

GORDON KEENAN

C635009 RSM 5 L.A.A. RGT. RCA

MORE PLEASANT MEMORIES OF WAR

Gordon Keenan was born on July 9, 1910 in Cobourg, where he attended George St. Public School and Cobourg District Collegiate Institute, leaving early to start working at various jobs. Looking for adventure and a way to earn some money, he participated in one of the last Harvest Excursions to Western Canada.

Later he worked at the Dominion Wheel and Foundries, then as a groundskeeper at the Cobourg Union Cemetery and ultimately as a custodian at Cobourg Collegiate Institute, a position to which he returned at the end of the war.

Along with many young men at the time, in 1934 he joined the non-permanent active militia receiving training at Petawawa, Ontario. He attended a sergeant's course in Kingston in 1936 and rose to the rank of Battery Sergeant Major in 1940. In 1941 he achieved the rank of Regimental Sergeant. Major, 5th Canadian Light Anti Aircraft Regiment.

In September 1941 Gordon set sail for Britain where he trained at various locations in the south of England.

New Year 1943, I visited a friend Jack "Scotty" Grant who worked in a Cobourg drugstore before the war and now lived in Edinburgh. They took me into their small apartment on Coburg St and treated me royally... There was a New Year's party in the building and we were all invited. The only requirement was you had to say, "Eh ye can say it's a braw bricht moon lit nicht eh yer ah richt ye ken," which I was quite familiar with. It was a good party.

New Year's Day Scotty and I went pub crawling and a chap said, "Hello Canada - where are you from?" I told him Ontario and he informed me he had lived in Ontario in the 1920s and worked on a rum runner that ran from Cobourg to Rochester. When I suggested that they loaded up at Richardson's Point, he said "Where are you from?" I told him Cobourg and we then sat down and talked of Cobourg over our beers. It is a small world.

In November 1943 Gordon sailed from Liverpool to Naples, Italy. While at Gravina, Italy, he observed:

Most of us arrived at Gravina by November 25th and some vehicles limped in two days later. We settled into winter quarters on a bleak hill around the remains of farm buildings. Pup tents were erected with nothing to hold their guys but chunks of stone. The tents sagged down on the occupants with six inches of wet snow. B.H.Q. were lucky. We had a cold stone house but it was dry.

The thing that saved the day was two caves that had housed sheep. They had about two feet of droppings that had to be cleaned out. A can of gasoline was used to start the fire and kill the vermin. It burned for two days and the boys shovelled out the ash.

The larger cave became a canteen with a sign like an English pub with a German helmet and crossbones over the door, and the name "Cave Inn." It was stocked with a heavy dark vino the boys called "Purple Death." Joe Fowler and Fergie Flesch ran the canteen and a cup of vino sold for five lire. For some reason the snow all around camp turned purple and the boys didn't mind the mud anymore. The smaller cave with a hole in the roof became a shower room.

From "The Lighter Side of Soldiering" by Gordon Keenan (C63500 RSM 5 L.A.A. REGT. RCA)



*Lucera Italy March 1944 Coburg boys of "D" Troop
Lt. D. Tait - Sgt. J. Cuthbert B.S.M. G. Keenan
Sgt. H. Pearce - E. Bradbury - T. Cate
Sergeant W. Box - J. Fardella*

Gordon served in the Italian Campaign November 1943 to February 1945 after which he spent a short time in Belgium before moving on to Holland. When Holland was liberated in April 1945, he was stationed at Winschoten until his repatriation just before Christmas 1945.

He returned to work at Cobourg District Collegiate Institute where his duties expanded over the next thirty years. When he retired in 1975 he was supervising the operation and maintenance of the fifty-two schools governed by the Northumberland and Newcastle Board of Education.

Gordon Keenan still resides in the house he built for his family right next door to the old family home in Cobourg.



Gordon and Linda Keenan

