

3190827 Lance Corporal James McEwen



James (known as Jim) McEwen was born on 21st February 1920 in a small Dumfriesshire village, Kirkpatrick-Fleming, 5 miles west of Annan. He was the eldest of the three sons of William McEwen and Sarah McEwen (née Murray). William was a railway porter and van man, who served in 1/5th King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB) during the Great War in Palestine and won the Military Medal there in 1917. Jim was named after his Uncle James, killed in France serving in the Seaforths in 1918.

Jim, an apprentice joiner and cabinet maker, joined 5th KOSB, when the Territorial Army doubled in size and recruited actively shortly before World War 2 started. 5th KOSB split in two in April 1939, to form a new 7th KOSB in 15th (Scottish) Division.

Jim was embodied in 5th KOSB on 2nd September, when war broke out. Sometime after he joined 7th KOSB, which had mobilized and moved to St. Boswells on the River Tweed. 7th KOSB provided local guards while trained for active service, by making route marches and doing target practice with its limited ammunition. At the end of 1939 7th KOSB moved to the area

around the Forth Bridge, which had seen the first German air raid on UK territory in October (the day before Scapa Flow was attacked).

7th KOSB, at strength of 574 all ranks in 44th Brigade, moved to Marlborough in Wiltshire on 12th May 1940. Heavy fighting had broken out in France, leading to the Dunkirk evacuation and the real threat of invasion. 7th KOSB moved to Byfleet, 25 miles south of London, to cover the capital and nearby local airfields. July saw a move to Essex, digging defences along 12 miles of the north shore of the Blackwater estuary, then another in October to Clackton-on-Sea for similar duties.

7th KOSB spent most of 1941 around Lowestoft naval base of in Suffolk, but moved in November to Wooler in Northumbria, closer to home for Jim and most of his comrades. Their monotonous routine of training and guard duties was relieved by sporting contests, within the battalion and against nearby units, also occasional entertainment (lectures, concerts and film shows) and leave.

7th KOSB participated in seven major exercises at Battalion or Brigade level in the first half of 1942. In October 15th Division reorganised and 7th KOSB left it to join the newly formed 228th Independent Brigade in the far-off Shetland Islands. 7th KOSB moved into a camp in the south of Shetland's Mainland, its main role the defence of RAF Sumburgh Aerodrome from German attack from the air or by sea. As winter approached the bleak landscape there was matched by poor weather, with much wind and rain, but also often fog. RAF Sumburgh helped to ease 7th KOSB's monotony with frequent sporting contests, also making available their entertainment facilities.

7th KOSB left Sumburgh in July 1943 and travelled to Orkney, where it continued to train hard. The Battalion moved into Sunnybank Camp on the western outskirts of Kirkwall, where its main role in the OSDef Defence Scheme was the protection of the nearby naval airfield, RNAS Hatston. On 28th July in Exercise "Mike Tare", 7th KOSB moved forward to the Finstown area and deployed to block a possible enemy advance on Kirkwall and Hatston from the west. On 25th October the command of 7th KOSB was assumed by Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Payton Reid.

Jim and his pals visited nearby Kirkwall for entertainment and sporting contests. Jim met Margaret Groundwater, while she and her mother were working in a services canteen off Palace Road (where the St Magnus Centre now stands), and a romantic friendship blossomed. Most of 7th KOSB moved to Hoy and South Ronaldsay in October, but D Company and Jim remained at Sunnybank. On 1st December 7th KOSB left Orkney for Woodhall Spa in Lincolnshire, to take on a new role.

7th KOSB had been selected to train as a glider battalion and join 1st Airlanding Brigade, in British 1st Airborne Division recently returned to the UK from hard service in North Africa and Sicily. 7th KOSB, as its only Territorial and Scottish battalion, replaced units transferred to join the new 6th Airborne Division. Nine new officers joined from 9th KOSB and four from 12th Cameronians in December. Strenuous physical training and frequent route marches enabled most 7th KOSB personnel to attain the required standard of fitness for its new airborne role, while replacements arrived from other KOSB and Scottish units to replace those weeded out. Volunteer Canadian officers joined 7th KOSB in the Canloan scheme; ten later flew with the Battalion to Arnhem.

In the next six months the Borderers learned the skills to carry out their glider landing role. 26 of them, 6 RAF personnel and 2 glider pilots were killed on 4th April 1944 when a Stirling towing a Horsa glider crashed after hitting a tree. 1st Airborne Division did not take part in the Normandy landings, although it stood ready to join that fighting, the eventual breakout and rapid advance.

“Off at Last”, 7th KOSB history’s title, was the overwhelming feeling of its 765 men who left for Arnhem on 17th September. Most had served five years in the battalion, training to defend against airborne landings and then to carry one out. In the three months since D-Day they had prepared for many of the 17 airborne operations planned and cancelled, so most were then keen to “do their bit”.

Airborne landings in Holland to secure the bridge crossings over the Rivers Maas, Waal and Lower Rhine by American 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, British 1st Airborne Division and Polish 1st Parachute Brigade, were to be carried out over three days, starting Sunday, 17th September.

Most of 7th KOSB flew that day in 56 Horsa gliders from Down Ampney and Blakehill Farm airfields, with one Hamilcar from Tarrant-Rushton. Seven Horsas crash landed in England and two ditched in the North Sea, but the others landed about 1.30 pm on Landing Zone-S, four miles NW of Arnhem. There were only sporadic fire fights that day, against minor German units in the area.



