



Byrne, John Vincent "Jack"

UNIT L Detachment SAS RANK Corporal NUMBER 2060658

AWARDED Distinguished Conduct Medal

PLACE North Africa 1942

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION,

Parent unit 1 Bn Gordon Highlanders

Born 1.4.1921 Preston, Lancashire

WIA May 1940 Dunkirk

Joined SAS 1941 as Private

POW 1942, Stalag Luft 111 Poland. Escaped 1943

6 Commando 1944

WIA June 1944 Normandy

Demobilised 1947

Kenya Police

Kulai Police District Johor Malaya

WIA 1953 Prison Service Kenya

Drapery business Shropshire 1958, retired 1986

Married Mary Hayes (3 daughters) died January 2007

Author "The General Salutes a Soldier" (1986)

John (Jack) Vincent Byrne, DCM. born in Preston, joined the Gordon Highlanders in February after having served at the Army Apprentices College in Chepstow. At the Fall of France he was twice wounded, first by shrapnel and then by a deep bayonet thrust just above the groin in a bloody hand to hand encounter during the 51st Highland Division's rear-guard action on the Dunkirk perimeter. Left for dead in the bottom of a trench, he was found in semi-conscious condition by two French civilians who carried him to the beachhead, whence he was evacuated to England. Byrne and another survivor of the 1st Gordons, Lieutenant Bill Fraser, next transferred to the newly raised No.11 Commando, which having been drawn from the pick of the Scottish regiments underwent rigorous training on the Isle of Arran during the autumn and winter. In January 1941, No.11 Commando embarked for service in the eastern Mediterranean with 'LAYFORCE', and in early June spearheaded the Allied invasion of Vichy-occupied Syria with an amphibious landing and a classic infantry assault in broad daylight across the Litani River; Byrne being part of Fraser's Troop of Gordon Highlanders which for the purposes of this operation was the part of the Commando under Major (later Lt-Col.) Geoffrey Keyes, VC.

After a few actions in Libya, he missed a rendezvous and was taken prisoner. Byrne ended up in Stalag III in Poland but managed to escape for which he was awarded the DCM. By the time 11 Commando returned to Egypt, the decision had been taken to disband Layforce. Byrne was reluctant to return to his original unit and it was therefore a matter of considerable interest when Fraser told him and three others of the Gordons Troop that a Scots Guards officer called Captain David Stirling was looking for volunteers to join a new independent command consisting of seven officers and fifty-nine other ranks, to be known as 'L' Detachment of the Special Air Service Brigade.

Subsequently, Byrne was posted to 6 Commando and landed on Sword Beach on D-Day. When he and his unit tried to establish contact with the 6th Airborne Division at the canal near Caen and the Orne river, he was wounded in the knee and was evacuated to England. He was however fit enough to be deployed in the battle near Maasbracht and the Rhine crossing near Wesel. He also took part in the crossing of the Dortmund-Ems canal.

After the war he remained in the army until 1947 and later became a policeman in Kenya during the Malaya crisis where he was shot in the stomach by a terrorist.

After his discharge from the army, he married and started a textile shop in Shropshire.



Obituary from the Daily Telegraph dated 17th Feb. 2007 for Jack Byrne who died on January 10th 2007.

Jack Byrne, who has died aged 85, was one of the SAS "Originals" and won the Distinguished Conduct Medal for a daring escape from a German PoW camp in 1943. After being recruited by Captain David Stirling, Byrne joined "L" Detachment, 1st Special Service Brigade, the unit which subsequently became 1st SAS Regiment. After intensive training, in November 1941 he took part in a paratroop raid on enemy fighter bases in the Gazala-Tmimi area, Libya. In the high winds the sticks became separated, weapons and equipment were lost and, of the 64 men who set out, only 22 returned. A month later the survivors left their base at the Jato Oasis for a night raid on Agedabia airfield. Each man carried eight Lewes bombs, which they placed high up on the wings of the bombers and the noses of the fighters. They destroyed all 37 aircraft. After helping to blow up ammunition dumps at Berka airstrip, Byrne missed a rendezvous with his patrol. He set off alone across the desert in an attempt to reach the Allied lines and was captured. Told to surrender his arms, he pulled his revolver from its holster, intending to throw it on the ground. The gesture was misinterpreted and he was shot in the face, but was not badly wounded.

