

## Peter Cassella Murphy MC



Major Peter Casella Murphy was born in 1912, the son of Major Frank and Marguerite Murphy who lived at Dunsland Court in Jacobstowe. Major Frank Murphy moved with his family to Jacobstowe in Devon in 1921. The Murphy family were very active in the Roman Catholic Church and were part of the driving force behind the extension of the present church building in Okehampton.

Peter Murphy was one of 9 children and was educated at Beaumont College and Sandhurst, before being commissioned into the East Yorks Regiment and being sent to India.. There he served on the North West Frontier and was also caught up in the 1936 Quetta Earthquake. Later he also served in Palestine. By the outbreak of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War; he was a Captain in the Royal Irish Fusiliers. In his personal life, as a

countryman, he was a good horseman and a 1<sup>st</sup> class shot. While on a training assignment in Catterick he met Kathleen Margaret Sharpe and in early 1940 they were married. Peter thrived on life in the army. His gaiety was infectious and he could be relied on to lift spirits in any mess party.

On the second of October 1939 Peter left for France in command of A Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers, to join the BEF. The morning of Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1940 saw the battalion at Ninove, acting as rearguard to the bulk of the BEF in their retreat towards the River Escaut. As the battalion withdrew from Ninove towards the rendezvous on the River Dendre at Oultre with the German army hot on their heels, Peter, his company, and the battalion as a whole came under heavy German machine gun fire. During this withdrawal Peter Murphy was severely wounded having been hit through the lung. Nevertheless, he kept command and marched with his of his company for several days, before he collapsed and was evacuated back to England via Dunkirk in a critical condition. While in hospital, he received a visit from the Queen.

For this rearguard action Peter Murphy was awarded the Military Cross. The citation reads:-

*Capt Peter Casella MURPHY*

*1st Royal Irish Fusiliers*

*Commanding his Company on the wide and exposed right flank of the Battalion in the rearguard position north of Ninove with conspicuous coolness and skill under very heavy fire. Although shot through the chest in the early stages of the withdrawal he refused to get on to a vehicle until contact with the enemy had been broken. He saw to the evacuation of his casualties and despite his wound marched for five miles in command of his Company until he collapsed and was put onto an ambulance. This courageous example was a most valuable factor in a very difficult withdrawal.*

*Recommended by Comdr 50 Div. Award Recommended Military Cross.*

Peter Murphy recovered from his wounds and was posted to Northern Ireland, where his son, Patrick was born. By November 1942 he was en-route with his battalion to North Africa as part of "Operation Torch" and arrived in Algeria on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1942. By 12<sup>th</sup> January 1943 the Irish Brigade which included the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers were occupying a low ridge called "Grandstand Hill" near Bou Arada in Tunisia. Plans to attack and recapture high ground know as "Two Tree Hill" which was occupied by the Germans, was disrupted on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1943 by a major German attack on "Grandstand Hill" involving the 10<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Panzers together with the German 5<sup>th</sup> Parachute regiment. The Germans very nearly achieved their objective coming between the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Enniskillen Fusiliers and "D" company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers and Grandstand Hill. "A" company with Major Peter Murphy MC in command were ordered to counter attack on the rear of the German attack (O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan 2012,9). Peter's men went in under a storm of fire from the front and flanks with his company piper at his side. As his company closed, the enemy broke cover and ran for it, but both Peter and his piper were shot and died during the last few moments of that battle. This charge across open ground will live

in the archives like all acts of true valour (Horsfall 1976,53-4), Peter left a wife and a son Patrick with another, Peter, soon to be born.

His friend John Horsfall reflecting upon Peter, often wondered how things might have been had he survived the war, thinking that perhaps he didn't try too hard to do so. He continues that we had lost one of our best wits, as well as a most colourful and endearing character (Horsfall 1976,12). We often read of depraved behaviour of protagonists in war but here both German and British stretcher bearers after this battle helped each other locate each others casualties so that they could be treated.

#### References

Horsfall, J. 1976, *The Wild Geese are Flying* Roundwood Press, Kington.

Horsfall, J. 1977, *Say not the Struggle*. Roundwood Press, Kington.

O'Sullivan, E. & O'Sullivan, R. A Practical Guide to Irish Brigade Battlefields in the Bou Arada Area. <http://www.irishbrigade.co.uk/> . 2012. 1-1-2013. Ref Type: Electronic Citation