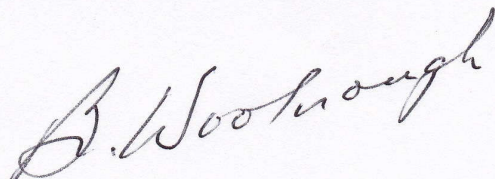


Dear Mr Turton,

I saw your article in the Italian Star and although not sure I can be of assistance with your project thought I should give you my material. I was attached to No. 2 Commando Brigade which covered the Italian campaign. I was a Commando Signaller so was attached to various Commandos on their respective actions. No 2 Brigade was comprised of two Army Commandos and two Marine Commandos. Most of the actions I saw was with Army Commandos although I was attached to No. 40 Marine Commando on some of their actions. I was not on the initial assault on Sicily but in the second wave that had sailed from the UK. I landed at Siracuse and immediately joined 3 Army Commando. There was a gradual follow the Germans as they did a strategic withdrawal towards the Italian mainland, there were minor skirmishes and eventually we arrived at the Straits of Messina for the Italian invasion. Unlike the brave TV and Film soldiers there were many occasions when a POW lifestyle was a better option. This happened at Messina when our unit was given the task of taking out mainland coastal batteries on the mainland invasion, all that happened was we got cold as the gun crews had done a bunk when they realised what was going to happen. At the risk of boring you I am sending four memoirs that I had done for our village monthly magazine. They may be of interest but as they are on my PC they are easy to print off. There were many minor actions and the records show that in the nearly 2 years of continual action the casualties sustained by the Brigade as 136 officers, 1,444 other ranks. A Mediterranean Commando is recorded as 461 all ranks, four Commandos to Brigade making maximum of 1,844 men, with casualties of 1,580 the Brigade could only operate by a Commando being replaced when their numbers were depleted to a certain level. I* was attached, for various actions, to 2, 3, 9, 40 Marine and the Belgium troop of 10 commandos during the Italian campaign.

Hoping that even if not of help this may be of some interest

Yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'B. Wootton', written in dark ink.

Porton Down

My arrival at Achnacarry for the Commando Training Course would have been earlier had I not, in a rash moment, volunteered as a guinea pig in the chemical warfare programme. As a result I found myself with others at the now well known Chemical Warfare establishment on Salisbury Plain.

We were lodged with nearby army units and transported daily to the unit. The first few days involved documenting us and putting various chemicals on our arms. This appeared to be to ensure we had normal skin types and that there would be no violent allergic reaction. Crunch day arrived and six of us were told we were to test mustard gas. Three would be exposed for a long period in the gas, and the others for a shorter spell in a much stronger dose. We were all told to get out of our uniforms and put on some others that they had ready for us. They appeared identical albeit with a chemical odour about them. After a careful fitting of a respirator I was earmarked for the long period exposure and we were admitted into a chamber a bit like a portable cabin with a glass front. It was about 12 feet by 6 feet and we had to walk up and down. In all we were subjected to the gas for about 1½ hours with technicians keeping a close eye on us and, at times, indicating that we should keep moving. On coming out of the chamber we were told to keep the same uniforms on and report back the next morning. By that afternoon, we were aware that our necks, where they had been exposed outside the uniform and respirator, had reddened as with sunburn. By nightfall it got much worse as the gas affected the sensitive skin areas of the body. Our underarms, scalps and of course that other sensitive area, the genitals, really suffered.

Next morning, in a sorry state, with blistering, swelling and extreme difficulty in walking we were admitted to a medical wing in the unit. We spent a week there with many inspections from medical officers from all the services, and then we were transferred to Tidworth Military Hospital where we came under a skin specialist. In all I was about 10 weeks in hospital and I am relieved to say, I was cured. Suffice to say, if the experiment was to see if the doctored uniforms gave any protection, it was an abject failure. It showed those of us taking part how troops would be disabled by such a weapon.

In a belated pleasant outcome in January 2008 I spotted an article in the national press from a veterans agency asking for any Porton Down volunteers to contact them. More out of curiosity than any other reason I did so and after months of completing forms and giving details of service and the experiments carried out, in January 2009 the MOD sent me a compensation cheque for £8,356. This was 67 years after the event and I couldn't help thinking about how many who took part lost out by not surviving into old age.



The photograph shows the plaque, at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, for the tree dedicated to those used in tests at Porton Down.

Bryan Woolnough MBE, 2 Commando Brigade Signals.

