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“Exercise Medicina Kukri”, Italy 14th –20th April 2005

Last year was the most exciting, emotional, difficult and cathartic time for me, not only visiting Nepal in February/March, which I enjoyed profoundly, but also revisiting the Battlefields of Italy, that we fought over in 1944/45.

To be honest, since that time, I have not had the courage to revisit those grounds, where so many of my friends lost their lives. The opportunity came when Major Piers Hutt, Commanding Officer of Fire Support and ‘Medicina Company’ IRGR, Shorncliffe, invited me to accompany Officers and men on a visit to the Battle Grounds of Italy and also for the 60th Anniversary of the liberation of Medicina, 16th April 2005. As a veteran who served with 2/6 GR in the Italian Campaign, he would appreciate any input that I could provide for the preparation of “Exercise Medicina Kukri”.

He was keen to use this opportunity for his platoon to study the All Arms aspect of battles, and the use for the first time in battle of ‘Kangaroos’ for infantry attack. He would therefore be asking his men to give presentations before and after looking at the battlegrounds. Major John Cotterall, a military historian who would also accompany us in Italy, visited me at my home, and with old battle maps and my diaries, we spent a day arranging the basic outline of the Battle tour.

I made a visit to the Bovington Tank Museum, and with the help of the Curator, Mr. Willey, was able to photograph a Kangaroo Troop Carrier, plus arms and munitions, as used by the British and Germans in WW II. An information pack was made, with battle maps of the area we were to visit and other relevant information relating to the Italian Campaign in 1944-45.

With the help of the Heroes Return Lottery Fund I was able to make this tour, for which I am most grateful. I made my way to Shorncliffe two days before leaving for Italy, to meet and to get to know the men of Medicina Company. I was greeted with much enthusiasm and given a grand tour of the camp. Staying in the Officers’ Mess gave me time to talk in more detail of my experiences, and also to present a plaque to the Medicina Company, celebrating the 60th Anniversary of the Battle.

Arriving at Bologna Airport, the coach, and a 4x4 vehicle that we would use for a recce, were waiting and took us to our hotel in Faenza. After booking in, Major Hutt, two Gurkha Officers and I drove to a meeting in the Town Hall at Medicina with the Lady Mayor, the Commandant of Police and other officials, to plan for the Medicina Day celebrations. Also we visited other places around the town and the countryside where plaques were mounted, and where I would place wreaths.

I must say at this time that Medicina Old Town, as I remembered it, had not changed—the streets Via Liberta and Via Cuscini, where I was involved in hand-to-hand fighting, were much the same. (The painting by Terence Cuneo is of the very same street.)

Over the next few days we toured the battlefields. Major John Cotterall, the historian, brought his renditions of the battles to life, and I filled in with my personal accounts and actions. Starting with the Concentration Area prior to the Battle of the Gothic Line, Passano (The Ridge), San Savino, Monte Codruzzo, Monte Del Erta, Monte Guzzo and Monte Chicco. All walked, and battles re-fought, the young Gurkhas were a very good audience, taking in every account and living the battles as if they were there, wanting to know every action that I took in

detail. Personally, I believe that their enthusiasm and understanding during these days helped me to overcome my guilt, especially when we visited the Gurkha War Cemetery at Rimini. This was my worst day of recognition, seeing the faces of old friends long gone. We all paraded in full uniform; with a piper playing a lament, we paid our respects. I laid the wreath at the cenotaph. After breaking ranks, we wandered among the many gravestones; I found seven of the eight of my section, and paid my own lonely respects by planting a Poppy Cross on each grave, and, I am proud to say, shed many a heavy tear.

On 16th April we arrived at Medicina and formed up for the parade with the group of those representing the 14th/20th Kings Hussars, the local Police Force and other civilian marchers. Setting off behind the local band, we marched through and around the old town. The small streets were packed with people shouting and clapping. After about 35 minutes we came to a halt in the Main Square. Speeches were given, interrupted by cheers and clapping when told that the Gurkhas on parade were of 'Medicina Company' 1st Royal Gurkha Rifles. The Gurkhas gave their usual Kukri Dance, but this time with more aggression; it had the right effect on the audience who gave them great applause.

To the surprise of both the Hussars and the Gurkhas, it was announced that we were all to receive the "Medicina Liberation Medal (60th Anniversary)" and the Lady Mayor presented each of us with the medal, and spoke to me briefly about the Battle. We then marched to the Town Hall to lay the wreaths by the "Plaque of Remembrance"; a short service was held, and the local school children sang "Ave Maria".

After a brief break for a light lunch in the Hall, we were off by coach to lay wreaths at other Plaques around the area, the last being the Gaiana Canal Bridge. On our way back to the town the local Historian suggested we call at Villa Fontana; this was where I fought my last battle of the War. The building that was our OP had not been rebuilt, and in its place a small garden had been made, with a stone plaque in the centre with a few words in Italian: (In translation) "In honour of the fallen on this battlefield, men of the 2nd/6th Gurkha Rifles, fell 17th April 1945".

A bunch of flowers had been laid there that day; the Historian knew I was one of the three survivors. I was devastated and collapsed into tears.

The rest of the afternoon, with the Commandant, we walked around the town, being introduced to many people, with much hugging and backslapping. I was amused when an old lady, who looked about 80 years old, held my hand and said she remembered the terrible battle, and that she was only six years old at the time. I thought to myself "My God, I must be getting old!"

That evening the Lady Mayor, officials and many townspeople entertained us to a banquet in the Great Hall; wonderful food and wine flowed, and many stories told.

The hospitality was unforgettable.

Next day, many of us, with heavy heads, coached to Coriano Ridge, and then on to San Marino and lunch with the Mayor and officials; but before that we went down a mountain gravel path to where a Gurkha VC had been won. On a bend in the track there was a four-foot wooden post with a bunch of flowers tied at the top. Beside the path was rubbish left by both people and dogs. There had been placed no inscription, no plinth, nor any other identification; yet this was where a Gurkha had won the Victoria Cross in 1944! I commented on this to the Local Historian of San Marino; his explanation was that, over the years since the War, letters to the British Authorities regarding placing a plaque at this place had fallen on deaf ears (his words, not mine

), but that he would write again. This was in April 2005, I wonder if anything has been done? I consider it a disgrace.

In the afternoon we all had free time to walk the town and take in the delightful views from the top of this Mountain Republic.

The last day, before leaving for the UK, was spent shopping in the delightful town of Bologna, and that evening, back in Faenza, the Officers and NCOs invited me to an Indian restaurant for dinner to thank me for my help in making the tour a great success.

Arriving back at Shorncliffe, I stayed over night. Next morning the Company paraded so that Major Hutt could present me with a framed picture of Terence Cuneo's painting of the "Battle of Medicina", engraved to me and dated. After a short speech I reluctantly left for home.