Byrne was sent to Stalag Luft III, Sagan, in Poland. He made two unsuccessful escape attempts before crawling under the perimeter wire directly below a watch tower and walking to Königsberg station. French workmen provided him with civilian clothes, food and money. He then stole a bicycle and made his way to Danzig, evading several road blocks on the way. Having bluffed his way into the docks, Byrne put on a sailor's cap which he had picked up earlier. When he was challenged by a sentry, he sparred playfully with the man, who then waved him up the companionway and on to a Swedish ship. Byrne concealed himself under one of the boilers, and, when the vessel was searched before sailing, he raised himself off the floor by clinging to a pipe to escape detection.

A friendly sailor hid him in the hold and brought him food. After disembarking at Gothenburg, he took the train to Stockholm and flew to Leuchars in a Mosquito. He was awarded the DCM.

John Vincent Byrne was born on April 11 1921 at Preston, Lancashire, and educated at Army Apprentices College, Chepstow. He enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders and was wounded in France in 1940 while serving with the 1st Battalion. After the evacuation from Dunkirk, he was transferred to 11 (Scottish) Commando and took part in the landings north of the Litani river during the campaign in Syria against the Vichy French. After his escape from the PoW camp he retained his rank of corporal and moved to the Commando Depot at Achnacarry, Inverness-shire, for rigorous re-training before being posted to 6 Commando.

Shortly after landing in Normandy, Byrne was wounded in the knee and evacuated, but re-joined 6 Commando in Holland for the final phase of the campaign in north-west Europe.

After the war Byrne went to Greece with 4th Battalion the Royal Norfolk Regiment and was seconded to HQ 179 Infantry Brigade. He was demobilised early in 1947 and served with the Kenya Police for a spell before moving to Kulai Police District, Johor, on internal security duties at the outset of the Malaya "Emergency".

In 1953 a terrorist fired his revolver into Byrne's stomach at point-blank range. After being discharged from hospital he returned to Kenya to work in the prison service before retiring in 1958. He settled in Shropshire, and built up a drapery business until he finally retired in 1986.

Jack Byrne died on January 10 2007. He is survived by their three daughters.

General Salutes a Soldier: Hardcover - 10 July 1986



General Sir Frederick Pile Bt GCB DSO MC
Salutes the soldier Lance Sergeant J V Byrne

This first-hand account of the exciting exploits of a Commando sub-section and a Special Air Service group, the smallest fighting formations of the most renowned of all regiments, highlights the determination and patriotism of these formidable soldiers, who suffered trials and hardship that few have endured. The author's vivid descriptions of vicious close quarter fighting, sabotage, gruelling treks through

the wilderness of the North African desert and the courage of a teenage Greek girl, are woven into a tremendously moving and exciting story. Byrne escaped from two POW camps before reaching home. There, his extraordinary exploits were publicly recognized in the 'Salute the Soldier' campaign. This compelling book, rich in detail and eminently readable, contains no hearsay or quotes from other sources.

Recommendation: "This N.C.O. was captured by the Germans in Libya while returning alone from a special sabotage mission. He was sent to a Prisoner of War camp in Germany where he volunteered to act as an officer's batman as he thought this would give him a better opportunity of escaping. He was, accordingly, transferred to Oflag XXIB, an Officers camp, where he made two attempts to escape but, unfortunately, was recaptured on each occasion. On 18 Jul 43, while being transferred to another camp, he escaped from a transit camp at Koenigsberg and succeeded in reaching Danzig, where he boarded a Swedish ship and finally arrived at Goteborg on 25 Jul 43. This NCO showed courage, pertinacity and initiative of the very highest order under the most trying circumstances.'

London Gazette 7 October 1943: 2060658 Corporal John Vincent Byrne, "L" Detachment, 1st Special Air Service Regiment (The Gordon Highlanders). 'Cpl Byrne was captured by the Germans in Libya while returning alone from a special sabotage mission. He was sent to a Prisoner of War camp in Germany where he volunteered to act as an Officer's batman as he thought this would give him a better opportunity of escaping. He was, accordingly, transferred to Oflag XXIB, an Officers camp, where he made two attempts to escape but, unfortunately, was recaptured on each occasion. On 18 Jul 43, while being transferred to another camp, he escaped from a transit camp at Koenigsberg and succeeded in reaching Danzig, where he boarded a Swedish ship and finally arrived at Goteborg on 25 Jul 43. This NCO showed courage, pertinacity and initiative of the very highest order under the most trying circumstances.' One of only four D.C.M's gazetted to 'L' Detachment, Special Air Service Regiment, during the Second World War.