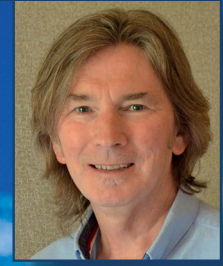


Gordon Craigie



An independent mind...

This month, I'm remembering and honouring...

BY THE LATE 1930s, it was becoming increasingly clear that the common description of the First World War as "the war to end all wars" was, at best, overly optimistic or, at worst, a jingoistic lie. A war that saw around 20 million people – civilians and military in almost equal numbers – die worldwide had, in fact, not ended all wars but had actually directly provoked a set of circumstances that were leading inevitably to the Second World War. Indeed, at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, a British Army officer reportedly observed, "after the war to end war, they seem to have been pretty successful in Paris at making the peace to end peace". Although the exact figures are difficult to verify, one source claims that "close to 150,000 Scots died during the First World War, [representing] 20% of British losses". The Second World War would see another 75 million deaths worldwide, including around 57,000 Scots...

In 1939, young Henry McIntosh left his family behind in Dundee to join the Gordon Highlanders. After completing his training, he served in El Alamein, Tunisia, and Sicily, as part of the 51st Highland Division, before returning to the UK in preparation for the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944. The Gordons landed at Courseulles and moved inland to Banville before fighting their way through Colombiers-sur-Seulles, Benouville, and Touffreville, reaching Escoville on 14 June. Two days later Lance Corporal Henry McIntosh died in battle at Escoville, aged 28. His final

resting place is the beautifully maintained Ranville War Cemetery, around 2 miles from where he fell. Henry was my uncle, my mother's big brother. His death was a family tragedy, as suffered by so many families, and his parents and sisters never really got over it. He was certainly never forgotten and, although I came along many (many!) years later my mum named me Gordon in his memory...



My uncle, Henry McIntosh, 1915-1944

The Second World War would see another 75 million deaths worldwide, including around 57,000 Scots...



6 Platoon, No. 2 Recruit Company., May 1940 at Gordon Barracks.

Most of the detailed information in the previous paragraph was unknown to me or, I'm certain, my family, yet it only took 10 minutes or so in The Gordon Highlanders Museum in Aberdeen for one of their research volunteers to piece it together. I visited in February this year to donate a photograph of Henry's platoon from May 1940 – it seemed appropriate to honour his memory by adding to the Gordons' collection rather than gathering dust in our house – and to catch up with Stewart Mitchell, one of the researchers, who had previously helped me with an iScot story about the 51st Highland Division being left behind at St Valéry in 1940. (If you haven't read that article, *He never spoke about it...* – originally published in issue 53, May/June 2019 – then please do, at tinyurl.com/StValery.)

Stewart's input to that story was based on the extensive research he had carried out for his excellent book, *St Valéry and Its Aftermath – The Gordon Highlanders Captured in France in 1940*. It was a happy coincidence that my visit in February was soon after his most recently-published book, *Fighting Through to Anzio – The Gordon Highlanders in The Second World War (6th Battalion & 1st London Scottish)* – if you recall, in issue 91 I wrote about my wife's family connection with Vallerotonda, an Italian hilltop town very much affected by the fighting around Monte Cassino, hence my interest in this publication. Stewart gave me an outline of his latest book:

"[It tells] the little known and inspiring story of the important role played by the 6th Battalion Gordon Highlanders and the 1st Battalion London Scottish (Gordon Highlanders) in some of the Second World War's bloodiest battles. These were Territorial Army battalions, so called week-end warriors, with civilian occupations who did their training in their spare time. Publication of this book was timed to mark the 80th anniversary of the battle for Rome, with the Anzio landings on 22 January 1944.

"Hollywood films have created an impression that the battle for Anzio and the liberation of Rome was an entirely American affair, but it was a joint British and American operation. The Allied advance up the Italian mainland

towards Rome stalled as the Germans doggedly defended a formidable line across Italy, known as the Gustav Line. This included Monte Cassino, where the Germans could observe all Allied movements below. To bypass the Germans, an amphibious landing north of the line, at Anzio, was planned together with an all-out attack on the Monte Cassino line to take place at the same time.

"The Anzio landings began with the 6th Battalion Gordon Highlanders among the first British troops to storm ashore from the landing craft. The landings were totally unopposed, with a few stunned Germans captured while still in their pyjamas. The Gordons pushed inland without encountering any Germans but were ordered to halt. The American General, John Lucas, concentrated on landing men and supplies, rather than exploiting the element of surprise and capturing the high ground and cutting the supply links south to Monte Cassino. Meanwhile the German commander threw a ring of steel around the bridgehead perimeter. Back in London, Winston Churchill, who had been buoyed up by the news that the landings had achieved complete surprise, and unrealistically expected Rome liberated within days, was dismayed by the lack of progress. He is famously quoted as complaining, 'I had hoped we were hurling a wildcat onto the shore, but all we got was a stranded whale.'"

