

The Memory Endures

By Geoffrey Holland

On 23 June 1941, War Office photographer Lieutenant Leonard Puttnam took an iconic photograph of three British paratroopers: Private Fred Cutting, Private Jim Crabtree and Corporal Reg Curtis, all former Grenadier Guardsmen and veterans of Dunkirk.

Now they were members of 'L' Troop, 11th Special Air Service Battalion, Britain's first battalion of paratroopers, formed as No 2 Commando in the wake of Dunkirk and redesignated the 11th SAS Battalion on 21 November 1940.

Lieutenant Puttnam had been sent to photograph a training exercise involving a parachute drop and surprise attack on Norwich Castle, which the Battalion had swiftly captured. It was one of many such exercises, in which they targeted Army units, the Home Guard, and even the civilian and military police. It's doubtful they were too popular with those they targeted.

The new type of fighting soldier was offering some optimism at a time when the War was not going well for Britain. Articles had been appearing in the national press extolling the abilities of the paratroopers, if somewhat amplifying their strength and including a degree of misinformation aimed at the enemy.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill was their great champion and he and Mrs Churchill had visited them at Ringway to observe demonstration drops, as had King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

The Daily Express, then the newspaper with the largest circulation in the world, had just published a piece by Military Reporter Morley Richards, who thought they had "reached the highest pitch of perfection" and wrote "I saw these men training. It was like looking at a race of supermen." A lot of people would have read those words.

The Daily Mail printed Leonard Puttnam's photograph on 26 June, cropped to feature Reg Curtis, referring to him only as "The British Paratroop...training for the day when Britain's new Army takes the field against the Nazi hordes".

All the positive publicity was fine while it lasted, but the



Above (L-R): Private Cutting, Private Crabtree, Corporal Curtis, 'L' Troop, 11th Special Air Service Battalion, Norwich, 23 June 1941. Photographer: Lieutenant L.A. Puttnam, War Office photograph

reality would prove tragic. When the Battalion sailed for North Africa in November 1942, by now renamed the 1st Parachute Battalion, part of the 1st Parachute Brigade, they would shortly face slaughter on a dreadful scale during some of the fiercest fighting of the War. Further terrible losses would follow the drop into Sicily in 1943 to seize the Primrose Bridge. When Reg counted the cost after Sicily, he found that fewer than a quarter of his original battalion remained alive.

After Sicily came an unexpected opportunity, when Reg was invited to submit a newspaper article in the form of a letter home. He had not written for a newspaper before but decided to give it a go. Under the headline "I am a Red Devil" his piece was printed on 17 October 1943 in the Empire News, a Sunday newspaper owned by Lord Beaverbrook. Lieutenant Puttnam's photograph featured once again, and Reg's letter was introduced by the editor as follows:

"Much has been written of Britain's paratroops—the famous 'Red Devils.' We have read of their bravery, coolness and daring. Here is an action story written by an ordinary paratrooper of three years' experience—telling of his fears, his hopes, and his pride in the role he has been privileged to play in this war."

Reg was encouraged and continued to write. He later said he took to it because he had lost so many friends and seeing their names on paper seemed to help. In his

book *The Memory Endures*, published two years before his death in 2016, in the chapter on Sicily he retained some of his original Empire News article, making this a book written over 70 years.

Reg's final battle was at Arnhem. There, while trying to reach the Arnhem Bridge on 18 September 1944 his right leg was shattered by a sniper's bullet, and he lay on his back for six days and nights as the battle raged around him. When the fighting was over, he was taken prisoner. Attempts were made to save his leg, but it was amputated to save his life. He was then sent to Stalag XIB in Saxony for several months before liberation in April 1945.

Back home in England, for a while Reg was resident in Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton, which specialises in services for amputees, and he was fitted with an artificial leg. Soon he was living a full life again. He married his sweetheart Betty, rode a motorbike with sidecar, worked as a landscape gardener and even built his own house. His artificial leg was repeatedly strengthened for kneeling!

