion moved to take up positions at Cheux. Although not engaged in offensive action the battalion lost three senior officers, including their Commanding Officer Lt Col. E. Fass who was killed on 30th June – as a consequence John Syrett was promoted to Major to be the Company Commander of No. 4 Company.

The battalion moved south and on 20th July were engaged in liberating Cagny, a south-east of Caen. In the late afternoon of 21st July the battalion

was ordered to attack enemy positions beyond Cagny in the village of Le Poirier. The battalion advanced with artillery and tank support. Heavy rain made movement difficult and the battalion dug in. The battalion's war diary for the next day begins with the following entry:

22nd July 1944 Slightly fine after a very damp night in slit trenches. Major Syrett was killed by a shell early in the morning – a sad loss. Capt. Evans took over No.4 Company.



John Syrett is buried in Banneville-la-Compagne War Cemetery, situated 10 kilometres east of Caen. This picture above* shows the Welsh Guards in action near Cagny – John Syrett is the officer pointing out positions to his troops. The picture was taken a few days before he was killed.

The cemetery at Banneville-la-Compagne contains the graves of 2,175 Commonwealth and Polish servicemen who were killed in the fighting from the second week of July when Caen was captured to the last week in August when the Falaise Gap had been closed and the Allies began their advance beyond the Seine.

After the war John Syrett's father had a book printed of letters between him and his son, with letters of condolence from friends and a biographical notice. The book was published by the Batsford Press in London in 1945.

Today the town of Cagny is twinned with Pirbright in Surrey, for many years the home of the Guards Training Depot and now the Army Training Centre.

**Sources: Imperial War Museum (non-commercial licence) & 'Welsh Guards at War' by Major L.F.Ellis, Naval & Military Press (1946)*

