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Letters from the frontline: The mystery of missing Leeds soldier

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By Neil Hudson



In 1943, a young soldier from Leeds was passing through a small Italian town. He was carrying letters from home. Somehow, he became separated from them. Now those letters have come to light and the hunt is on to discover what happened to their owner. Neil Hudson takes up the story.

At some point in 1943, Laurie Armitage, a teenage soldier from Leeds, passed through the Italian town of Rocca San Giovanni, overlooking the Adriatic Sea. He carried a cache of personal letters which he had kept with him following his passage from North Africa.

Despite fastidiously holding on to the bundle of letters through numerous battlefields, somehow, in the closing days of that year, he became separated from them.

Miraculously, the wad of letters was found some 45 years ago, in 1964, by a 13-year-old Italian boy who had gone to the edge of his village to play a game of football.

As he stared at his find, partially buried in the ground, he could only guess at the strange addresses, their curious numbers and initials but the word 'African' made him understand he had discovered something important.

The letters belonged to Rifleman L A Armitage, of the London Irish Rifles, who was 19 years old in 1943.

He was known as Laurie to family and friends and Lawrence to those who asked about him to his mother.

What happened to him remains a mystery. But it is one which a Canadian historian hopes to solve.

The precious letters Laurie guarded and at some point lost contained missives from his mother and other family members.

Now a Canadian-born local historian has taken up the challenge of finding Mr Armitage's family and is appealing to Yorkshire Evening Post readers for any

information.

Martha Sarmatiuk is a 56-year-old mother-of-two, who moved to Abruzzo, Italy, and fell in love with the place some 26 years ago. She was researching the history of Canadian troops during the Second World War when she met Levino De Fidelibus, a librarian from Rocca San Giovanni and the man who had dug the letters from the dirt as a child.

Martha said: "Levino had tried to find out more about the letters but without luck. When he first told me about them, I said: 'What luck that your 14 year-old-self didn't look at the letters with disinterest and throw them away.' He replied he'd been a historian all his life and recognised the letters were of certain importance and so he hung onto them for dear life.

"I live in Abruzzo on the battlefields of the Second World War. The scenic hills and valleys one can enjoy today were, in 1943, treacherous killing grounds commanded by German forces and from which they retreated as the Eighth Army advanced up the Adriatic coast.

"I am studying the Canadians and the battles they fought but it is difficult to separate the combined efforts of the Canadian and British forces; too often the study of one leads to the inevitable inclusion of the other. This is how I stumbled upon Laurie and his letters and how I became inextricably enmeshed in his story and driven to know who and where he and his family is today."

There are seven letters in all: two from his mother, Mrs J Armitage, of 39, Station Road, Armley, Leeds; one from his sister Wynne; two from a friend, Connie Bithell, of 46 Morley Avenue, Fallowfield, Manchester; and two from a Corporal Mary Bailie, of 14 Redfern St, Barnsley.

Four of the letters were sent in the summer of 1943 and were addressed to Rifleman Armitage, L A; No. 4694638, "D" Coy. No. 4 Batt.; I.R.T.D. (Infantry Reinforcement Training Depot), B.N.A.F. (British North African Forces). The remaining three letters of late October and November of the same year are and are addressed differently, to: 9 Sec.15 Plt. "G" Coy.; 2nd Batt. L.I.R.; C.M.F.

Martha said: "Of all the letters, his mother's evoke the most tenderness. She greets him as 'My own dear son,' and closes with, 'Cheers pet. My dearest and sweetest kisses and tightest hugs. Ever and always, Your own sweetheart, XXXX MAM XXXX.'

In another letter she writes of her joy at having received a reply from him: 'Now at least I have been rewarded and believe me I feel at least 10 years younger.'

In another, she mentions she has sent out the newspaper that announced 'Ken's 21st birthday' – perhaps Laurie's brother?

Laurie's sister, Wynne, sent a typed letter describing a trip to London with a friend, Dorothy Towers. The letter is a veritable Who's Who of wartime London of July, 1943 as she describes her stay at

The Strand Palace, seeing such films as Hello Frisco Hello with Alice Faye and Slightly Dangerous with Lana Turner; enjoying plays such as Noel Coward's Blithe Spirit and Ibsen's Ghosts with Beatrix Lehmann; and seeing Tommy Trinder live at the Palladium.

Martha added: "There were many people thinking about Laurie in wartime. With the help of your readers, we are asking you to think of him again.
"Perhaps a name that has been mentioned will trigger a memory which could lead to us solving the mystery of Lawrence A Armitage."

A spokesman from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), said they could not trace anyone with L A Armitage's service number.

Contact Martha via email: marsarm@libero.it, or the Yorkshire Evening Post at the usual address.