## 2019

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**Author: Robert PALMER** 



The Cross of Sacrifice Imphal War Cemetery

### A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

# LANCE CORPORAL J. P. HARMAN, V.C. (OF LUNDY)

A concise biography of Lance Corporal John Pennington HARMAN, V.C., a soldier in the British Army between 1940 and 1944, who was awarded posthumously the Victoria Cross for gallantry during the Siege of Kohima. In addition, a biography of Sergeant Stanley James TACON, who was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal in the same action.

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#### A Concise Biography of Lance Corporal J. P. HARMAN, V.C.

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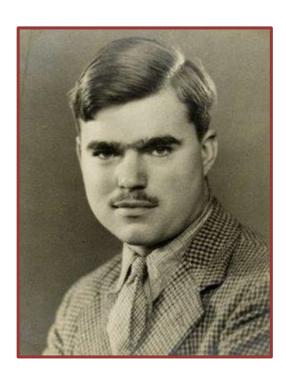
and to the TACON family for

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### Lance Corporal John Pennington HARMAN, V.C.



#### Introduction

The Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry in the British Army, is awarded to a relatively small number of soldiers for acts of supreme bravery while under fire from an enemy. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded at Kohima, in Nagaland, India, between April and June 1944, seventy-five years ago. One was awarded for an action during the siege of Kohima, and the other during the battle to drive the Japanese from Kohima. The award relating to the siege of Kohima was granted to an unconventional soldier, who spent a large part of his formative life living on the Island of Lundy in the Bristol Channel off North Devon, namely: Lance Corporal John Pennington HARMAN, V.C.. This is his story.

But it is also the story of the other soldiers who faced the Japanese onslaught throughout the days of the siege of Kohima. Today, we know the outcome, but for them each day must have seemed an eternity, with an uncertain future ahead of them. These men include Major Donald EASTEN, Sergeant Major HAINES, Sergeant Stanley TACON and Corporal 'Taffy' REES, all of whom feature in this account of one small part of the siege of Kohima. One of these men, Sergeant TACON, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (D.C.M.) for his conduct in the same action; the D.C.M. ranking second only to the Victoria Cross in seniority of British military gallantry medals. His biography is also included in this document, and it illustrates the varied nature of the soldiers who faced the Japanese in April 1944 in North-East India.

#### **Early Life and Lundy**

John Pennington HARMAN was born on 20 July 1914, at 9, Shrewsbury Road, Elmers End, Beckenham in Kent. He was the eldest son of Martin Coles HARMAN and his wife, Amy Ruth HARMAN. Known to his family as 'Jack', HARMAN was sent to a preparatory school in Bristol when reaching seven years' of age. He was unhappy at this school, and not just because of being away from home. It became apparent at an early age that Jack was not one to be conventional. He detested discipline and had little time for the expectations masters placed on their pupils.

His dormitory was close to Bristol Zoo, which is located at Clifton. During the night, Jack could hear the animals and the sounds of distress they made. He was affected by this, saying that the distress the animals were apparently suffering was a sign of 'unwelcome captivity and restraint'. Jack ran away from school twice, after which his parents accepted the inevitable and removed him from that school.



The plaque on the wall of 9, Shrewsbury Road, Beckenham, Kent.

His parents sent Jack to Bedales School in Hampshire, which was a school with a then unconventional attitude to education. Founded in 1893, the principles of the school revolved around treating each child as an individual. This suited Jack's non-conformist attitude to life. Academic studies were never his focus, with Jack showing a marked lack of concentration in things that did not interest him, although his love of nature was allowed to blossom at Bedales School.

Jack's father, Martin, made his fortune in corporate finance, having left school at the age of sixteen years to join Lazards. By the early 1930's, he had accumulated a portfolio of several companies which were estimated to be worth about £12 million. A newspaper described him as the 'pre-war City's wonder man' who commanded significant influence in many boardrooms of the period. In 1924, Martin HARMAN purchased Lundy Island in the Bristol Channel from the CHRISTIE family, together with the mail contract and the M.V. Lerina, the supply boat for the island.

