



FROM NORWAY TO ANZIO

Sgt Joseph Dunne DCM

By Ross Glennon

It's not very often you get the chance to meet a living legend. Sgt Joe Dunne is 100 years old. He served and fought throughout the entire Second World War with the Irish Guards. He still fervently attends all Royal British Legion and Irish Guards Association ceremonies and functions. Proudly wearing his medals he still looks up and down serving soldiers to see if they have their brasses polished and donning a Windsor knot in their ties. This is Joe's story.

Photos courtesy of Joe Dunne and Irish Guards Association

The Irish Guards, commonly known as 'The Micks', have to date received six Victoria Crosses (VC), all awarded during the First and Second World Wars. However, the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) predates the VC by two years. The DCM was established on December 4th 1854 during the Crimean War, and was awarded to NCO's and other ranks.

Sgt Joseph Dunne of Kilurin, Co. Offaly, was born on June 8th 1914. Having finished school, Joe worked for a while as a forester on the Estate of Lord Digby at Clonad. Adventure gripped Joe and along with two of his friends he decided to try and join the London Metropolitan Police. They received advice from a recruiting sergeant that it was easier to get into the police if they first joined the army. And so it was in 1936 that the Irish Guards received three new recruits. The next decade would see these new Guardsmen combating in extreme conditions. Posted to 1st Battalion, Joe soon found himself a lot further from Offaly than he might have originally imagined. In the same year, 1st Battalion moved to Egypt and were stationed at Cairo. In 1938 the battalion was sent to Palestine for three months to assist with internal security duties before returning to England in time for Christmas.

After the outbreak of World War II, 1st Battalion first saw action in the Arctic Circle. The battalion was deployed to Norway as part of the 24th Guards Brigade. Tragedy befell the brigade when HMT Chobray was hit by the German Luftwaffe. There were a number of casualties including the CO Lt/Col W.D Faulkner MC, along with several company commanders. The surviving Guardsmen were evacuated from the burning ship by one of their escort vessels, the HMS Wolverine. With possibly only minutes to save lives Commander George Craske, of the Wolverine commented: "We closed on their burning and sinking ship. I had never before realised what the discipline of the Guards was. We got a gangway shipped forward and the men were ordered to file off on to us. There was no confusion, no hurry and no sign of haste or flurry". The Battle Honour 'Norway' was awarded.

697 men, including Joe, were evacuated



from the Chobray that morning. 1st Battalion went into action at the town of Pothus where they were instrumental in holding off very heavy German attacks for two days allowing many of the British force to be evacuated. The battle honour of 'Pothus Wood' was awarded to the battalion for this action. The Guards were eventually evacuated back to the UK.

After a period of refit, the 1st Battalion was deployed to North Africa in March 1943. Taking part in the Allied invasion of Tunisia led to the Battle Honours of Medjez Plain and Djebel bou Aoukas (Bou) being awarded to the Battalion soon after. The Bou for example was a low ridge, devoid of any vegetation and with limited cover. The battalion successfully assaulted the heights and captured two sections of German troops who were caught unaware. However the position was precarious as the "Bou" created a salient which could be easily shelled by German artillery. The formidable German 88mm guns were described as

being used 'like sniper rifles' on the exposed Micks but still they held the position. The artillery barrages and fighting were ferocious and the fighting lasted for many days. Of the 166 Guardsmen that went up the hill only 77 returned. During this



engagement Joe's great friend Paddy Mercer was awarded the Military Medal. The Germans were eventually forced to retreat and on May 20th, 1943, 60 Guardsmen were picked to take part in the Victory Parade in Tunis, among them was Joe.

After North Africa, Joe, now a Sergeant, and the 1st Battalion were sent to Italy as part of Operation Shingle, more commonly known as the Battle of Anzio. The area of operations of the battalion was in the Area of Carroceto. Operation Shingle had been conceived as an operation to help break the stalemate that had been created between the German forces and the allied American and British forces that had been held up by the strong defences of the Gustav Line.

On January 22nd 1944, Sgt Joe Dunne found himself on board a landing craft approaching a beach 10km's north of Anzio as part of the 24th Guards Brigade. The history of the Irish Guards states that the Micks had a relaxing first day after the landings. However this was to change as German reinforcements were quickly transported in to the area. It was on the

afternoon of January 23rd, that the brigade was ordered to carryout a reconnaissance

“The attack went very smoothly and far faster than expected, as Sergeant Dunne went through the house like a dose of salts driving Krauts out in all directions”

in force of the village of Carroceto. The lead element was the 1st Grenadier Guards, followed by the Micks and the Scots Guards. Unknown to brigade HQ, the village had been occupied and heavy contact was

made with the occupying German troops. Joe was in command of 13 Platoon of No. 3 Company, and was one of the leading Platoons to advance on Carroceto. It was here and in the general area that Joe was to show such initiative, courage and resolve. As a result many lives were saved by this brave soldier. The regimental history mentions Joe many times during this period, where he and Lt Musgrave were witnessed while clearing a farm house of enemy on their own and Joe was observed to charge through the front door and out the back, "scattering Germans left and right." This feat was to be repeated the following day, when 13 Platoon was tasked with clearing a farm of the enemy. Under the cover of two American M10 tanks Joe and his platoon advanced on the farm. The history states; "The attack went very smoothly and far faster than expected, as Sergeant Dunne went through the house like a dose of salts driving Krauts out in all directions". Joe and his platoon were left to secure their objective while the farm clearances continued. The 3rd Brigade advanced through the positions



of the 24th Brigade and pushed forward. However, as Joe's No. 3 Company prepared to advance behind 3rd Brigade heavy fire was received from a building on their right flank. Joe dashed forward and led his platoon in an immediate attack on the building and burst through the front door only to find four young Germans with two machine guns. They had held fire until they felt they themselves were under direct attack. Joe states in his report that, "in spite of his education he did not have the intelligence to realise the situation. A few minutes after we started to attack him he left his rear completely unguarded and he succeeded in doing nobody any damage, as from the time he started firing he could not have had time to fire more than one belt before our party slipped round his rear."