Airspeed Horsa Mk II Glider

Jim McEwen, a Bren gunner in HQ Company’s Pioneer Platoon, was in one of 7th KOSB’s six Horsa gliders in the second day lift from Down Ampney, joined by several that landed in England on Sunday. Jim’s glider took off at 9.40 am and landed on LZ-S about three hours later, under fire from German and Dutch SS soldiers. 7th KOSB were nearby at Drop Zone-Y on Ginkel Heath, where the paras of 4th Brigade landed in the afternoon (after delayed by fog in England). Although the paras met considerable German ground fire, the Borderers’ cover had minimised their losses.

7th KOSB moved during the night to cover on Tuesday 19th the landing on LZ-L at Johannahoeve Farm of Polish heavy equipment by glider. Fog in England again delayed the arrival into the late afternoon, by when an attack by 156 and 10 Para Battalions towards Arnhem through the KOSB positions had broken against a strong German blocking line. Battle-hardened troops of II SS Panzer Corps, who had been resting and refitting around Arnhem, had deployed in strength to oppose the British advance. The Borderers joined the Poles and paras in a confused fighting withdrawal through woods and across a railway to a rendezvous at Wolfheze, taking heavy casualties in killed and prisoners (including nearly all of the Borderers’ A Company) as the Germans pursued.

During the night 7th KOSB moved into position at the Hotel Dreijeroord (the White House), along the northern edge of a thumb-shaped Divisional perimeter in the western Arnhem suburb of Oosterbeek. The Borderers had five (of their original eight) 6-pdr ant-tank guns sited to cover roads, their mortars centrally situated and Vickers machine guns in the central D Company position. In a series of early morning spoiling patrols by the Borderers into the enemy positions and then escalating German attacks on 7th KOSB’s defence line throughout Wednesday 20th, both sides took heavy losses. Jim McEwen was among the many Borderers cut off and taken prisoner that day. He was wounded in the leg and captured in the evening, while trying to escape towards the river edge.

Jim was taken on Thursday 21st to a German HQ on a Tiger tank. 7th KOSB took heavy casualties that day defending the White House, before the survivors moved that night to new positions as the Oosterbeek perimeter tightened. After three more hard days, less than a hundred Borderers moved into three rows of three houses on Sunday 24th afternoon. Fire from 30th Corps' heavy artillery in position south of the Rhine covered that move, then the final withdrawal in boats across the river on Monday night of only 4 Borderers' officers (including Colonel Payton Reid) and 72 other ranks.

104 Borderers had died in the nine days of desperate fighting at Arnhem, including Jim's best mate in the Pioneer Platoon, Sid Pollard of Cornwall, who was married with children. 582 men of 7th KOSB had been taken prisoner, 165 wounded. Jim was trucked to Oldenzaal on the Dutch/German border, then onward by train to Stalag XIIA, Limburg POW Camp. It was infamous because the Germans concentrated 2,200 Irish POWs there in 1915, so that Sir Roger Casement could recruit for his rebel Irish Brigade – but only 55 joined. In 1944 Limburg Camp was a processing centre for Allied enlisted men POWs, who were issued IDs before sent on to Stalags in Germany or Poland.

Jim completed a five day train journey on 30th September, when reached Stalag IVD, near Torgau in Saxony, about 30 miles NE of Leipzig. The about 800, mainly British and French, POWs there were assigned to *Arbeitskommando*: work parties in factories, mines, railway yards and farms up to 100 miles away. On 4th October Jim was separated from his mates and sent by train to join a work party in Halle. He worked as a labourer unloading potatoes, then in November removing bomb damage and building air raid shelters. When in camp most of the guards behaved correctly and Jim befriended one called Otto, but civilians that he encountered while in work parties were nearly all hostile. Jim was confined to camp on 23rd November with diphtheria, hospitalised with a swollen neck next day. He was seriously ill for several months and lost weight, but did eventually recover.

Jim was back in a work party, of 185 men including many Arnhem veterans, at Halle in April 1945. Their camp was heavily bombed by Allied planes on the 13th and the American Army was reported to be close by. The prisoners were formed into a long column, including Poles and Russians, and marched eastward about 20 miles over two days. After rest but no food issue on the 15th, the march resumed next day. Tanks appeared in the distance that turned out to be American and after some brief firing most of the German guards made off or surrendered. The American tank troops freely distributed biscuits and cigarettes, before moving on. Jim enjoyed some good food in the next couple of days, mostly taken by Russians and Poles from local farms and villages and shared out.

A week after his liberation, Jim was flown on the 23rd from an airport SW of Nuremberg to Brussels. Next day he was flown to RAF Westcott in Buckinghamshire, 45 miles NW of London, where he got a great welcome. After a medical examination (Jim's weight was only 6 stone), form filling and issues of pay/rations/passes, Jim left Euston by train at 3 pm on 26th April for Carlisle and onward to home. Jim had survived the ordeal at Arnhem and his seven months as a POW.

Sixteen 7th KOSB soldiers died as German prisoners: most of wounds or sickness, but four by the "friendly fire" (bombed in camp or strafed in work parties) of Allied planes. 7th KOSB reformed in the UK and took part in the liberation of Norway, but lost four killed arriving (one an Arnhem veteran) when a plane crashed into a lake on the Norwegian/Swedish border.

Jim got some sad news on reaching home: that his mother had lost a year-long struggle against cancer in January 1945. Jim returned soon after the war to Orkney and married Margaret Groundwater in Kirkwall in 1948. They started a successful furniture business in the town together, also a family. Their daughter, Marlene, was born in 1949, son William (Billy) in 1961. Billy took over running the family furniture business a couple of years before Jim died in 1990.

