

William James Hawe, pictured in the African desert during the Second World War. MM45 501



# Tales of training at Ballyronan



Lieutenant Stanley Weinberg (front middle) and members of 'B' Company, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, take a break from weapons practice at Ballymultrea firing range, February 1944

## William fought in desert conflict

**L**IKE numerous young men from South Derry, William James Hawe from Castledawson (*pictured right*) willingly volunteered on the outbreak of World War Two.

Joining the Royal Ulster Rifles as a rifleman on May 12, 1939, he and his colleagues from Northern Ireland were shipped off to Perth in Scotland where training on rifle, light machine, stem gun, mortar smoke and the obligatory physical education were strenuously undertaken. From here, overseas postings were to see the locals thrust into the heat of battle in Italy and Africa.

It was in this searing heat of Tunisia that William and his fellow countrymen were seconded to the Royal Artillery and under Field Marshal Montgomery, played a significant role in the desert as the infantry fought in some of the toughest battles of the campaign. Numerous comrades fell and many were seriously injured as war raged until 1945.

Throughout the campaign, William Hawe served for six years, returning to Newcastle Under Lyme where he was discharged as "being a good, clean soldier".

Needless to say, of those who joined from this immediate area, a lot fewer were to return. William was entitled to wear the Africa and Italy Stars as he settled back into life in the tranquil surrounds of his homeland, rarely speaking of his war service and the terrible sights he, and his comrades, must have endured first hand.

Over 50 years service were then given to LOL No. 96 and the British Legion while when the new Nestles Factory opened around 1950, for the next three decades it offered a welcome respite not only for him, but hundreds of others in the community.

It would seem inconceivable to many of us today that a volunteer would sacrifice six years of their lives to readily go to war and serve their country. Yet for William James Hawe and countless others, there was never any hesitation, or doubts given the situation over half a century ago. *From Ivor Hawe*

**T**HE 505 PIR's firing ranges were located at Ballymultrea, near Ballyronan.

Once there, everyone had the opportunity to 'zero in' their rifles, discharge their machine guns, fire their mortars and run obstacle courses.

One time Harold Paul's platoon "had to crawl under barbed wire while they set off charges around us. By the time we had finished, we all were covered in mud. It was just a complete waste of time."

2nd Lieutenant James J. Coyle remembers digging foxholes "which we occupied while tanks were driven over us to prove it was safe.

"This made a change from our normal routine, but to the best of my knowledge, no man in 'E' Company was ever run over by a tank in combat."

On another occasion, Chris Christensen was given the job of demonstrating to 3rd Battalion the tank stopping abilities of the new British Gammon Grenade.

He recalls: "My target was an old abandoned tank which I managed to hit with one of the grenades. It tore a nice hole in the hull.

"Unfortunately, a steel splinter came off and hit me in the leg.

"The medic had to drop my pants and shorts in order to inspect the wound and put a bandage on it. That day, you might say, I mooned the battalion..."

"Later the engineers set up a demolition

school. A couple of lieutenants and myself were chosen to go for 'G' Company.

"At the time, this seemed like a good deal, but from then on I was our company's demolition man."

This meant that in the future, when Christensen jumped into combat, not only would he be carrying fifteen pounds of extra equipment, he would also be a potential human powder keg.

It was the job of Service Company, 505 PIR to transport the troopers to the firing ranges. One morning, after off-loading troops at Ballymultrea on land owned by the Port family, one of the drivers noticed the landowner trying to dig out tree roots from under the road.

"All he had was a pick and a shovel and he was working very hard," recalls the driver.

"I backed up the truck to where I could pass a cable around the tree-trunk and hooked it up to the trailer hitch.

"When I moved forward about eight feet, the tree bounced out of the ground and landed in the bed of the truck.

"After driving the tree to a burn-pile, the landowner invited me in to have tea and pie.

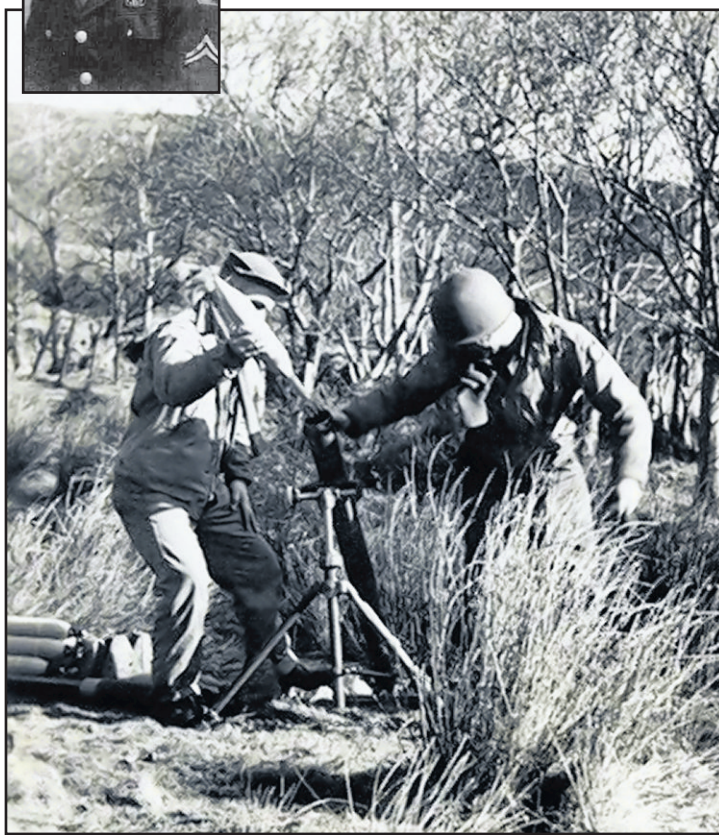
"From then on I spent many leisure hours in front of the fireplace drinking tea and eating sweets while our troopers practised on the range."

*Extract taken from 'Passing Through' by John McCann.*



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- Chris Christensen, 'G' Company, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, December 1943



505th Parachute Infantry Regiment troopers fire a heavy mortar on the range at 'Strawberry Hill' (exact location unknown, possibly Slieve Gallion near Moneymore, County Derry), February 1944.



505th Parachute Infantry Regiment troopers fire a mortar on the range at Ballymultrea, near Ballyronan, February 1944.