Joe's Company was relieved by elements of the Grenadier Guards and they moved

back to their original positions out of the direct fire along the line. However, they found that during the previous night German snipers had taken up position in close proximity to their original farm house. Again Joe came to the fore and stalked the German snipers and eliminated the threat accounting for five of their number. It was later that day that he completed the task when he stalked the final sniper to his hide in a culvert and eliminated the threat to his fellow Micks. Joe's 13 Platoon pushed on and occupied a spur on a ridge close by only to discover that the enemy were heavily entrenched on the other side. They held fast and consolidated this position. On the night of February 3rd, a strong German counter attack was put in against the Micks' positions and heavy fighting took place across the line. Joe made this report following the action;

'Knowing that an attack was imminent I immediately ordered the platoon to 'stand to'. I ran round to the officer in charge of the support 4.2 mortars, who was in the house at the rear of my platoon, informed him that the enemy were attacking in strength and told him that the defensive fire plan must be laid on immediately. On my return I ran into the heavy enemy barrage and had to take shelter in a cow shed until I could cross the open ground to my platoon. On reaching my platoon I found Guardsman Burke badly wounded lying in his trench. I lifted him from the trench and sent another Guardsman for the stretcher bearers. Then Captain McNerney joined me and I explained to him that I had already told the 4.2 Mortar officer to bring down the defensive fire. He left me to return to Company HQ, and I did not see him again. What ever happened I do not know,

but the defensive fire was never brought down and I saw the enemy at the far end of the gully in front of us. My platoon at once engaged the enemy, as did 15 Platoon on my left, joined by the attached machine guns. The hayricks in front of No's 14 and 15 Platoons were set a light and the Vickers machine guns brought heavy fire to bear in front of our positions. Then on my platoon front, the enemy seemed to move over both flanks, and only a number of enemy snipers remained. Next I observed the enemy attacking Company HQ from the rear, and after approximately thirty minutes the firing quietened down. I then decided to withdraw my platoon to the Battalion HQ to support them in defence of their positions, knowing that No's 14 and 15 Platoon had been over run. After giving orders to my section commanders we moved forward then swung right. We made good progress until we reached the railway, then we came under heavy fire, which I thought came from our own troops. I shouted to them and then found the embankment was strongly held by the enemy, thus making our objective almost impossible to attain. I left two sections of my platoon in the Gully, which runs from the road to the railway, whilst Lance-Sergeant Ashton, Lance-Corporal Ashton, Lance-Corporal Wilson, five Guardsmen and I went forward to the high ground. On reaching this we were pinned down by fire from both flanks and the rear. Lance-Corporal Wilson reported to me that the two sections in the gully had been cut off. I remained with this section in the high ground overnight and eight o'clock the following morning Lance-Sergeant Ashton and Guardsman Swift were badly wounded by enemy machine gun fire. The enemy by this time had encircled the section and having exhausted our ammunition we were taken prisoner and put in the gully. We were later moved to a house, leaving Lance-Sergeant Ashton, we were refused permission to carry him with us. We had been in the house for about an hour when one of our tanks opened up on it, causing the enemy to seek safety in the trenches outside. We were left under guard of two Germans whom we over powered and made our escape, taking them with us. We made our way back to the gully, taking

two more prisoners on the way, then passed through the mortar platoon, who were in the gully under the railway line. On reaching the road we handed over our prisoners and Guardsman Swift and myself were conveyed by carrier to the dressing station".

Joe himself was injured in the early stages of this action, but chose to make no reference to his wounds in his report. Joe's numerous displays of bravery and leadership in the various engagements around Anzio did not go unnoticed. He was recommended for a DCM. Lt Col Andrew Montague-Douglas Scott DSO. & Bar, OC 1st Battalion wrote about the situation making reference to Joe's continuous bravery since landing in Italy. The award was passed by General HR Alexander, Commander in Chief, Allied Central Mediterranean Force, on April 20th, 1944.

By this time 1st Battalion strength was no more than 20 officers and 247 other ranks. As a result of casualties taken in Italy the battalion was withdrawn from the line. Anzio was to be the final combat engagement for the battalion and Joe in the Second World War. This was not the end of Joe's military career and he was deployed again to the Middle East in 1947 where 1st Battalion again carried out internal security duties in Palestine. By 1948 British responsibility there had ceased and the battalion were the last troops to leave. They sailed from Haifa in June 1948 and spent a further nine months in Tripoli before returning to England in the spring of 1949.

In 1947 Joe had married Bridget Monaghan from Cavan. Bridget had served as an ambulance driver in London throughout the war. Together they raised five children. Bridget died on April 1st, 1961. At a time when men did not raise children on their own Joe stood fast. In a real testament to his character and as a Guardsman Joe stood guard over his



children when social welfare officers came to take them away. Joe went on to work in the Junior Carlton Club until he retired in 1979. The club was the headquarters for the Conservative Party in England. Joe met and mixed with many important people including Winston Churchill. His biggest claim to fame was refusing entry to Margaret Thatcher as he said, "it was a men's only club."

Joe returned to Offaly in 1989 to live alongside his brother George. He is currently in a nursing home outside Moate. Joe is far from alone as his daughter Patricia and granddaughter see him every day and he regularly receives visits from the Irish Guards both serving and retired.

As we went to print, Irish Guardsman, Sgt Joe Dunne DCM, passed away. May he rest in peace.

"Quis Separabit"
"Who Shall Separate Us?"