

Hero plans return to battlefield after 62 years

High emotion for Norman at war site

Picture: Martin Pory G254159-MP67

by Paul Keogh

paul.keogh@gloscitizen.co.uk

WHEN former Grenadier Guardsman Norman Mitchell arrives at Camino next month it will be the first time he has set foot on Italian soil since the dark days of 1943.

Mr Mitchell, now 85, fought in one of the bloodiest battles of the Italian campaign during the Second World War, high up in the icy mountains at Monte Camino.

More than half of his battalion were killed or limped back as casualties from the first assault on the German stronghold in November 1943.

And many more paid the ultimate price when they returned to the mountain to take it weeks later.

The weather conditions were so intense that men were burned by the frost just by touching the metal of their guns.

Many found it difficult to even stand up in the perishing winds.

"I remember the terror," Mr Mitchell said.

"When we got there we suddenly found it wasn't what we thought. We had been told it was lightly defended and it was actually being held by grounded parachutists from the Herman Goering Division and a regiment of mountain warfare troops.

"There was very close fighting all over the place and it was literally hand to hand in the most appalling weather - I still suffer from the frostbite I got 60 years ago. The enemy were anything from a foot onwards apart, but that's what you expect.

"When it comes to killing the enemy, you just do it because it's there. People say it's either you or him, but it's not, it's just him. You don't really feel anything because you're fighting to survive."

After the war was over, Mr Mitchell served in Palestine and Germany, before leaving the Army in 1958 as a warrant officer, second class.



But he remained heavily involved in the veterans' community and still keeps in touch with the other 28 surviving members of the 6th Battalion of the Grenadier Guards to this day.

Mr Mitchell, who was born in Holloway, London, but now lives in Tuffley, secured a grant from the National Lottery-funded Heroes Return programme to travel back to Italy.

Next month he will set off with his 70-year-old carer and former artillery man Philip Meakin, of Gotherington, near Cheltenham, ex-Grenadier Guard Chris Bennett, who lives in Australia, and Sussex man Michael Sterling, whose uncle died in the first attack on Camino.

Mr Sterling only discovered the family connection a few years ago and has since returned each year, and built a cairn stone memorial to mark his uncle's grave on the mountain top.

While in Italy, the group will visit the memorial to lay wreaths and will join a ceremony at Rocca d'Evandro, on the northern side of Camino, to rename a street Grenadier Strada after the men who fought there.

Despite his age, Mr Mitchell said he was determined to get to the top of the mountain.

"It's going to be very emotional, exciting and also breathtaking, literally," he said. "If I pass out at the top, they can just leave me - I'll be in good company."



■ **BATTLEFIELD:** Remnants of the Sixth Battalion Grenadier Guards leave the captured Monte Camino massif in Italy after a second battle in 1943 cleared the way for an assault on Monte Cassino. Taking part in the battle was Norman Mitchell, circled in the picture, and inset, as an 85-year-old veteran, planning to return to the scene for the first time. Pictured left is Norman in his full Guards regalia, in the 1950s.

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Are you, or do you know of, a veteran planning to return to the battlefields for the first time since the Second World War? Write to News Desk, The Citizen, St John's Lane, Gloucester, GL1 2AY, email news@gloscitizen.co.uk or call 01452 420 621