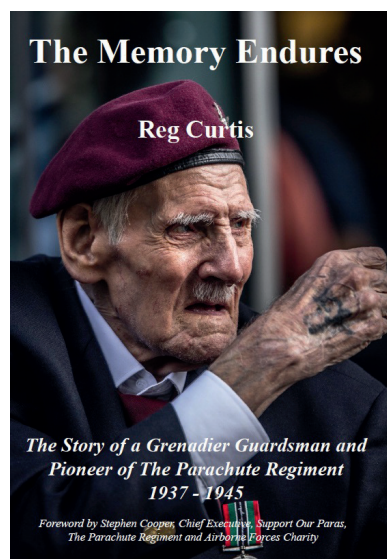
Reg always remembered his friends. For the rest of his life he stayed in touch with survivors of his 11th SAS Battalion, attending reunions at every opportunity, until he was the last. He kept his favourite photograph by Lieutenant Leonard Puttnam framed upon his wall. Of the two men pictured with him, Jim Crabtree died by his side in Tunisia, Fred Cutting's fate he never knew.

"Reg Curtis and his fellow 'originals' set the pace and the standard in WW2, to which successive generations of Paras still aspire. Reg's gripping and inspiring book preserves and promotes part of our heritage and helps disseminate it to the wider public, raising money to help serving and retired soldiers and families in need and distress, as his legacy to the Regiment he served with distinction. As a tight-knit family, we take great pride in 'our own doing it for our own': that is, Airborne soldiers, serving and retired, making great efforts to support their brothers. Reg has been now fully 'retired' from this world since 2016, but he continues to set a fine example.

I hope that he will look down 'from Valhalla' and take justifiable pride in what he has achieved."

- Lieutenant General
Sir John Lorimer KCB
DSO MBE
Lieutenant Governor of
the Isle of Man
Chairman, Support
Our Paras, The Parachute
Regiment and Airborne
Forces Charity
Former Colonel
Commandant of The
Parachute Regiment

The Memory Endures



MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN OF BRITAIN'S PARATROOPS—THE FAMOUS "RED DEVILS." WE HAVE READ OF THEIR BRAVERY, COOLNESS, AND DARING. HERE IS AN ACTION STORY WRITTEN BY AN ORDINARY PARATROOPER OF THREE YEARS' EXPERIENCE—TELLING OF HIS FEARS, HIS HOPES, AND HIS PRIDE IN THE ROLE HE HAS BEEN PRIVILEGED TO PLAY IN THIS WAR.

I am a Red Devil

REGINALD CURTIS, aged 23, 6ft. 3in. tall, of Orpington, Kent, was in the Grenadier Guards before the war. He fought in France and Belgium and escaped via Dunkirk. When he came back, he volunteered to be a paratrooper.

To-day at 23 he is a veteran—a member of a Parachute Battalion. He has seen action. He dropped on the Tunisian battlefield and helped to capture Hill 648. Then he fought in Sicily and took part in that gallant paratrooper attempt to hold the 400ft. bridge at Primasolo before Catania.

Afterwards—when he was safe and sound—he wrote home to his parents and told them his story in simple words. It begins after the Tunisian Tip had been eliminated.

In July we learned that we were going to invade Sicily. I was now at the aerodrome preparing for the worst and talking with the American pilots. A truck arrived with tea and eggs, but we could not eat. Zero hour was not far off.

OVER MALTA

At 8 p.m. we climbed into the aircraft. As the plane took off we uneasily looked at each other. Chunky said: "Well, this is it, our second operation." I tried to act normally, but could feel the rivulets of sweat running down my cheeks.

After two hours we passed over Malta. One more hour to go. Private Irons seemed quite interested. Private Pierce seemed amused by something he was reading in a coloured children's comic. Western looked as though he was going home in a bus from work. Chunky and I were both tense.

We were still at sea. I looked out of the window and could see massive fires burning along the Sicilian coast from Syracuse to Catania.

Searchlights fanned the sky to find us. Ack-ack and machine-gun fire streamed skywards as if it would never cease. We drew nearer land. At

1,000 feet up I could see the flak tracer zipping past under the wings. For 30 minutes we dodged everything they flung at us. It was a sickening helplessness. Suddenly came the order which always makes me shiver: "Hook up." I hooked up and waited. Hopping over the sea at 600 feet we approached land as all sorts of rubbish whizzed past.

STICKY

Then there was a terrific explosion and the acrid smell of gun fodder as our tail was hit. I set my teeth. The green light came on and the order "Jump" pealed like Big Ben in my ears.

I found myself tumbling through the doorway into the open void below. My chute obediently opened, and I saw a few pals as they drifted palely round me. I estimated we were 15 miles behind the enemy lines.

It was a rather sticky position. Searchlights were turned on and found us no matter how we twisted and turned to seek the comfort of the darkness. Flak then came near, and no more than 100 yards away a number of enemy opened their machine-guns on us.