Martin HARMAN was eccentric, declaring himself 'King' of Lundy Island and running it as a private fiefdom. With a declining population and a general lack of interest in the mail contract, the General Post Office ended this at the end of 1927. For the next two years, HARMAN continued to run the postal service himself at no charge. On 1 November 1929, he decided to offset the cost of handling the mail by issuing two postage stamps. They were the half puffin and one puffin, and this practice continues to this day. HARMAN issued two coins in 1929, also called the Half Puffin and One Puffin; the coins equating with one halfpenny and one penny. This action resulted in him being prosecuted under the Coinage Act 1870; he was convicted and fined £5.

Jack HARMAN loved Lundy. This was one place where he could live the type of life he preferred. He loved exploring the cliffs and coves, and in particular a disused granite quarry on the eastern coast of the island. He dreamt of finding precious metals, even taking this to the extent of having boreholes drilled on the island. Jack invited his friends to join him on Lundy whenever possible. Most of them, like Jack himself, were non-conformist characters who would swim, fish and chase each other across the island during the day, and then at night, they would read Dickens by lamplight.

Jack's mother, Amy, used to enjoy the social life of London much more than visiting Lundy. By the late 1920's, she was suffering from kidney failure. She was given increasing amounts of morphine to ease the pain as the disease progressed, but died in 1931, aged just forty-seven years. Jack, who was now aged sixteen years and was shortly due to leave school, was badly upset by the death of his mother. The death of Amy affected Martin HARMAN as well. Just a year after her death, he was declared bankrupt with debts of over £550,000, yet assets of only £10,000. The following year, matters deteriorated again, with Martin HARMAN being convicted for embezzlement and sent to prison for eighteen months. This was devastating for young Jack. His one respite from the realities of life was Lundy, as his father had placed the island in trust so that his creditors could not seize it when he was declared bankrupt.

In consequence of these family issues, eighteen-year-old Jack HARMAN set off to travel the world. He visited many countries, from Spain through to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. He turned his hand to anything, working on sheep farms, cutting timber and even prospecting for gold, however nothing was ever permanent, with Jack soon moving on. In 1936, he returned to Lundy and worked with the family's retainer on the island, Felix GADE, and started keeping bees.

#### The Second World War – Jack Enlists

The outbreak of the Second World War made little difference initially to Jack, but in November 1941, he enlisted in the Household Cavalry. The reason he chose the Household Cavalry was that he thought he would be working with horses. Not surprisingly, Jack HARMAN did not adapt well to Army life. He wrote to his father (who was now free from jail and discharged from bankruptcy) stating that life:

(was) just bloody hell, dirty, noisy, crude and inefficient. I heartily wished I have never joined up. There is no time to do anything after the set tasks are done....how I wish I was stalking deer in NZ a free man.... I learn almost nothing each day.

In April 1942, he wrote how he was thinking of running away to a life of solitude. He went on to say, 'I can hardly constrain a desire to desert and damn the consequences.' Before HARMAN left for India, he was back on Lundy when a plane crashed into the island when it was shrouded in fog. The plane hit a cliff above Pilot's Quay, and all on board were killed. Most of the plane was destroyed, but the tail hung precariously over the cliff-face. Without the use of ropes or any assistance, HARMAN climbed down and recovered the airman's body, identity disc and papers before burying the dead man and other human remains.<sup>1</sup>

There is little doubt that as the son of a former millionaire who lived on and loved Lundy, Jack HARMAN was an odd private soldier, who found barrack life crude in the extreme. In spite of his background, HARMAN did not apply for a commission, apparently through self-doubt of his own abilities. Never one for any degree of stability, HARMAN transferred to the Worcestershire Regiment and considered the possibility of applying again for a commission, but he never did. By January 1943, he was serving with the 20<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Royal Fusiliers (The City of London Regiment), which was sent to India. The battalion was formed in Mill Hill, London, on 25 June 1940, and served in Cheshire, Berkshire, and the Isle of Wight. In January 1942, it was moved to Portsmouth and brought up to strength in terms of personnel and equipment. The battalion was selected for overseas service, and it embarked on the 'Mooltan' at Liverpool in January 1943. The ship sailed for Greenock, where it joined a convoy. It called at Durban in South Africa, and arrived at Bombay, India, on 18 March 1943. The battalion moved to Allahabad for jungle training, and then joined the 52<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade in Budni in Bhopal State as a training battalion.

