

History uncovered: Glace Bay soldier's belongings to be returned after 81 years

“They say this is pretty historical and you don’t find things like this these days.”

By [Rosemary Godin](#)

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Church parade of the West Nova Scotia Regiment, Ortona, Italy, 6 February 1944/

Photographer/ R: Dolan, Dwight E. Canada Dept. of National Defence/National Archives of Canada PA112952

The belongings of a Second World War soldier from Glace Bay are being returned today to his great-grand niece who is in Italy to put family eyes on them 81 years after his tragic death.

Lance Sgt. Hector Colin MacDonald of the West Nova Scotia Regiment enlisted in the Canadian Armed Forces in 1941 and went overseas. He found himself fighting as one of 93,000 Canadians playing a role in the Italian Campaign, a 20-month Allied operation in the Second World War aimed at weakening German forces.

The son of Angus Joseph and Mary McDonald of New Aberdeen, his family back in Glace Bay received word of his December 1944 death but there was little detail at the time.

A short newspaper clipping dated Dec. 21, 1944 tells all the family has known as time went by:

“Hector Colin MacDonald, well-known New Aberdeen resident was killed in action overseas this month, his parents Mr. And Mrs. Angus J. MacDonald, 297 Fifth St. were advised today.

GREAT UNCLE HECTOR

L-Sgt. MacDonald was 29 years of age and a native of New Aberdeen. After completing his education in the schools at New Aberdeen, he secured employment at No. 2 Colliery, where he worked until his enlistment about four years ago. He has been serving with a military unit overseas for the past three years.”

“Great Uncle Hector” was a name passed down through the years as a missing piece of the Glace Bay MacDonald history. And then in June of this year, his grand-niece Kim Pyke – herself an Army veteran of 29 years in the Armed Forces (retired) – got a surprising phone call from Italy. On the other end of the line was a woman named Raffaella Cortese de Bossis.

She told Pyke, who lives in Kingston, Ont., that a farmer had been cleaning out one of his shacks on the property and came across a military knapsack with the name Hector MacDonald stitched into it.

Through research and military papers, they discovered that MacDonald was killed around Dec. 13, 1944 by a land mine near the town of Russi. He was buried in the Ravenna War Cemetery where many other Canadians are buried.

THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN

According to the official history, *The Canadian Army in the Second World War (Volume II, The Canadians in Italy, by LCol G.W.L. Nicholson, Queen’s Printer, Ottawa, 1956)*: “Between Dec 2-22, the 1st Canadian Corps suffered 548 killed in a war characterized by rain, flooding, shortages of ammunition and reinforcements, and continued resistance and counter-attack by the Germans.

Appreciative Italians still celebrate the Italian Campaign in which MacDonald was killed and Canadians held back the German advancing troops. Ceremonies commemorating the protracted military operation are being held in Italy again over the next few days. Today, one will be held in the cemetery where MacDonald is buried. While Pyke herself can’t be there, her youngest daughter Stacey Jordan will attend the ceremony and be the first in the family to look at the backpack’s contents.

December 20-28, 1943, the rubble-filled streets of Ortona saw fierce hand-to-hand-fighting. Thanks to Canadian soldiers, Ortona was liberated from some of the German army’s best combat troops.

VETERANS CANADA GRAPHIC

There’s a lot of emotion tied up in its discovery all these years later.

Pyke has spent the last few months doing her own research and has read her great-uncle’s service record.

“We know he had permission to marry someone from Glasgow, Scotland,” she says. “But it never happened before he died.”

She says the people in Italy are as astounded as she and her family are.

“They say this is pretty historical and you don’t find things like this these days.”

She’s been told the knapsack is intact and Pyke credits the farmer who found it with respecting what it was.

“He saw it had a name on it and took it to the local cemetery and found Uncle Hector’s grave. Then, he contacted Raffaella (Cortese) because he knew she writes for an organization called Wartime Friends (wartimefriends.org) that publishes stories about international war veterans,” she says.

The organization's website says it is a group "interested in uncovering minor events which happened in Romagna (a historical region in north-eastern Italy) during (The Second World War)."

A researcher, Cortese tracked down members of Hector MacDonald's family through the Canadian Military.

Pyke's daughter has had several tours of the area and the cemetery while she has been in Italy and will be officially given the knapsack today at a ceremony at the 17th century palace, Villa Gallici Deciani near Russi.

L-Sgt. Hector MacDonald still has family living in Glace Bay, and Pyke will be up later this month for a visit. The family will have a lot to talk about.

Rosemary Godin is the Local Journalism Initiative reporter for the Cape Breton Post, a position funded by the federal government.