

Geoffrey Winter, 1st Battalion, The York and Lancaster Regiment

In Remembrance Italy 1944 – 2003

Mr. Winter's account is reproduced here courtesy of Tiger and Rose, newsletter of the York and Lancaster Regiment.

The 1st Battalion, The York and Lancaster Regiment, landed in Sicily on 10th of July 1943. I joined the battalion some days later and served as platoon commander of 12 Platoon in 'B' Company until the end of the year when I was transferred to 'S' Company. After the Sicilian campaign the battalion was among the first troops into Italy and for a time was the leading unit of the Eighth Army moving up the west coast. After a spell in the hills and mountains of the centre the battalion moved east to the line between Orsogna and Ortona. Then it was moved right across to the west in readiness to attack across the River Garigliano and capture enemy positions beyond the town of Minturno.

The battalion's attack began in the morning on 20th January 1944 and by the end of the afternoon the objectives—the area around the cemetery on the road north from Minturno and a long hill, Monte Natale, had been captured, but not without casualties. Facing the enemy, 'A' Coy was astride the road, 'B' and 'C' were on Monte Natale with 'D' in reserve. Enemy counter-attack on the morning of 21st January resulted in 'C' Coy being driven with heavy loss on to 'B's position, then another counter-attack caused further losses. A very heavy enemy counter-attack with tanks began on the morning of 22nd January practically annihilating 'A' Coy. 'B' and 'C', later reinforced by two 'D' Coy platoons, all under command of Major D. B. Webster, held on but, under another counter-attack with tanks, were ordered to withdraw through the Green Howards' positions to the rear. After about two days of fighting the battalion had suffered nearly 300 casualties (largely from the rifle companies), including 64 missing. The dead of the battalion who were found were eventually buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery established near Minturno.

That seemed to be the end of the story. However, after nearly sixty years, preparatory site work for the building of a house on Monte Natale unearthed human remains which, on examination, were found to be of five British soldiers. Among the remains was a Y & L brass shoulder title. It was decided that they should be given a military funeral but this had to be at Cassino as the Minturno Cemetery was full. Responsibility for the organisation of the burials was mainly undertaken by Colonel (ret'd) Tom Huggan of the Defence Attache's Office at the British Embassy in Rome in association with Mr. Christopher Oakford of the Ministry of Defence in this country. The Regimental Office was contacted and invited to nominate a representative to attend the service at Cassino. I was honoured to be invited.

Thus, on 17th July 2003, my wife and I found ourselves in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Cassino. The day was sunny and unusually hot. The cemetery is an impressive and moving sight with many hundreds of white headstones gleaming in the sun, overlooked by the monastery high above. It is now a most peaceful scene which was once a dreadful place. It was pleasing to see that there was a respectable number of people at the service.

Those present were positioned by the RSM of the NATO Signals School (Mr. Archer, Royal Signals). The Rev. Jonathan Boardman of All Saints Church in Rome took the service in which he kindly included the Regimental Collect. The lesson was read by Brigadier Allan Mallinson, the

Military Attache at the Embassy. The bearer party of five senior NCO's (four RAF and one Army) stood by the grave, one to each coffin. They were immaculately turned out and drilled well. It was heartening to know that each one had volunteered for the duty and indeed that one had returned specially from leave for the purpose. Each coffin bore a Union Jack, a wreath, a khaki beret and Y and L cap badge. At the committal each member of the bearer party knelt in turn, sprinkled earth on a coffin, stood up and saluted. The Last Post and Reveille were sounded by Warrant Officer Nicolo Pecorelli of the Italian Army.

Those present in addition to the Brigadier, the clergyman, my wife and myself were —the Mayor of Cassino, Colonel Huggan, Lieutenant-Colonel Turner (Royal Signals), the C.O. of the NATO Signals School with his wife and son, Major R. Deare of the Highlanders, Mr. C. Chalmers and Mr. R. O'Connor of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and several members of the Forces and their families. Group photographs were taken.

So at last five soldiers of the Minturno battle were properly laid to rest. We do not know their names as war-time identity discs were perishable. The inscription on each headstone reads "A Soldier of the 1939-1945, Known unto God".

In the afternoon Colonel Huggan and I were driven to Minturno where we assembled near the former 'A' Coy position with Dr. Filippo Marino (who had carried out the examination of the remains) and Maresciallo Moscaritolo, Commander of the Carabinieri at Minturno. We went along a track on the forward slope of Monte Natale and saw the actual area where the remains had been found. I had last been in the area fifty nine years ago on the night of 21st January when I went up to see Derrick Webster and some of my old platoon. I well remember Derrick asking for (and getting!) my spare twelve rounds of .38 ammo.

We then did a general tour of the area and I tried to identify former positions but it was difficult to remember distances and orientations. Colonel Huggan, the doctor (who showed a lot of interest) and I went to the military cemetery at Minturno, another very moving experience. I particularly sought out the graves of L/Sgt Norman Sutton, a tough NCO who had been one of my section commanders in 12 Platoon, and of Pte. Hook, a stocky cheerful Welshman who had been my No.1 on the 2" mortar in that platoon.

I am grateful to Mr. Oakford of the Ministry of Defence for his part in the administration of the visit and my wife and I are immensely indebted to Colonel Tom Huggan for looking after us so well and to Brigadier Mallinson for giving a dinner in our honour. The Regiment must also be extremely grateful to Colonel Huggan for the very considerable efforts which he made to ensure that five brave men were given the farewell they deserved. Finally I must thank Colonel Geoffrey Norton for inviting me to represent the Regiment.