

## **Achnacarry – Commando Training - 1943**

Having completed my basic army training and the subsequent much longer course as a Royal Signals wireless operator, I volunteered to join the newly created Commando units being formed. On the 1st January 1943 I reported to the training base at Achnacarry Castle, sixteen miles north of Fort William, in the shadow of Ben Nevis. For a Londoner the harshness of a Scottish winter was a bit of a shock. The five weeks of training, apart from being a toughening up course, was intended to create the conditions to be encountered in actual battle and to push men to the limits. Records show that 30 per cent of recruits dropped out. To win your green beret was paramount, to be RTU'd (returned to unit) looked on as a disgrace. Men who found the course too harsh could simply ask for a RTU and they were off! This also happened to anybody who did not complete an assault course or training exercise required of them. The speed marches saw several men dropping out. These were 2, 5, 10 and then building to 15 miles in full kit on a 'run then walk, run then walk' basis; and with the instructors lightly dressed, the pace was cruel. I still find it hard to believe that after the longer runs, soaked in sweat, myself and others would strip and roll nude in the snow to cool off!

An eye opener was the use of live ammunition in training. Whilst those training used it on the assault courses giving covering fire to colleagues, marksman instructors subjected us to such close shots the nearness of which was as near as anything you would experience in action, short of being actually shot. The American Rangers (the US equivalent to Commandos) also trained at Achnacarry and they refused to participate in the beach landing assault course when they found that live ammunition would be used. This course required 12 men to paddle a canvas boat across a lake and land on a beach under fire whilst pre-set explosives were detonated all around us as we ran for our target. The return across the lake was a repeat of the ordeal. Grenade throwing was also scary – not the usual throwing from the shelter of a sandbagged trench and listening for a bang, oh no! Instead you had to individually approach a marked circle on the ground, throw your grenade (on target) and then prostrate yourself on the ground whilst debris and shrapnel rained over you. We had no head protection – just a soft cap; Commandos never wore steel helmets, even in action. If you didn't hit the target you had to try again until you did!

Abseiling was another daunting experience to a newcomer. Having to lower yourself down a sheer rockface with no mechanical device, just a rope twined around your torso. We had to keep going until we reached the speed of descent required by the instructor. Needless to say, some opted for RTU when confronted with this. Although this training was punishing it was intended to make you feel you could cope with anything. It is hard to explain how you felt on the final parade when you were presented with your coveted green beret. I lost quite a bit of weight on that course and at 19 I did not have that much spare to lose! I don't think I shall ever be as fit again.

*Bryan Woolnough MBE, 2 Commando Brigade Signals*