crash, with five of them commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial, however, Air-Gunner, Sergeant Oswald Austin JONES is buried in the Willesden New Cemetery, which is consistent with the above accounts.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This plane crash is referred to in more than one source, but the date and exact nature of the crash are not clear. The most likely incident is the crash of an Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bomber AD698 on Lundy in poor weather at 13.30 hours, 1 June 1942. The aircraft was being flown by 77 Squadron, which at the time was serving at R.A.F. Chivenor near Barnstaple on attachment to Coastal Command. The aircraft was returning to Chivenor from an anti-submarine patrol in bad visibility when it crashed into cliffs 300 hundred feet above sea level on Lundy. All six crew members died in the

#### **HARMAN** joins the Royal West Kent's

The 20<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Royal Fusiliers provided drafts for units in Burma, and sent a large draft to the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, which formed 'D' Company of that battalion. Jack HARMAN was one of that draft, which is why the boy from Beckenham and Lundy ended up in a Kent regiment in India. HARMAN joined the battalion shortly before it was deployed to the Arakan region of Burma. The battalion was part of the 161<sup>st</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade, which itself was part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. He was posted to 'D' Company, commanded by Captain Donald EASTEN.<sup>2</sup> HARMAN could not have found a better company commander, for EASTEN was understanding of HARMAN's character. EASTEN described him as:

A great countryman who found his way everywhere day or night, he understood ground as well as anyone. He was an obviously very solid citizen, who wasn't going to bolt if something nasty happened. He was brave and of course in the end it was proved.

Jack HARMAN was a big man, whose uniform never seemed to fit him. He was tall and built solidly, with broad shoulders. It was difficult to get boots to fit him, and once he wrote home mentioning that he did not have any boots, with the result that an order came down from above for this matter to be solved. HARMAN was reported to have been embarrassed by this intervention, as it is reputed to have resulted from his father contacting the British Prime Minister.

HARMAN established a reputation as a leader who would show courage under fire. He was known to stand up while others were sheltering, in order to identify where the Japanese fire was coming from. Once he picked up a Bren gun and ran with it to help relieve his friend Wally EVANS who was pinned down with his section. On another occasion, HARMAN rescued Private 'Happy' HAMSTEAD, who had been wounded by a Japanese machine gun, and carried him to safety. His leadership skills were recognised with promotion to the rank of Lance Corporal, and his hunting skills recognised by his use as the company sniper. He carried his own maps and compasses, and as far as his colleagues were concerned, he always seemed to know where he was. He also seemed to have a knack of working out where the battalion was heading.

Another skill that HARMAN displayed which made him popular with his fellow soldiers was his ability for scavenging. He managed to stalk and kill a wild pig after disappearing off into the jungle, which the section were able to butcher, cook and eat. In addition, he sought permission to kill a local cow for food, but this was denied.<sup>3</sup> The only circumstances allowed were if the animal was severely injured, so a cow was killed in the company cookhouse after apparently suffering a broken leg, the origin of which was never discussed.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Donald Friswell EASTEN was commissioned in the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment on 14 January 1940, in the rank of Second Lieutenant (service number 113515). He was promoted to the rank of War Substantive Lieutenant on 14 July 1941, Acting Captain on 15 February 1942, and then Acting Major on 7 April 1944, ie, just at the start of the Siege of Kohima.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The cow has also been described as a water buffalo.

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#### [LANCE CORPORAL J. P. HARMAN, V.C.]

The soldiers of 'D' Company thought highly of this eccentric soldier. He was respected for being more intellectual than the average private soldier, and never used coarse language with others. Noone in his platoon had a bad word for him.<sup>4</sup>

HARMAN had some deeply held superstitions and honestly believed that he was destined to survive the war. He confided in his company commander that a fortune-teller he had met in Spain had told him he would live to old age. A palm reader he consulted stated he was to live to the age of seventytwo years. Another fortune-teller he consulted, an Indian he went to see with a colleague in Raniket, became upset when he read his hand, and walked out without saying anything further to Jack. In one of his regular letters to one of his sisters, HARMAN wrote of his intentions to settle in Burma after the war because he was becoming fond of both India and Burma, and could see opportunities to make money out there.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> BAILEY Roderick Forgotten Voices of the Victoria Cross (London, Ebury Press, 2010) p.314, quoting Private Thomas JACKSON who served alongside HARMAN.

