

26/5/'81

The Editor,
Doncaster Post,
North Bridge, S. Yorks.

Sir, DENIS COULTHREAD,

Denis Coulthread, who died last week aged 64 was serving in the Royal Scots in 1940 ~~when in 1940~~ when he volunteered to join the 11th Scottish Commando. Norway had just fallen to the Nazis, and British troops had been withdrawn from Europe. Hitler expected Britain would be next on his list. The Commandos trained with the Royal Navy, because Mr Winston Churchill thought it was time we started to fight back, and the whole coast of Europe was Nazi controlled.

Denis Coulthread was a Lance Corporal in No 5 Troop and was Colonel Geoffrey Keyes' batman when the 'Rommel Raid' was planned in Egypt. Being an officer's batman on active service involved much more than looking after him and cleaning his boots. Denis was Colonel Keyes' body-guard and right-hand-man for the intended Commando raid on the Main Rear Headquarters of the Africa Corps, known to the Senussi tribesmen as "Rommel's House" at Sidi Rafa in Cyrenaica. It was timed for November 17th 1941. The Commandos were to be landed at night using small inflatable rubber boats. They had practiced for this in fine weather, but on the night of the landing it was blowing half a gale. There was only one wire stay along the deck of the submarine "Torbay". The men had to hold onto this while they loaded the dinghies. When a wave broke over the deck and swept several dinghies away Denis grabbed his boat with one hand and the safety line with the other, with

2

the result that his arm was temporarily pulled out of joint, but he held on. The first seven rubber boats were launched with only a few spills, and got ashore with Colonel Keyes (aged 64) and Denis leading the way. The remainder from Torbay took six hours, and found Keyes and Coulthread waiting to help them drag their boats up. It was a bitterly cold night and the sea became so rough that only ten men from the other submarine were able to reach the shore. November 16th their second day was spent hiding in the scrub, after marching all night uphill carrying heavy loads. Colonel Keyes persuaded an Arab to bring them some cooked food, and knowing it was Denis's birthday said: "I am sorry we haven't a cake. Would you like a goat?"

Denis had wonderful powers of sleeping: no matter where he was, he had only to lie down and he was snoring. The following night, November 17th, Keyes chose Denis as one of the five men to enter and blow up the German Headquarters. He did a preliminary reconnaissance himself and killed the German sentry by the gate. The sentry who should have been outside the front door opened it when they knocked, grabbed Colonel Keyes' colt, and wrestled with him while shouting for help. Captain Robin Campbell then shot the sentry. Since the alarm had now been given Keyes then gave the order to use Tommy guns and grenades. They found themselves in a dimly lit hall, and heard a man in heavy boots clattering down the stairs. Sergeant Terry (aged 19) and Denis both fired at his silhouette on the staircase. To use Coulthread's own words: "I had a more or less roving commission in the hallway. You can't watch a man's interests from in front in an action of that type."

3

Meanwhile Colonel Keyes was throwing open the doors round the hall. In one room there were Germans in steel helmets. He fired one or two rounds, and then held the door shut while Captain Campbell got the pin out of a grenade. He re-opened the door and said: "Well done" as he saw the grenade go in and Sergeant Terry gave a burst with his Tommy gun. Before Keyes could shut the door a bullet struck him just over the heart.

They had succeeded in getting into the Germans Main Rear Headquarters with enough high explosive to destroy the six storey building without a shot being fired by the enemy. Now their leader was dead; soon afterwards Captain Campbell was wounded by a shot from one of the Commandos guarding the back of the house. He ordered a retreat. Because of the continuous heavy rain they found the fuses on their sticks of gelignite would not ignite. Coulthread and Bombadier Brodie were unable to get into the power station but found an external breather pipe to the engine. Denis pushed three sticks of gelignite down the pipe, and Brodie dropped a grenade down after them. The charge exploded and all the lights went out. They started to retreat to the coast eighteen kilometers away, but after about a mile a thick mist came down and they were obliged to wait till daylight. Denis true to form admitted: "I slept on top of a nice thick bush in the pouring rain till morning." When they reached the coast it proved too rough for their rubber boats. They were unable to reach "Torbay" and were eventually taken prisoner. Although the raid failed in its main objective: "TO BUCK UP GENERAL ROMMEL'S HEADQUARTERS" (too few men had got ashore to mount an attack on his villa where he was said to sleep when at Sidi Rafa), it showed what could be done by trained men.

4

behind the enemy lines. Instead of disbanding the unorthodox Commandos as Whitehall intended, more were raised, and all assault troops were trained on the same lines, until at least on D Day they launched the assault which was to liberate Europe.

Elizabeth Keyes

But not the Poles alas.....

The Hon. Elizabeth Keyes.

Extracts from "GEOFFREY KEYES VC OF THE ROMMEL RAID" published in hard-back 1956 and paper-back 1958

Signed annotated copies of the hard-back can be obtained from the author, minimum price £3.50p sold in aid of Tingewick Church Repair Fund.