

“So Fine and Honourable an Englishman”: Capt. Joseph Houghton, MC

By Carol Kerr - March 2011

On Christmas Eve 2010 I was invited to join Desiree Roderick, MBE and family at her son's home overlooking the Exe estuary in Devon. Desiree is the sister of Joe Houghton, being born 10 years after her brother. In conversation with me, Desiree recalled Joe's pre-war career and his entry into the forces, his service with No. 2 Commando including the raids on St. Nazaire and Glomfjord, and his subsequent capture and journey as a prisoner to Colditz. Finally we talked about the family's struggle to gain reliable information regarding his treatment by his captors and the part that many Colditz veterans played in the search for the facts.

Joseph Blundell Johnson-Houghton was born on 13th June 1911 at Bromborough on the Wirral peninsula and the family home was at New Hall, near Thornton Hough in Cheshire. As a boy he was educated at Selwyn House Preparatory School, Broadstairs and Marlborough College. Joe's father died when he was 16 and the family removed to London. After leaving finishing school in France he joined the staff of the London office of The African Manganese Company, which was not a particularly exciting time for Joe. He was discontented as he didn't enjoy the confines of an office in the City, and complained about how bored he was.

When the opportunity arose for Joe to transfer to the company's plant at Sauda in Norway, this was much more to his liking, and during his time there he enjoyed the outdoor life becoming an expert skier and a fluent speaker of Norwegian.

In 1938 Joe joined the Territorial Army and was mobilised with the Honourable Artillery Company in 1939. He volunteered for special service and was posted to No. 4 Independent Company. Owing to Joe's specialist knowledge of Norway, he was given a general service commission and assigned to the Norwegian campaign as part of "Operation Scissorforce", later transferring to the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders (Liverpool Scottish), which had



Joe Houghton

been his Father's Regiment in World War I. In autumn 1940 Joe arrived at No. 2 Commando.

Joe's involvement in "Operation Chariot", the raid on St. Nazaire in March 1942, was detailed in Peter Lush's excellent talk to the Society at the IWM in November 2010 (see overview on page 6). Joe was on the motor launch ML443 that overshot their target and was unable to land the troops that were on board. The motor launch subsequently returned to Falmouth with their wounded including Joe, and after a period of recovery he took some well-deserved leave.

During the summer of 1942, Joe and Capt. Graeme Black were stationed with No. 2 Commando at Ayr and fully engaged in planning the detail of the Glomfjord raid (Operation Musketoon). The aim of the operation was to disable the hydro-electric power station supplying a nearby aluminium factory. Joe was to be second in command, with the operation led by Captain Black. Another eight men were selected from No. 2 Commando (CSM Miller Smith,

L/Sgt Richard O'Brien, L/Sgt William Chudley, Gdsmn John Fairclough and Ptes Cyril Abram, Eric Curtis, Reginald Makeham and Fred Trigg) plus two Norwegians Erling Djupdraet and Sverre Granlund. The original plan included being collected after the raid by a Sunderland flying boat, but this was changed before they left and the revised plan was to head overland to Sweden when the job was done. They departed in the French submarine "Junon" from the Orkney Islands on Friday 11th September. The "Junon" was chosen because its silhouette resembled a German U-Boat. They crossed the North Sea without incident and



Joe at Cookham in 1932



Last picture of Glomfjord party on final training in Scotland.

arrived at Bjaerangsfjord, south of Glomfjord on Tuesday 15th September, going ashore by dinghy shortly after 9pm. Having crossed the glacier they stayed hidden during the following day, and commenced their raid on the power plant late on Thursday 17th September, but had to turn back when they spotted a small craft on the fjord and were worried that they would lose the element of surprise. Once again they had to hide for some considerable time, but as the weather was against them and they were getting short on supplies, Captain Black ordered that they must go ahead.