#### **Kohima**

Kohima is a town in Nagaland, India, which in 1944 was where the District Commissioner lived as it was the administrative centre for Nagaland. It was important as it was about half way on the only road between the main British base at Dimapur and the strategically important Imphal Plain in Manipur. There was a small British base located at Kohima, which included a supply depot and a reinforcement camp.

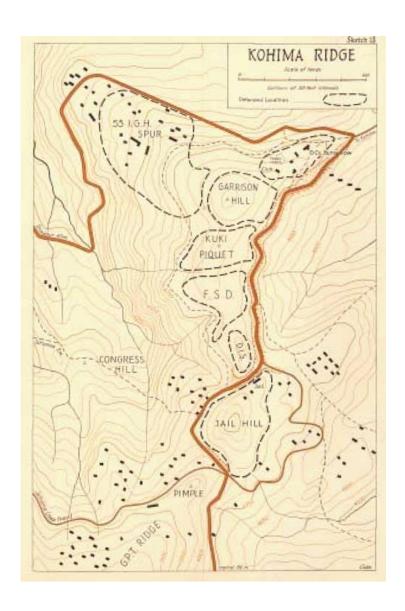
The Japanese Army devised a plan, which was codenamed U-Go, to attack the main British base on the Imphal plain in order to forestall the anticipated British offensive later in 1944. This was enlarged and made more ambitious by Lieutenant General Renya MUTAGUCHI, the General Officer Commanding the Japanese Fifteenth Area based in Burma. The new intention was to invade the Indian regions of Manipur and Assam, thereby hopefully emboldening Indian nationalists in the province of Bengal to rise up against British rule. This offensive was to follow another offensive in the Arakan, codenamed Ha-Go, which was intended to draw British reserves away from Manipur and Assam. The British IV Corps, comprising three Indian infantry divisions, was based on the Imphal plain, but it was dependent upon the long supply route from the main base at Dimapur along the one road via Kohima. The distance by road from Dimapur to Imphal is about 213 km, although the direct distance is just 125 km.

The Japanese Imperial General Headquarters approved Operation U-Go on 7 January 1944, and the Fifteenth Army commenced preparations for their offensive. The intention was to direct the Japanese 31<sup>st</sup> Division to capture Kohima, and thereby block the road to and from Imphal. This would cause major supply difficulties for the British, and aid the destruction of IV Corps by the two Japanese divisions directed at Imphal. Due to the nature of the Japanese Army, and the lack of air superiority by their Air Force, the plan was predicated on the Japanese troops travelling with few supplies, but being able to capture British supply dumps and bases by which they would sustain their soldiers. The intention was that after Kohima fell, the Japanese 31<sup>st</sup> Division would press on to Dimapur and capture the main British supply base.

The Japanese 31<sup>st</sup> Division crossed the Chindwin River on 15 March 1944 to commence its march on Kohima. The first major battle took place at Sangshak on 20 March, which was held by the 50<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade. The battle lasted for six days and nights, but in the end the British forces had to retreat from Sangshak having sustained significant casualties. There was initial confusion within the British Fourteenth Army with regards to the Japanese intentions. Following the battle at Sangshak, it became apparent that the size of the Japanese force heading for Kohima was much stronger than expected. General Sir George GIFFARD, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group that was responsible for British forces in India and Burma, authorised the transfer of British reinforcements to Imphal and Kohima. Elements of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division were sent by air from the Arakan to Imphal and Dimapur. Two brigades were flown to Imphal, while the 161<sup>st</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade, and the 24<sup>th</sup> Indian Mountain Artillery Regiment, were sent to Dimapur in order to reinforce Kohima.