It was sickening to hang in mid-air and be picked off. A tracer bullet ripped my rigging lines in two. I landed at last on a road, found a gaping ditch and began to collect my bearings.

Our objective was the 400ft. bridge which crosses the river Simolo before Catania. We were to capture it, hold it, and prevent it being destroyed until our Army pushed through over it on to Catania. Thus we would save eight days' fighting and many precious lives.

About 200 yards to my left was the main coastal road to Catania and enemy traffic in tremendous confusion. To my right I could hear Italian voices. About 100 yards to my right were German voices rapping out orders.

SLOW GOING

We did not wait long. Down the road came a few miles away. It was a leisurely process—for them. We watched the planes take off, machine-gun us, return to the drone, land, re-load, take off, machine-gun us again. The process was repeated a half-dozen times when the Royal Navy



REGINALD CURTIS, PARATROOPER

* examining myself I found it had gone through my jumping-jacket, shirt and trousers and was lodging in my flesh. I gingerly took hold of it and eased it out of my body.

NO TIME TO EAT

THE battle seemed to be working up to a terrific climax. We were using a captured Italian anti-tank gun at point-blank range, merrily acting as ammunition feeder. The Germans were now sending in their best troops in their attempts to shift us. Paratroops dropped all round us from ten in the morning to six at night.

Food was in our haversacks but we had no time to get it out and eat it. It was fire, fire, and keep on firing! Then the ammunition began to disappear as we used it on the Germans and Italians. We fought on until we each had six rounds left.

At 7.30 p.m. we decided that we had to withdraw to avoid capture. We did not know that our armoured forward element would arrive in three hours' time. If I had, perhaps we would have held on with our bare hands for those 180 v.i.a. minutes. But we did not know and we began to make preparations to leave the bridge we had been defending for nearly 18 hours.

They started back in small groups and were told to avoid trouble so as to keep the Germans guessing as to whether we were still around or not. Chunky another paratrooper named Pat and myself made for the hills. All the way shells were slung at us as we groped our way through a much-raped lemon orchard.

We were fired on from a hilltop 600 yards away as we dodged round some bushes. At we got lost in a thick wood, the firing ceased. Coming out into the open, we entered an adjoining field and suddenly found ourselves confronted by a group of 50 Italians.

EMBARRASSED

THEY did not make any move to challenge us, and seeing that the situation was becoming embarrassing for all, we challenged them. They put up their hands as our three Sten guns covered them. An Italian officer came forward and said in good English: "We are glad you are here and we are ready to surrender."

We frankly did not know what to do, as to take them along with us would mean running the risk of being fired on by our own men so we decided to make them stay where they were until our force advanced forward and took them. The officer gladly agreed.

While Chunky covered them Pat and I smashed their rifles on a boulder. Then we bisected them, assuring them that they would be taken care of to-morrow.

A few miles further on we came to a well and decided to fill up.

Drinking our fill, we dashed behind a farm house, found it empty and decided to stay. By the rest of daylight, pushing on five miles during darkness, we encountered nobody—friend or foe.

We chose to sleep in an orchard. About 3 a.m. the sound

NAVY STEPS IN

At the bridge we found traces of a fierce battle. The pill-boxes had been rushed. We took up our positions.

At 10 a.m. everyone was settled at battle-stations. Some had to bring their rifles, but I returned already dug. Chunky and I began to brew some tea just for the sake of doing something.

About 10.30 a.m. we saw some German fighters take off from an aerodrome a few miles away.

It was a leisurely process—for them. We watched the planes take off, machine-gun us, return to the drone, land, re-load, take off, machine-gun us again. The process was repeated a half-dozen times when the Royal Navy

Above: Reg's article in *The Empire News*, 17 October 1943

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The Memory Endures is available at:
<https://pilotspublishing.co.uk/the-memory-endures>

The Reg Curtis Fund to Support Our Paras is at:
<https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/RegCurtis>

Lieutenant Leonard Puttnam was a photojournalist who served with the War Office throughout WW2. A significant body of his work is held by the Imperial War Museum. He is especially remembered for documenting the evacuation from the Dunkirk beaches in 1940, from where, with his colleague Lieutenant Edward Malindine, he was evacuated twice, having bravely returned a second time to take further photographs. Leonard Puttnam's son is the distinguished film producer David, Lord Puttnam.