The party split into two groups for the attack and explosives were planted around the pipelines and also around the machinery inside the power house. The full events of the raid are detailed in Stephen Schofield's book "Musketoon" which was published in Great Britain in 1964. After activating

the explosives in the early hours of Monday 21st September, both groups then withdrew into the hills trying to locate a quick exit route before the Germans closed in on them. One group (O'Brien, Granlund, Fairclough and Trigg) went north around the mountains and the other group (Houghton, Black, Smith, Chudley, Curtis, Abram and Makeham) took the southern route. During the raid Djupdraet had been badly wounded. The decision was taken to leave him behind so he could receive help, but he died a few days later in Bodo hospital. The group who had taken the southern route were discovered by the Germans before they had managed to get very far, as they were unable to find the right path and an early snowfall revealed their tracks. Joe was wounded twice in the arm and being surrounded by fifty Germans the seven men were eventually forced to surrender at 6.30pm. The other group made a successful getaway. The power station was badly damaged and was out of operation for the rest of the war.

In the diary of Private Curtis, found later during a search of Colditz by Corporal Schädlich (translated by Henry Chancellor) he records that they spent the night of Monday 21st September in Glomfjord where they were held separately and interrogated. In the afternoon of 22nd September they all boarded a ship together and sailed overnight to Moesjoern where they were loaded on to a train in separate wagons for the journey to Trondheim prison. They were interrogated for several days and told they would be shot as spies. On the afternoon of Friday 25th they were moved again by train and lorry to the Gestapo prison in Oslo arriving at 8.00am on the 26th. Their personal items were returned but they were kept in isolation. The interrogations continued and once again they were told they would be shot.

On Friday 2nd October they were all taken in chains to the docks at Oslo where they boarded the SS Donau. For the next two days the ship sailed close to the coast and then set

out for Aalborg in Denmark where it docked on 4th October. Their journey continued from there by train via Flensburg to Lübeck where they arrived at 10.30pm on Monday 5th October and were handed over to General Westoff. The following day they were taken by train once again from Lübeck to Colditz and in the evening of Wednesday 7th October the seven were marched into the outer courtyard.



Pipelines to Glomfjord power station.

The commandos spent their first night in the guard room and the following morning they were photographed by Johannes Lange in the courtyard. Although communication was forbidden, contact was made with the group held in canteen gate cells, and also with Joe and Captain Black who were taken to the town jail. All they would say to the Colditz inmates was "Tell them all went well in Norway". Their presence was reported to Lt Col Stayner who was very suspicious as to why they

were being kept in isolation, and their names were passed to MI5.

The attempts to communicate with the commandos while they were in Colditz are well documented elsewhere, including the Schofield book. Another extract from the diary of Private Curtis shows that they were heartened by receiving food and Red Cross parcels at that time:

Thursday 8th October "Food seems to be OK. 14 cigarettes and 4 books. Half an hour's exercise in the valley, lovely weather. Red Cross parcels arrived after supper – what a sensation, plus tea and English food. We feel really happy as if we were on holiday..... Tonight we really feel terrific".
Friday 9th October "Exercise after breakfast. Red Cross marmalade makes bread taste like home. The Duty Corporal brought us English tea from their stock. He got us four razors, two brushes, soap and a pack of cards (decent bloke)"
In the afternoon of Tuesday 13th October, SS Officers arrived in Colditz and the seven commandos were removed under heavy armed guard in two groups and taken to Berlin to be interrogated at Reich Central Security HQ by Obergruppenführer Heinrich Mueller. In the afternoon of Thursday 22nd October, the Musketoon commandos arrived at Sachsenhausen and were kept in the Zellenbau. Just before dawn the following day, Friday 23rd October 1942, they were shot in the back of the head and their bodies were cremated. The seven commandos were the first victims of Hitler's Commando Order of 18th October 1942.

It was a long time before much of this detail was known by the family, who didn't get the full picture until provided with information made available through Stephen Schofield's research for his book.