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The Headquarters Indian XXXIII Corps, with the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division were also ordered to Assam, and in the meantime, Kohima was placed under the command of the 202<sup>nd</sup> Line of Communication Area based at Dimapur. Units from the 161st Brigade started out for Kohima, but were recalled as the major threat was felt to be Dimapur. Beginning on 1 April, the Japanese came upon British outposts at Jessami, about 48 km east of Kohima, held by elements of the 1st Bn. The Assam Regiment. The Japanese advance was held up for a couple of days, but on 3 April 1944, the advanced troops of the Japanese 31st Division had reached Kohima. In addition, on 3 April XXXIII Corps assumed responsibility for the Kohima area, and the units of the 161st Brigade were ordered back to Kohima. The lead battalion of the 161st Brigade was the 4th Bn. The Royal West Kent Regiment, which arrived in Kohima only just in time before the road was cut by the Japanese. The rest of the 161st Brigade consolidated in a box at Jotsoma outside Kohima. The total number of troops in the Kohima box was about two-thousand, five-hundred, but not all were combat troops. Colonel Hugh RICHARDS was the Commander of the Kohima Garrison, with Lieutenant Colonel John LAVERTY commanding the Royal West Kents. The siege of Kohima began on 6 April 1944 with a series of Japanese attacks on the garrison.



The delay imposed on the Japanese by the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. The Assam Regiment on the approaches to Kohima, allowed the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment to get through to Kohima before they closed in and surrounded the town. The battalion was the only complete unit within the garrison, the rest being made up of a variety of British and Indian personnel.

The Royal West Kents numbered about four-hundred and fifty men, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel LAVERTY. On their arrival at Kohima, LAVERTY deployed his battalion around the perimeter of the garrison. The battalion headquarters, Headquarter Company and 'A' Company (Major KENYON) dug in on Summerhouse Hill (later to become Garrison Hill); 'B' Company (Major John WINSTANLEY) were deployed on Kuki Piquet; with 'C' Company under Major SHAW located on D.I.S. Hill.<sup>5</sup> Finally 'D' Company, commanded by Major Donald EASTEN and containing Lance Corporal HARMAN, were based on the Hospital Spur. Jack HARMAN's platoon commander, Lieutenant John FAULKNER, found HARMAN a difficult person to understand. FAULKNER was a conventional man who had joined the battalion just prior to it being deployed to Kohima, so was not familiar with HARMAN's style of doing things that had become apparent in the Arakan. FAULKNER struggled to comprehend why HARMAN would wander around, 'strolling unconcernedly with one hand in his pocket' while snipers forced everyone else to take cover'.<sup>6</sup> FAULKNER had himself narrowly missed being hit by snipers more than once, yet HARMAN seemed to live a charmed life.

HARMAN was now living up to the image he had created for himself, the eccentric individualist who disdained privilege and rank. His faith in his own immortality was contrary to the rational reality of a savage, face-to-face battlefield that often existed in Burma. He reinforced his reputation as a lone stalker of the enemy. HARMAN told some colleagues that he had gone out one night and killed a couple of Japanese he found asleep in a trench. On another night, Major WINSTANLEY reprimanded him after he disappeared for a period. HARMAN told WINSTANLEY that he had gone to the toilet, but told fellow soldiers that he had gone out on a personal reconnaissance. On one night, he came back with a bag of rice he had liberated from a Japanese store he had located. Only those who served at Kohima will ever fully understand how they lived day-to-day under the constant threat of instant death or serious injury.