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

Termoli, Italy – 1943

On the third of October 1943 I was with No. 3 Commando for the assault on the town of Termoli. This was to be the last engagement for No. 3 as after this action they returned to the UK, their numbers sadly depleted, to reform for the coming second front. It was also the battle in which their C.O. Colonel Durnford-Slater, recorded saying it was the battle that at one time he thought we would lose.

Termoli, is a small eastern coastal town on the Adriatic, north of Bari. The 78th division, 8th Army, was pushing the Germans north but they were forming a defence line, using natural sources, north of the river Biferno some two miles south of Termoli. The plan was for our force of 1000 to land on their flank and to their rear which would require them to pull back. Three commando was to go in the first to form the bridgehead for the main force to pass through and take the town. We landed in the early hours of the morning and the Germans had no idea of our presence. With not a shot fired the main force landed and passed through our lines. Many of the Germans were still sleeping when attacked. By early morning the town was in our hands and various defence positions around the town were made.

For a couple of days all was calm with infantry from the 78th division gradually coming through. Engineers were working hard to repair destroyed bridges to enable tanks and heavy equipment to cross the river. Our calm was suddenly shattered when the German 26th Panzer division came from inland to retake the town. Prior to this we were about to rejoin our LCL's [landing craft], to be on call again, and leave the town to the 78th division. Instead 3 Commando found itself in an olive grove about two miles southwest of the town. We were ordered to hold out as long as possible to enable troops to reform in and around the town. The German attack with their tanks had forced several infantry units back to the town. In the olive grove - which looked down on open fields that sloped away from us making an incline for attackers - besides No. 3 were a few men from the Argylls, a troop of SRS, and a machine gun unit that had all chosen to stay and assist. There had been an antitank unit in the grove but when a German tank knocked out one of their guns they withdrew having immobilised their guns.

All that afternoon we were under constant attack with their infantry taking cover from tanks until a final rush at our position. The tanks had been aware of the antitank guns so would not come too close. These attacks were repulsed time and time again. Whether the lower positions the Germans had to fire from was the cause I don't know, but it had the effect of causing their fire to pass over our heads. The trees took a bashing from the tank fire and I remember one right behind me suddenly being snapped in half from a hit. Nightfall brought an uneasy peace with everybody alert. Next morning the same format occurred and messages from the town kept asking us to hold on. The morning saw the addition of some plane sorties, three planes at a time at tree height straight across the grove with the machine guns strafing and each dropping two bombs. I was at a loss to know whether they were ours engaging Jerry, not far from our single line, or theirs having difficulty at such a small unseen target. Either way it was for a bit too close for comfort.

The day continued in the same way but by now the Germans were easing frontal attack and were passing our flanks heading for town. During the night we were told to leave and pull back to town and about 2 a.m. we formed a single line and made it back. There at HQ I was told to find a hole and have a rest. I did and went into an exhausted sleep, unaware of a fierce battle that raged and ended with the Germans forced to retreat. We finally left Termoli on 12th October, 1943.

Bryan Woolnough MBE, 2 Commando Brigade Signals

Garigliano, Italy 1943

On the night of 29th of December, 1943 during the Italian campaign I was attached to No.9 Commando for a raid on the mouth of the Garigliano river. This river started in the mountains around Cassino and wound its way down to the sea north of Naples. At this period of the war the river divided both armies as the Allies in the west were pushing on to Cassino.

The raid was a diversion to mislead the Germans whilst the 56th division and 201st Guards brigade were engaged in actions and crossings further inland. It was a planned one night raid and we were dropped on the Germans' side of the river. A few eyebrows were raised when at the briefing we were informed that we would have to cross a mined beach to reach our objectives and there was no possibility of any mine clearance. We were placed in our landing craft about six miles from the coast and landed later than intended after midnight. Instructions were given to leave the LCA's in a single file and follow the fellow in front allowing as much space as possible. Not very easy in the pitch black! I lost two close colleagues here, Signaller Lewis and Currie [now buried in the Cassino memorial cemetery] when they triggered an 'S' mine. At the briefing they forgot to mention "Keep your fingers crossed".

Luckily both I and the signaller I was paired with cleared the minefield successfully. Various targets and emplacements were taken care of and the force gathered at the river bank to get back to safety. We knew we had to be clear of the area by dawn as in full daylight we would be sitting ducks for German artillery and mortar positions in the mountains. The plan was for DUKW's [vehicles designed for land and water ability] to travel from some point south of the river mouth by sea, hugging the coast, to get us across to the safe side. The river at this time of the year was very fast and full. My signals role was rather a simple task - to keep contact with the DUKW's to ensure they were on their way and had not run into trouble. You can imagine as dawn was getting nearer and nearer I had to make several reassuring calls always to say "they're on way, no trouble, shouldn't be long". Eventually they arrived and ferried us across. We boarded transport and were quickly driven away from the immediate danger zone. During the many raids I took part in during the Italian campaign this was the only one where we were ordered to blacken our faces. I shall always remember also that having cleared the immediate firing area our transport was met by a van with a drop down counter and two young Salvation Army women served us with mugs of tea and rolls, they could not have got much closer to the enemy lines!

