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The Royal Sussex

A Minutiae on Monte Ornito, March 1944. The Cassino Front

In leaving our positions at Teano, north of Naples we moved up to the Garigliano front to relieve the 46th Division.

The approach to the Aurunci mountains was across the Garigliano valley. It was a long march up, and a bit of a joke as we passed the CMP signs which read, "You are now under active shelling distance." This joke turned into reality within minutes as the long column repeatedly took cover at the roadside ditches from the German artillery stoncks. The NCO's were soon urging us up and on.

Eventually we laid up in a staging area about a mile past "Skipton Dump". The weather was the typical grey sombre days, however I managed a good wash down in the sulphur springs which ran under the road from the foothills in the laying up area. Before moving forward we were issued with sandbags. As was usual, not much information came with this; apparently we were to bind them over our boots and gaiters. We started the move up to Ornito and Tuga, a long wandering climb. The benefit of the sandbags became evident as we slithered and slipped in 10 inches of mud up an overused goat track. Much of this was single file, halting occasionally to let the Sikh stretcher parties, who were working in relays carrying out wounded from the summit, pass by. It was indeed also humorous to read the names given to these tracks—Harrogate, Piccadilly Circus and Oxford Street. My thoughts ran back to the actual locations in Blighty.

Relieving a Guards Battalion, we took up positions late in the afternoon. The tall gaunt figures passed us silently wearing beards and whiskers. Harassing air bursts were applied to us about 16.00 hours.

The next day I was detailed to go back down that meandering track to locate a platoon of 2nd Beds and Herts. In a nonchalant attitude I plodded back, only half knowing what I was supposed to be doing. Eventually at a junction in the network of tracks I entered a shell destroyed farm building, the blown half of which was draped with a tent fly sheet. I looked in and saw a Captain with a field telephone seated on an ammo box. I asked him if he could tell me where a Platoon of Beds and Herts were. He said "they are up there" and pointed to a stone farm house about a mile away. I continued my trek to find them. I passed through hurriedly vacated German lines strewn with Schmeissers and mg 42s with ammo belts still in the feed positions. I eventually reached the building. The platoon commander Lieutenant Lloyd, leading his little straggling force, was almost about to enter. I told him he was on no account to take up his allotted position as it was under direct close observation and began my descent back down towards the track junction.

I turned to see the building engulfed in mortar bursts and on fire. I hope my duties had been of some use to the platoon.

After several hours I returned to our position. It was early evening, misty and cold. Several inches of hailstones had fallen. I could see someone coming up the track dragging a huge sack. It was CQMS Rupert Scott. When he neared our sangar he said to me, "Wenham how's your feet?" I replied "cold and wet" whereupon he slung over a brand new pair of size 9s and a pair of army greys. He continued, "how's your underwear?" I said "I think it's moving". Again he threw me a pair of long johns and a vest, telling me to change. I said "what here?" to which he replied

“yes and now”. I knew better than to challenge orders from a senior NCO, so I got all my gear off as quick as I could and got changed. Needless to say the long johns came up to my armpits and the vest below my knees (any squaddie will know what I am talking about); it was quite a predicament. I was so abashed at stripping off on Mount Ornito; Gerry was 100m away and being 19 I had never stripped off to an audience of anyone before except my mum, and that stopped when I was about 6 years old.

The next morning at 'stand to' rum rations were issued by the CSM. When I reached him he held out the stone jar and when I realised what was happening I said “I don't drink sir”. He said “OK” and waved me away. I noticed he put my drop in a mess tin. When I got back to our sangar, Louis Kefford, my sangar mucker said “did you get your rum” I said “no I don't drink”. He said “you bloody fool, why didn't you fetch it back to me”. The next 'stand to' was the same performance, but I was a quick learner and took it back to Kefford.

The next morning there was a bit of 88 mm air bursters and mortaring, during which Sgt. Pexton in a sangar about 10 feet from me was killed by a direct hit. He hailed from Essex. I was on the simple burial party. A shallow grave was scratched out on one of the terraces on that hill, the Padre and a couple of ORs attending. It was carried out calmly and so clinical, without emotion--one could not be too involved with all ones' comrades. However, the memory clings to me and periodically throughout the Italian Campaign and later in my civvie life I could not forget the burial of Sgt Pexton. It would not rest, the committal of a comrade with such little reported note—it was happening all the time.

Eventually in 2004, I made the 60th anniversary back to Cassino and I often wondered if Sgt Pexton had been recovered from the bleak mountain. With the brilliant help of the CWGC they established he was in fact now in Row F, Plot 14, Grave 11. I visited the grave and laid a poppy and felt relieved at last that I had paid a humble respect to his memory. I had laid a ghost to rest and am no longer disturbed by the pros and cons or remorse of that memory, however late it was performed. I paused a few minutes, wondering why I was standing there 60 years later, and not him.