

Lance Corporal Donald WHITCOMBE

Service number 5673655

Somerset Light Infantry

1st Battalion

Killed in action on 8 February 1944, aged 23

Donald was born in Wells and was an avid member of the 5th Wells Scout Troop. He joined the army at the start of the war and was posted to the 1st Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, in India. He died in Burma (now Myanmar) during the 2nd Arakan Campaign, which was the start of the turn of the tide in Burma. Ten days earlier he had written a poignant letter to the scout leader (quoted in the full version of his story).



Donald, in the middle, on a Scout camp in 1938(?)

Photography courtesy of 5th/7th City of Wells Scouts

Donald was born in Wells on 16 September 1920 to Herbert Ballington Whitcombe and Alice Adanée Davis. He had an elder brother called John.

Donald went to the Oakleigh School on Chamberlain Street, the Boys' Blue School, and finally to Wells Cathedral School from September 1933 until December 1934. He was a keen and active member of the 5th Wells (City of Wells) Scout Troop right up to the start of the war, and was 'Seconder' in the Fox troop.

In September 1939, he was living with his mother at Pear Tree House, St Andrew Street (next to The Fountain's car park). It appears that his father had by then moved to Swindon and remarried.

Donald joined the army in September 1939, and in April 1942 was in the 6th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, which spent the war in training and in protecting the coast from invasion. In May 1940, it was on Romney Marsh and then on the Essex Coast. In March 1943 it went to Northern Ireland for training and returned to England in December 1943.

At some point Donald was posted to the 1st Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, which had been in India since the start of the war. On 29 January 1944, when serving with 'C' Company, he wrote to 'Skipper' Coates, the leader of the Wells Scout troop:

Dear Skip & Mrs Coates,

I think it is long past time I sent you a line. I myself have just got over malaria here in hospital, but still I'm O.K. and still going strong. I may just as well let you know that I am now in action with the Japs, well we are just playing hide & seek in the jungle with them, it is just the one who sees the other one first wins, I cannot say where we are, or what we have done. To be at camp at Bath these days in a tent would be like a palace to us. There is one thing I would like to ask you to do for me and that is if I do get my lights put out, I do not want anyone to wear black, and see that Mum has a good time on my money at home.

Going away from the gloom of life, how is the troop going on these days? I trust you will be able to get some good camps in at Bath this year, I shall have to come up and see the new camp site some time or the other, I trust that you still spend your weekends up there like you used to do.

Please thank your mother for all the big kisses mum has sent from her. I trust all the old boys are still going strong, dotted all over the place.

Well I must come to a close for now as news is very short these days.

With love to you both,

Donald.

P.S. I know a scout never says die till dead, but it was just a wish I liked to get off my chest.

The battalion was part of the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade in the 7th Indian Infantry Division. The battalion left the Calcutta area and moved to Chittagong by rail and boat in June 1943 in preparation for the 2nd Arakan Campaign. The initial aim of the campaign was to take the Maungdow-Buthidaung road which was heavily defended by the Japanese.

Starting in December 1943, the 7th Division advanced south down the Kalapanzin River valley but was halted by the Japanese defences in front of Buthidaung. When Donald wrote his letter at the end of January 1944, the 1st Battalion was dug-in on the Pyinsh Ridge and had been attacking Japanese positions for a number of days.

In February 1944, Japanese troops infiltrated through the 7th Division's front line and overran the divisional HQ. Field-Marshal Viscount Slim describes what happened:

The brigades of 7th Division ... in accordance with the orders given for such a situation, dug in for all-round defence on their position, and beat off attacks, frontally from Doi Force and in [the] rear from Tanahashi's troops ... The 7th Division was surrounded. ... The Japanese knew they *had* to destroy the 7th Division ... The fighting was everywhere hand to hand and desperate.¹

They fought the Japanese to a standstill, their supplies ran out and at the end of February they had to retreat. The Somerset Light Infantry had won another battle honour – Buthidaung – but Donald had died in the fighting on 8 February.

Donald has no known grave but is remembered on Face 7 of the Rangoon Memorial which is in the Taukkyan War Cemetery, Myanmar. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

We would like to thank Derek Faulkes for his help in writing this article.

¹ Defeat into Victory. Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945 by Field-Marshal Viscount Slim (New York, 1972).