Bryan Woolnough MBE, 2 Commando Brigade Signals

LCA's
(Landing
Craft
Assault)

Vis, Yugoslavia - 1944

In February, 1944 I was one of the Commando Brigade that was attached to LFA's [Land Force Adriatic] task force that was being established on the Dalmatian island of Vis in the Adriatic sea. Vis was among a group of islands off the Yugoslav coast between Split and Dubrovnik. The island was the nearest to the Italian mainland and was about eighteen miles by eight miles. The force was sent to aid Tito's partisans who, having been a thorn in the side of the Germans with their sabotage and ambushes, had been forced off the mainland onto these islands. The Germans subsequently drove them off the islands. We were of the opinion that as the German troops entered the respective island the partisans withdrew to the next - not surprising as the partisans did not have the resources or ability for open battle. The net result was that they were now on the last island, Vis, and were next to be attacked with nowhere to go. Their request for help resulted in the task force.

The island was turned first into a defensive fortress, a small air strip was established with a few fighter planes, anti-aircraft units and a general build up of men and equipment. Our role was soon apparent as we started a continual campaign of raiding the German garrisons and taking many prisoners. I was on raid after raid often returning to the same island after the Germans had renewed the garrison. I can remember these islands as if it were yesterday; Solta, Hvar, Brac, Karcula and Miljet. Partisans often came with our raiding parties but our relationship with them was very frail. They obviously needed us but did not trust us. They had many political officers amongst them and, if you were ever in a friendly conversation with an English speaking partisan, one of these officers would come up and whatever was said the individual would go off with him and never returned for a chat.

The raids were always a set pattern; move out in our assault craft in the evening, land after midnight in the early hours, get in position for the objective and wait for dawn and first light. Our attack was usually about 6a.m. and at times would be preceded by our fighter planes or a naval gunboat softening up the target before we went in. The raid was soon over and we would be back to Vis the following evening. So many raids were carried out that our signals section was often stretched. I recall coming back from one raid in the evening and as our party was getting out of our boats me and my fellow operator were met by our sergeant and told that he was sorry but we would have to go again with another raiding party that was boarding their boats. We just had time to tune our sets, a short briefing and a cup of tea and we were off again.

One particular raided is always in my mind. The partisans kept bothering the garrison commander to carry out a raid on their own. They eventually won the day and it was agreed. However, they needed our radio communications to keep in touch with the HQ on Vis so it was decided to send us with our sets and do the operating and passing the mike to the partisan to speak to his colleague or HQ. To do this handover we referred to them as "put Felix on the air" and the handover was made. Goodness knows what they chatted about. We had a separate briefing and we were taken aside and told that if things went wrong or got out of hand we were to break away, and as we controlled the radio, make our way to any beach and arrange our pickup. The partisans weren't aware of this and fortunately it never came to it. Our party consisted of a junior officer, a sergeant and a few men making us a party of ten. I wasn't too happy with this raid (I'm sure it was on Miljet), as their boats were odd fishing boats and a mixture of various wooden crafts. I had got used to proper landing craft with a modicum of protection if under fire. I was glad to get back to base.

The Germans eventually got fed up with what was happening and one evening saw the start of their retaliation. We were just laying around relaxing when bombers from the mainland suddenly appeared and hammered us. We fled out of the houses we were in, racing for the hills being machine gunned the whole way. One of our colleagues was killed, Burt Jay [now buried in Belgrade war cemetery], another lost a hand and another received a head wound. He stayed with us being

only walking wounded. After that every evening we took bed rolls and a snack and spent the night in the hills. The bombers made several returns but just bombed the two towns, Komiya, at our end of the island, and Vis at the other end. We felt very safe in the hills and used to watch the raids in progress thanking our stars on taking the action we did.