The first news Joe's family received, in October 1942, was that he had been taken prisoner in Lübeck and had been sent to Colditz. Late in 1942 and early 1943 Joe's mother was in frequent correspondence with the War Office and

British Red Cross. The family were trying to obtain a POW number for him so they could send letters and parcels. Joe's sister Desiree posted several letters to Joe at Colditz, but these were returned marked "Geflohen" – escaped. Then, on 19th May 1943 the family received a letter from the War Office advising they had received information that Joe had escaped on 10th February 1943. This was confirmed in a letter on 31st May from the British Red Cross.

Joe's mother continued in her search for information and at the same time assisting others in her role as Secretary to the "No. 2 Commando Next of Kin Association" on behalf of all the parents of Graeme Black and the other five men. In September 1944 the families received a further notification from the War Office stating "...in view of the lapse of time which has occurred since news

was last heard of your son, it has been decided for financial purposes to treat him on a "missing" basis in future. It will, therefore, be necessary for pay to cease to be credited to his account at the end of the current month".

As time went on and no more news was received, Joe's family repeatedly tried many different avenues to get information. On Saturday 4th August 1945, his mother placed a notice in the personal column of the Times Newspaper (also in Daily Telegraph on Tuesday 7th August) asking if any Colditz POW who had been in the camp between September 1942 and March 1943 would get in touch with her.

Desiree has very kindly allowed me access to copies of the responses her mother received, and Society Members will be interested to know that replies and offers of help were sent from the following:

Lt R D J Barnes; Flt Lt J Best; Flt Lt D Bruce; Lt H Bruce; Lt T Catlow; Lt A Orr Ewing; Capt R Heard; Capt G M P How; Lt T M Keillar; Capt W T Lawton; Lt W L B O'Hara; Rev J E Platt; Mrs. Nellie Romilly (mother of Giles Romilly); Lt Col and Mrs D Stayner; Lt P Storie-Pugh; Lt Cdr. O.S Stevenson; Lt G Wardle and Lt C J Witjens, nearly all of whom could recall the time when the commandos were in Colditz.

Just one month later, on 7th September 1945 the War Office sent letters to the next of kin of all seven men advising that as a result of extensive inquiries, there was reliable evidence that the men had died on 23rd October 1942 having been shot by the enemy after capture.

Even after this news, Joe's family continued with their quest to gather information, and during 1950 his mother and Desiree travelled to Glomfjord where they met a schoolboy who had found the dinghy used to get the men ashore from the submarine, and another person who had seen them taken away in chains after their capture. On this trip they discovered that the local people wanted to raise funds to build a Church at Glomfjord and they decided to pay for a mural portraying Christ and His radiance dedicated to the

Musketoon Commandos.

Joe and the others who were killed are also commemorated on the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp memorial plaque for British and Commonwealth forces, and at the Brookwood Memorial dedicated to the 3,500 Commonwealth men and

women who died during the Second World War and have no known grave.

Joe was posthumously awarded the Military Cross which his mother and Desiree received from King George VI.

Desiree told me what happened to the men who escaped from Glomfjord. Granlund made his own way to Sweden and was drowned later in the war when the submarine transporting him was struck by a mine off the Norwegian coast. Very little was heard after the war of Sgt O'Brien, who continued to serve with No. 2 Commando,

along with Cpl Fairclough who died of heart failure in 1999. Pte Trigg was killed in 1943 in Italy while also serving with No. 2 Commando.

The title of this article, "So fine and honourable an Englishman", is borrowed from a reference to Joe made by one of the Colditz correspondents who replied to his mother's newspaper advertisement.

I should like to thank Desiree, her son Joe and daughter-in-law Lindsay for their kind assistance in putting together this account, and for so generously making family photographs, private letters and War Office documentation available to me.



Sachsenhausen memorial.



Additional information:

Operation Musketoon, Stephen Schofield, Corgi Books, 1974 (Originally published as Musketoon in 1964).

An extract from the diary of Private Eric Curtis. This is taken from a book of memoirs by Thomas Schädlich and translated in Henry Chancellor's book "Colditz – The Definitive History"

The British at Sachsenhausen – A Summary. (Information leaflet – author unknown).

<http://www.combinedops.com/glomfjord.htm>