The landings were totally unopposed, with a few stunned Germans captured while still in their pyjamas



Stewart Mitchell with his book collection at the Gordon Highlanders Museum.

6th Battalion Pipers, Liberation Parade, Rome June 1944, Credit: Image courtesy of the Gordon Highlanders Museum



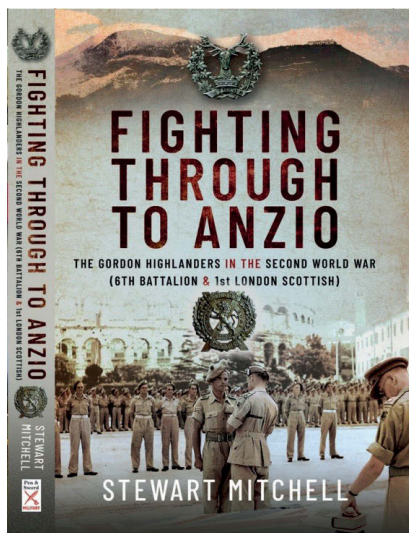
6th Gordons and 1st London Scottish Pipers play at the Anzio Bridgehead Hospital, Credit: Image courtesy of the Gordon Highlanders Museum

Between 30 January and 4 February there were many fierce battles, but the Germans then managed to successfully turn defence into devastating counterattack, inflicting unsustainable casualties on the Allied troops – the 1st Battalion London Scottish had casualties of over 60% of all ranks. But, having managed to bravely still hold their positions, all was not lost for the Allies, as Stewart explains:

“As the spring weather started to dry out the ground, the Allied tanks were more able to manoeuvre, and clearer skies allowed the Allied air superiority to pound the Germans to great effect. Finally, the Americans entered Rome on 4 June and General Mark Clark had his day of glory. The British forces in Italy were not to be denied their moment of celebration for their part in the victory. On 8 June 1944, the Drums and Pipes of the 6th Battalion Gordon Highlanders led the Victory Parade through Rome. Their march took them past the Colosseum, and finishing at the Vatican, all while receiving a rapturous welcome from the Romans. The skirl of the pipes and the sway of the kilts had their ‘usual’ effect.

“These two battalions of Gordon Highlanders fought fiercely and bravely throughout the Second World War and went on to smash through the Gothic Line in Northern Italy and on to Allied victory. One measure of this is the number of gallantry

My problem actually lies with the politicians and those entitled members of the Establishment who will do anything to hold onto, and increase, their power, wealth, and perceived influence no matter the cost to us ordinary citizens



awards made to the men of both battalions, which were 1 Victoria Cross, 4 Distinguished Service Orders, 4 Distinguished Conduct Medals, 22 Military Crosses, 33 Military, and numerous mentions in despatches.”

Despite never having served in the Gordons himself, Stewart’s pride in the regimental history and his meticulous attention to detail in his research is something to be greatly admired. To be honest, I have some difficulties in thinking proudly of British Army exploits, given their role in British imperialism, and I have even more issues with some Scottish regiments given that many of these only came into existence to “keep control” of the local population after the Jacobite uprisings of the eighteenth century. But, as Stewart pointed out to me, these were different times and the men were only doing what they believed was right. He is, of course, absolutely correct, and so, so many of them made the ultimate sacrifice for what they believed was their duty to their country, including my Uncle Henry. So, I now realise that my problem actually lies with the politicians and those entitled members of the Establishment who will do anything to hold onto, and increase, their power, wealth, and perceived influence no matter the cost to us ordinary citizens. We’re seeing it at play again in so many situations currently – including Ukraine, Gaza, and, of course, the cause of the restoration of Scotland’s independence.

But all of that’s for another day, as here I pay tribute to my uncle, Henry McIntosh, and all of his fallen colleagues. Although he wasn’t personally involved in the Anzio landing, the role of his regiment, the Gordons, in liberating my wife’s family’s hometown, and Italy, from Nazi occupation, is also very poignant for me. That being said, I’m not so sure about his regiment being responsible for my name – maybe I should just be grateful he was a Gordon and not a Cameron!

Stewart Mitchell’s latest book, *Fighting Through to Anzio – The Gordon Highlanders in The Second World War (6th Battalion & 1st London Scottish)*, is published by Pen & Sword Military, RRP £25.

The Gordon Highlanders Museum in Aberdeen is open Tuesday – Saturday www.gordonhighlanders.com