On June 1st a large raid was carried out on the island of Brac. This was the largest of the islands and nearest the mainland. It was the first time I had been on a raid to Brac and it turned out to be one of our least successful actions. It was also an occasion in which I was very fortunate at another's expense. Our landing, as usual, was unopposed and there was a steep climb from the landing beach to the hilltop where an HQ was established. I was put on to the control set with my fellow partner. We also had a RAF signaller talking to Hurricanes supporting the raid. It was just as well as shortly after setting up the HQ we noticed a plane peeling off in our direction, and not until we noticed he was firing at us did we realize that we were mistaken for Germans. Luckily the RAF signaller stopped him before we were really in trouble. During the action a Staff officer, Captain Wakefield, came to our HQ requesting a radio and operator to accompany him. I got a set and tuned it into the control and at that stage was going with the officer. Our sergeant in charge of the HQ control stopped me, saying he couldn't operate the control set with too few men. He then spotted an infantry signaller who was bringing up supplies from the beach to the HQ position and got him to take the set from me and go with the officer. Unfortunately both captain Wakefield and this signaller were killed and this could have easily been me. The raid cost us many casualties and two senior officers, Colonel Manners 40 Commando was killed and Colonel Churchill 2 Commando was captured.

As well as the Dalmatian island raids LFA involved the brigade in raids along the Albanian coast and into Greece. In July I was attached to 2 Commando for a raid at Himara on the Albanian coast to assist Albanian partisans. We had a quiet night landing and then a long steep climb, just following guides. When dawn broke we found our small party overlooked the German position to be attacked. We had a soft time just relaying information as to shell and mortar fire landing positions. Our only danger would have been if a German patrol came across us but that never occurred.

The brigades next large raid, working under LFA, was at Sarande on the Albanian/Greek border opposite the island of Corfu. After preparations and briefings in September, 1944 we embarked on a planned 36 hour raid. This was a combined Partisan and Allied troops action. The action proved anything but a short raid as intended as after our usual night landing there was a change of plans and arrangements made for a larger force to join our raiding group. A much stronger German garrison was at Sarande and necessitated a more serious battle plan. We therefore relaxed to await the reinforcements. During this period the Germans had wind of our position and self propelled artillery tried to target us. The shells nearly all fell in the sea as our beach position was rather inaccessible to them. Unfortunately during the two weeks waiting for other troops the weather changed and the heavy rain caused considerable hardship. Going on a raid for a short period there was no need to take any change of clothes, washing needs etc. and we were soon like castaways. We had no protection from the rain or shelter of any kind. Conditions caused problems with the men, the sodden state created many cases of trench foot and many had to be evacuated to the Italian mainland. Supplies, more men and equipment started to be brought in which eased our problems. The ships could only come in under cover of darkness as coastal batteries were on Corfu. This meant unloading supplies in the dark onto the beach and at first light we often found lots of equipment etc. in the sea due to the tide. Gradually we returned to a fit state and the action got under way.

Two LCGs [landing craft guns], each fitted with two 4.7" naval guns were driven onto the beach and provided devastating fire power for us. The noise from them was deafening and we were glad when action got us moving to take Sarande. The German troops at Sarande had increased due to them pulling men out of Greece, presumably planning to return to Germany. The combined Partisan and Allied force was able to take the town although there was a hold up. During the action the Albanian and Greek partisans fell out over some issue and started fighting each other. Mediators

sorted out the problem and the action continued against our common enemy.

When the town fell the German/Italian garrison on Corfu sent over a delegation that resulted in the garrison surrendering without a shot fired. They were pleased to do so to British troops aware that they were going to be the POWs. The island partisans felt they should have reprisals but arrangements were soon under way to ship the garrison to the Italian mainland. A long period was spent in Corfu, more in a policing role, as there were two opposing partisan groups at loggerheads and it was necessary to disarm them, by persuasion, and back to a normal civil life. It was well into November/December before we left Corfu for Italy to prepare for the closing stages of the Italian campaign. So much for our 36 hour raid that started on 21/22 September!

Bryan Woolnough MBE, 2 Commando Brigade Signals

Lake Comacchio, Italy - 1945

Night of Noise

During late February and March 1945 as the Italian war was nearing its end the Commando Brigade found itself in the front line from the east coast south of the Po valley and north of Ravenna bordering the Comacchio Lake. We were holding the line with various other units as the main army, including the 78th division, withdrew to the Ravenna area to rest, reform and prepare for the final push north. Various patrols and activities were carried out by the brigade, I think mainly to let the enemy know we were still there.

One evening I was directed to go back to HQ and report to a psychological officer. Somewhat mystified I sort him out to be confronted with a record player, batteries, rolls of cable and two very large trumpet type loud speakers. My instructions were to play three 12in. vinyl records at a certain position continually until recalled. He explained that the records were of tanks going into action, a propaganda record and one of German music. He started to say which order he wanted them played in, and as they were not marked, I said he would know anyway. This was a met with a "no" he wouldn't bother to come as he was sure I would cope. At this stage I thought this was either all going to get nasty, or he had arranged to be at a card school! Hoping it was the latter I loaded up his jeep and his driver, knowing the location, started me away.