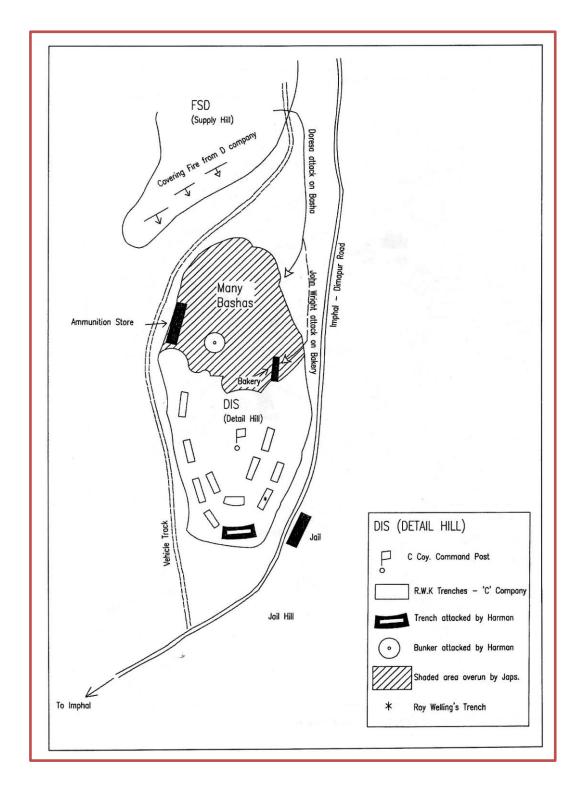
The Japanese commenced a series of aggressive, determined attacks on the garrison, steadily forcing them to withdraw into an increasingly restricted perimeter. The West Kents dug a series of trenches and foxholes from which they defended their positions with vigour. On 7 April (Good Friday), following a series of determined attacks on 'C' Company, LAVERTY moved 'D' Company around to support 'C' Company on D.I.S. Hill. HARMAN was one of the men of 'D' Company now deployed on D.I.S. Hill in support of 'C' Company.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> D.I.S. is an abbreviation for Daily Issue Stores, and the location is known also as D.I.S. Hill.

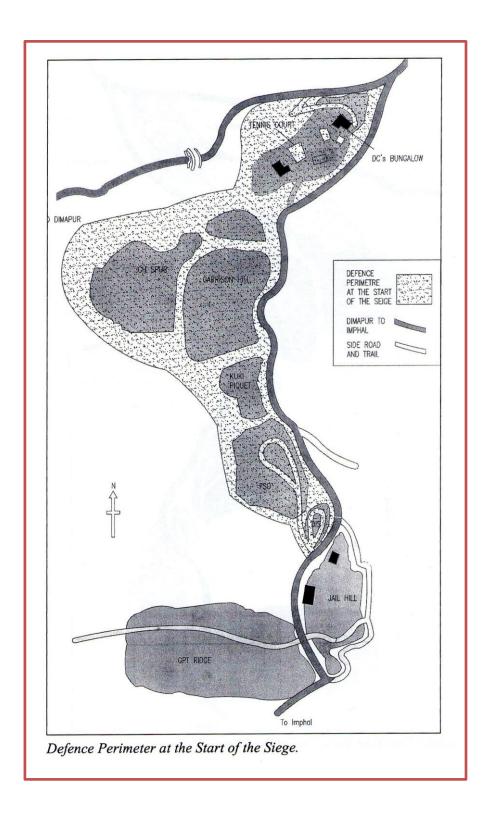
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> KEANE – 'Road of Bones' pages 240, 254-255.

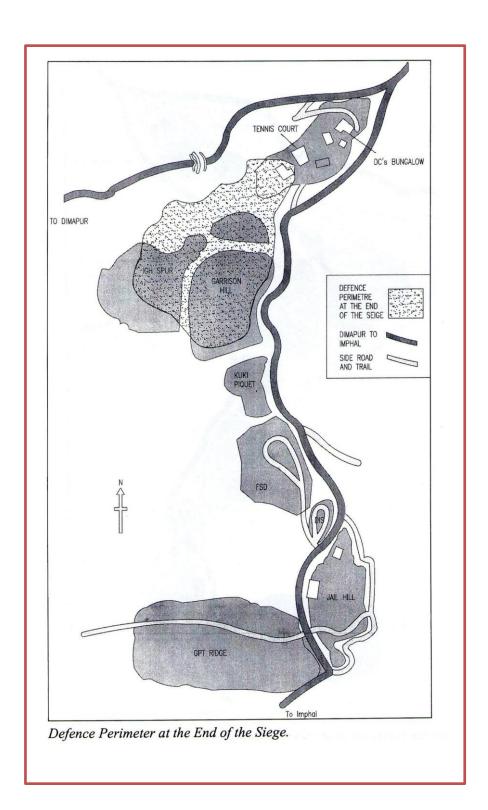
The Japanese made steady inroads into the Kohima garrison's perimeter. 'C' