



HILL 170 TO SPEAN BRIDGE

A SONS STORY By John Mewett

Everything that follows started out for me as a personal search.

A search to find my Father.

When dad died, I was 27 years old it was the mid 70's and things were much different then. It's a tale that's been told and that is felt a million times over. I just didn't take that much notice of him. Sure, he was dad, always there with a laugh and a joke always supportive always dependable, in fact everything a dad should be. I think I took things for granted.

When he died at 55yrs old it was a shock and everyone in the family felt it. But he was gone.

Having a young family, myself I got swept away with life and dad sort of faded into the past.

Always there but a memory. But always a nice memory.

As I now arrived at middle age, I started to have more time to think. My children were grown into young adults and doing their own thing. Dad started to re-emerge into my life.

And then it suddenly hit me. I hadn't known my father in any personal way at all. Because he'd died so young, I'd never been able to ask him questions that one adult would ask another. How had he felt about things? What had happened in his life? How had things shaped him?

One thing I had always known was dad had been a Commando in the war. Having said that he was never boastful or forthcoming with much information. There had been the occasional exotic story about his time in India. The joke and bravado about the tough training. The fact that he had seen action in Burma. And only once to my memory the mention of a Hill 170. The only details of which I can remember were it was an epic battle with many lost friends and dad himself getting a wounded leg. This rare conversation ended in a typical way.

Dad saying, 'only a few were able to walk back off of that position' and me interjecting 'Was you one of them Dad' and dad replying, 'Well I'm bleeding well here aren't I' and then all of us collapsing in laughter at my stupid question.

As I say these fleeting memories are all that were left. That and a case of dad's old army stuff that had been given to me by my mum just after dad's funeral. And that had been in my loft with only the occasional cursory look for some 15yrs.

Sitting with my family one evening we had settled in to watch the new channel 4 production of Commando. A four-part series detailing the early history of the wartime Commando's.

When I saw the first few minutes of it, I was shocked but not in a bad way. The programme involved interviews with old Commandos. These characters were an amazing likeness to my father in nearly every way their demeanour their attitude and most strikingly their total modesty. Although they were older the resolute character that had been such a part of dad's makeup shone through.

These men it suddenly dawned on me represented who my father had been. That night I was restless it was as though a ghost of dad had appeared to me. The next morning, I was determined to look further into my fathers' war time history.

The case of artefacts came down from the loft. It was all there. The record books. The old photo's the discharge papers. And then the FS fighting knife and the jungle issue Kukri. The Green Beret. My dad had played his part in the creation of a legend. A legend I needed to find out more about

Dad had been in No 12 and No 1 Commando from about 1941-1946. This information had been supplied to me via the Army records office in Scotland. I had a few photos of dad in his army uniform and even one of his troop taken in India or Burma but I knew it was No1 Commando. There was also a post card of a memorial to the Commandos in Spean Bridge Scotland. This became our first goal to visit this famous landmark.

The arrangements were made, and we flew from East Midlands to Glasgow on a bright sunny May morning picked up a car and made our way to Spean Bridge just outside of Fort William.

The journey taking about 2hrs. During which time the conversation with my wife inevitably turned to the Commandos.

What had it been like to train at the famous Achnacarry Castle, what a shock it must have been arriving in this remote place for those men so long ago? Those men whose destiny was to fight and some to die on foreign shores in even remoter parts of the world

We passed through Spean Bridge with mounting excitement and expectation for our first view of the famous Commando Memorial.

Dad started floating back into my mind. I was trying to imagine him walking and drinking with his army pals around this place. All the jokes and the trepidation they must have shared and felt.

And then suddenly rounding the hill on the corner it was there. The memorial took our breath away. It was stunningly awe inspiring. It was totally dramatic and so emotionally charged we both fell into a silence... The Great Glen in which it stands gives the whole scene an almost cathedral like feel. The three Commando soldiers that form the monument stand proudly looking out across the silent valley. Their attitude one of resolute defiance.

The very size of the memorial adding another unworldly feel to the scene. As you approach the dais the figures rear up at you almost daring you to come closer. It's as if they are defending this, their, hill and claiming this piece of the world their own. And of course, it is.

The whole thing I found overwhelming and very emotionally raw. I put this down to the personal nature of my visit. What in terms of my father this meant to me. The walk to the memorial from where we had parked was no more than about five minutes and in this time I had unwittingly lost contact with my wife. She had known dad for only a short time but when I did link up with her again, she had a tear in her eye. The effect of this fantastic memorial and its location had touched her just the same.

The creator of this, which can only be described as a brilliant piece of art, had totally captured the essence of these legendary fighting men. In every way, the location, the stature, and the demeanour melds together to make you feel you are in the presence of something very special indeed.

I tried to control my welling feelings of belonging fused with an enormous sense of loss. But now I was clear. My mission was set out before me. This is where I would find all the things and happenings that had made my father who he was. All the experiences that had shaped him. All his reference points. Here among the history of the Commandos.

I stepped up onto the plinth and looked up at the three proud comrades with a strange feeling of recognition. To add a further almost theatrical touch a cloud passed over the figures heads as I reached up and placed my outstretched hand and lay it on the boot of the nearest man.

And with a soft almost whisper laced with pride I muttered 'Hello Dad'



PHOTO NUMBER ONE:

This was taken at Jungle Warfare training Camp Coconada India 1944. The conditions in Coconada were so awful that the men made a make do sign at the entrance which read.

'WELCOME TO COCONADA OR 'DEATH'

This photo was given to me by Vic Ralph (CVA Founder) who was a good friend of Dad and also in 4 Troop No 1 Commando with Dad.

I have named those that I know in the photo. Dad was on the 2inch Mortar on Hill 170 and Jack Kelly (in photo was his 'Oppo' his number 2.

It was Dads and Jacks weapon the Lt Knowland used in his VC winning action, he ordered Dad and Kelly into the forward trenches with a rifle.

All the named men in the photo were in the No 1 Cdo boxing team. Kelly, King, Dad. And Jackson.

PHOTO NUMBER TWO:

This photo was given to me by John Lowman also 4 Troop No 1 Cdo with Dad (John was one of the replacements for those lost and wounded on the Hill). Dad and a few others were John's instructors, seniors and commenced their Jungle training.

The photo was taken in Bangalore, India 1945.



As a reward for their magnificent defence of Hill 170 the Commando were awarded two weeks leave in Bangalore.

The civvies Dad is wearing were supplied to all the men by the Army, but they still had to wear their Green Berets as in the photo.

PHOTO NUMBER THREE:

The Dad I did know. This was taken on a family holiday 1962 in Great Yarmouth. Dad was always in good humour as in the photo, always smiling

These photos among others that were given to me were the inspiration to create the CVA Archive site in 2007. I had never seen them before, and it opened up a whole new world to me.

I realised there must be 1000's of photos and artefacts out there among the Commando family that others would like to see, and all in one place. Many people have written to me and said how amazing it is to see a photo of their Dad or Grandad etc actually in Commando uniform, a first time ever for some and a very moving experience for them.

Well, the rest is history as they say.

We now have over 12,000 never before seen Commando related photos on the site.

We are indebted to Pete Rogers our archivist who has done a magnificent job in organising the site and still does today.