It was a very bright moonlit night and very frosty. We drove across farmland, no lights of course, and it was like a World War One scene with bloated cattle lying with their legs in the air and a general scene of shell and mortar activity. Our venue was a small canal dividing the two sides. Nearby was a shell wrecked farmhouse and this was to be my operational post. The odd soldier was patrolling outside and after negotiating two blankets, keeping the lights out I was in the room where a sergeant and a few men were busy with the compulsory brew and fry up over a paraffin stove lit by hurricane lamps, again a World War One scene. I was greeted by the sergeant with "who the hell are you?" My explanation of my job was not received too well as it appeared that they were almost on waving terms with the opposition and they didn't want me to stir things up.

I placed the two loud speakers, suitably apart, on the canal bank overlooking the Germans and, probably my imagination, but they looked very close indeed. Back in the farm house I duly played the records, but I'm afraid the order went to pot and I just put them on as they came to hand. I played them continually through the early hours of the morning until a field telephone call said close down and return. Typical of the army they often do not let you know what it is all about at the time, but I eventually found out the reason, I was only one of many such operators along the line doing the same and in addition any unit with vehicles had to keep driving them around, revving up and making as much noise as possible. Preparations were under way for the main attack and to this end to get across the large lake and flooded area LVT's [landing vehicles tracked - buffaloes, weasels etc.] were to be employed. These had featured in the second front but had not been used in our theatre of war so far. So on this night of "noise" drivers were receiving instruction at the water's edge on how to handle them.

Our brigade spearheaded the lake crossing in our area and I found myself in a Buffalo crossing a lake covered in smoke from our artillery, to break through and out of the water straight across the land to an area where we piled out. There is no doubt that they were ideal for such landings as you were protected from small arms fire and able to get in land near your objectives. My disk jockey operation reminded me of a quote, I think by Mark Twain, that "Wagner's music is really much better than it sounds". After listening to the repeats I had to do, I am not too sure that I agree!

Operation Roast

One of the major raids carried out by the Brigade whilst holding the line was on 1st April, 1945. The eastern side of the lake had a spit of land between lake and sea. It was estimated that 1200 German troops held this land and it was obvious it had to be cleared before the final assault across the lake for the push north took place. I was attached to 2 Commando for this assault and they were given the task of crossing the lake to hit the enemy half way up the spit of land while 9 Commando attacked from the south to push northwards up the spit.

A dyke that went across the lake had been breached to create a flooded area south of the lake. This area was a mass of glutinous mud that had to be crossed before hitting deeper water, about chest high, the other side of the dyke. The dyke was like a raised footpath across the lake and my pal and I were given the job of being paddled across the shallow water by the SBS [Special Boat Section] to position ourselves by the broken dyke. 2 Commando was to make the fast dash from the dyke to the land under the cover of a heavy artillery barrage. The trouble was nobody knew how long it would take them to complete the arduous task, manually towing their storm boats loaded with ammo and equipment to reach the dyke before the barrage could start. Our radio was there to give them the time to start their fire. There were four of us in this canoe waiting in the dark and cold, the assault planned for the early hours of the morning, but much better off than the troops struggling through the slime. The artillery contact kept asking "Any sign yet?" but all I could hear was muffled cursing somewhere from the dark. Eventually they started to arrive and when their officer in charge was ready for the final dash to land he gave me the go ahead to start the barrage.

We looked back to our lines to see the darkness erupt in a line of white flashes followed almost immediately by the thunderous noise of the explosions as the land in front of us was saturated. After a prearranged period the barrage stopped and the troops charged inland. The brigade pushed northwards on the spit to a canal dividing the sides and were there relieved on the night of 4th April. During this action I had a sad moment when talking to an infantry signaller on my net who was just a voice over the airwaves, reported to me that his patrol was receiving fire from one of our own guns as they were advancing behind a creeping barrage. Here troops moved forward as the barrage kept lifting. It was not uncommon for such to happen. I reported back to the gunnery officer who said there was no way they could stop the barrage but if the operator said when a shell landed near he would try to identify the gun. I think we all knew this was hopeless but gave it a try. I relayed the landings and over the radio I could hear them exploding in their vicinity. It wasn't long before his set went quiet and I lost contact to find later a shell had landed right next to the patrol and he was one of those killed. Not in my time but nowadays they refer to it as "friendly fire" but in any book I cannot think of anything more wrongly named.

Bryan Woolnough MBE, 2 Commando Brigade Signals