

# "Blackie" Rowe shares wartime experiences

By Tom McCoag

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Tomorrow is Remembrance Day, a day when people across Canada gather at cenotaphs to pay their respect to the soldiers who died in the first and second World Wars.

For veterans of the conflicts, it is a special day, a day they remember fallen comrades and re-live experiences that some would prefer not to remember.

Kenneth "Blackie" Rowe of Huron Terrace, Kincardine, is one of those veterans who will be remembering. He has agreed to share some of his wartime experiences.

Rowe was an infantry man who saw plenty of combat during the six years he served with the Fifth Regiment. He joined the regiment two weeks after the declaration of war by the Canadian government, because of tradition and because he was afraid that his mother would present him with a white feather - the sign of cowardice.

Rowe's regiment spent the first two years of the war serving in various locations in the province of Ontario. He was often at the receiving end of remarks which pointed out quite clearly that he was still in the country even though he had been in the services for two years. However, Rowe did not allow the statements to "bug" him.

He first experienced enemy fire when his regiment landed in Liverpool, England, on Oct. 17, 1941. The Germans were bombing the harbour and Rowe remembers wanting to get off the ship as soon possible. They were disembarked from the ship during the raid and Rowe states that most of the soldiers attempted to "ignite" the bombs.

For the next two years the regiment spent countless hours training, which was varied to keep it interesting. "If they hadn't varied the training, it would have become a pretty deadly bore," remembers Rowe.

In October, 1943, the regiment was told that it was being sent to Northern Ireland. In reality, they were being sent to Italy.

The regiment landed in Naples and was immediately assigned to Field Marshall Alexander Montgomery's 8th Army.

Rowe and the regiment first saw action in the battle for the Arielli River, which is a short distance north of Ortona. The reality of war was impressed on Rowe's mind very quickly.

During the first four years with the regiment, he had belonged to C Company, but just before departure from England he had transferred to D Company. This was a lucky break for Rowe because C Company was



Blackie Rowe

decimated during that battle.

"I knew every man in that company and only six survived the first attack," states Rowe.

Rowe's regiment took part in two attacks on German positions that were said to be unbreachable. The first was the battle for the Gothic Line on Aug. 30, 1944 and the second was the battle for Coriano Ridge on Sept. 13, 1944.

Both hold vivid memories for Rowe. Coriano Ridge was where he witnessed the largest artillery barrage used by the allied forces to that date. Seven hundred pieces of artillery were used as Rowe's regiment attacked the target, which was captured.

Coriano Ridge was also the place where he guarded a German sergeant who told him that Germany was going to win the war because "Hitler wouldn't let them down."

#### Received distinguished conduct medal

The battle for the Gothic Line is also well remembered by Rowe.

He was worn out prior to the attack because his regiment had been on a forced march that covered 35 miles. Rowe, by now a sergeant, along with the rest of D Company, was given one day's rest before being sent into the battle.

When they were sent, they were ordered to take Hill 111. As the lead company attacked the German positions, it was "wiped out." Rowe's company, in which he was now a platoon commander because of casualties, was forced to proceed through a mine field, an action that completely surprised the Germans.

When Rowe's company captured the hill, the first breach in the unbreachable line had occurred. Out of the 110 men who started towards the hill, only 80 remained after its capture.

The very next day, D Company was ordered to take Hill 204, which they did during the afternoon.

That night, the Germans mounted a counter-attack. As the Germans advanced, Rowe told his men to hold their fire by telling them "not to fire until they saw the whites of their eyes."

The company fought for the hill throughout the night and finally captured the hill around dawn. The company was down to 40 men.

For his actions during the battle, Rowe was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Rowe was wounded three times during the war. The first time occurred the day after the battle for Hill 204. Despite his wounds, he stayed at the front. "The commanding officer asked the padre to convince me to stay," remembers Rowe. "So the padre came over and asked me if I could still think, I said I could. He said, so, I did."

The second time he was wounded he was hit by seven pieces of shrapnel, four of which left pretty good holes. Because Rowe was on a reconnaissance mission, his men had to wait until dark before they could take him to get medical aid. He returned to his company, his wounds not completely healed, two weeks later.

The last time he was wounded was two weeks before the end of the war in Europe. He was hit under the left eye. People thought he was dead and so he did not receive any medical attention and the ambulance drivers stole all of his belongings during the trip to the hospital. At the hospital he can remember a lady pulling a blanket up over his face. Scaring the daylight out of the medical staff, he managed to remove it, giving them the first indication that he was still alive. He then received medical at-

tention for the first time since his injury had occurred.

He spent three months recuperating in a hospital in England before being shipped back to Canada. He arrived back in the country on July 22, 1945. His regiment arrived back six months later.

Not all of Rowe's memories are about fighting, in fact some are amusing. He tells one story where he managed to hit the second-in-command of the regiment, Lieutenant Colonel H.E.T. Doucet, in the face with dirty soap water. "I'd just finished shaving and tossed the water out of the tent," recalls Rowe. "He was so mad he wanted to put me in chains."

He also remembers a night while en route to Italy when he assisted 17 naked nurses on board the ship he was on. "Their had been torpedoed in the middle of the night and I guess they didn't have the time to put their clothes on," he states.

Food is something else that sticks in Rowe's mind. They either "had very little or none at all." He does remember three days when he and 30 men ate baked beans, rabbits, bacon and potatoes in an Italian farm house that was completely surrounded by Germans.

Rowe states that a bond develops between combat soldiers, especially those who shared the same experiences, that is stronger than any family tie. Why this occurs, he cannot explain.

These are but a few of Kenneth "Blackie" Rowe's memories of a difficult era. He will be attending the ceremony at the cenotaph tomorrow remembering his comrades.

Let us hope that we never forget what Rowe and his comrades, both living and dead, fought for - our freedom.