

As I walked the infamous 'Dark Mile' round Achnacarry yesterday (it's really 5 miles!), I came to realise that the old man who had sat in the comfy fireside chair with a deaf aid and portly disposition who was my father, the family comedian and raconteur, was actually one of the toughest men WWII produced, a man who had proud membership of a brotherhood about who legends are still being written. I honestly felt really humbled.

Until yesterday I had for a long time, most of my life in fact, thought that I knew about my father; how mistaken I was. I now understand that I had only known what he was prepared to let me know and the general facts presented in a book about his unit's achievements during WWII.

Achnacarry is the ancestral home of the Cameron Clan set on the edge of Loch Lochy in a steep wooded valley. It's a beautiful peaceful place now which welcomes walkers and those keen to trace their ancestry. I went because my father mentioned it once! I knew nothing then of the 'Dark Mile', the mock graves or cross country speed marches!

I approached the curator of the Clan Cameron museum with a certain amount of trepidation; I did not think that being a 'Clan' museum they would have any information. How wrong I was; she was fantastic and dug out lots of old photos and documents not normally available to visitors. She then showed us to the Clan library where we were able to browse the photos and view lots of out-of-print related books, and I searched them all in a vain hope of capturing a fleeting image or mention of My Dad. As I read through the documents I was stunned and shocked by the severity and toughness of the training and because of this it had a considerable failure rate.

New recruits were greeted with an 8 mile saunter (speed march) from Spean Bridge to Achnacarry - it is uphill all the way and one or two of the hills we drove up were in 1st gear! This was designed to separate the men from the boys!

As they marched into the camp, under the shadow of giant spruce and Scottish pines pipers greeted them with 'Highland Laddie' (The Commando March). The next sight to greet the new recruit was a line of fresh graves, with crosses bearing inscriptions such as: 'Didn't tie the right knot when climbing', 'Exposed his silhouette on the skyline to a sniper' etc, which was a shock to anyone's system and immediately brought home a salutary message of the reality of what the training was to be about. (The graves later turned out to be mock but the lesson was never forgotten.)

For reality all training was conducted with live ammunition and explosives; any mistake was usually a last!

I read for ages and scanned and re-scanned the fading photos. Chris and Natasha my daughter were awestruck with the same realisation as I, that my Dad, her Granddad had been here, had been a 'Commando'

So armed with a potted history of the camp and an out of scale map we decided to walk in the footsteps of what I can only describe as heroes and try and do 'The Commando Dark Mile'. Having served on a Commando unit myself I thought that I knew what 'tough' training was! After 5 minutes of speed marching my 47 year old legs told me that it was a non starter, much to Natasha's relief and we gently walked as far as the Chia-aig waterfall.

Through the tranquil woodland we walked, and all the time I was searching for anything that would remind me and link me with my father but unfortunately

there was nothing until that is we reached the 'White Wooden Bridge' at the end of Loch Arkaig. I was overcome with the emotional atmosphere of my surroundings, how many times had my Dad's boots crossed and re-crossed these worn oak timbers, what were his thoughts? There were inscriptions etched into the concrete walls at the bridge of long forgotten soldiers and I scraped away moss and lichen hoping that one would be his, but to no avail.

We paused in the middle of the bridge and looked out over the calm glass like surface of the Loch and I could feel my emotions getting the better of me. As we continued on I was reading one of the documents the curator had given me, My Father had on several occasions marched and ran up Ben Nevis in full fighting order as part of his normal daily training! Ben Nevis! It's a mountain 18 miles away Scotland's biggest mountain, that one feat brought home to me how tough the training was. I was in awe of the quiet man I had known all my life as a boy he was my hero, now I know that he actually was.

At Chia-aig we paused and gazed at the rocky cliff and tumbling waterfall, this freezing torrent was classed as a perk! It's had been where the Commando recruits got to cool off after cross-country speed marches!

We went on to the Commando Museum at the Spean Bridge Hotel, here the curator, an exceptionally knowledgeable man provided us with even more mind-blowing information. The Commando was trained as a pair and the 'pals' system was used this reinforced the Commando ideal and produced a more competent combat soldier without rival. Did you know that all western Special Forces can trace their ancestry back to Achnacarry? This includes our own SAS and SBS and their basic selection training is based on the original devised at Achnacarry. The US Rangers and 101st Airborne also trained their instructors there.

There was a No 4 Commando whole unit photograph which the curator removed from the wall for use to examine in detail, he even supplied us with a powerful magnifying glass with which to enlarge sections of it. Between the three of us and with a little help from him, we identified 4 men who possibly looked like my father. I wanted to stay, but time was against us and reluctantly we bade our farewell, we purchased a small pamphlet for £2 and made a £3 donation, we only had £5 between us, and left. As we drove away I gazed up at Ben Nevis and thought what a fitting monument to my father and his exceptionally brave comrades.

" We may feel sure that nothing of which we have any knowledge or record has ever been done by mortal men which surpasses the splendour and daring of their feats of arms. Truly we may say of them, "when Shall Their Glory Fade"

***Rt Hon Sir Winston Churchill, KG.,PC.,CH.
21st may 1948***

During their brief wartime existence 'The Commandos' where awarded 8 Victoria Crosses 5 of which where awarded posthumously.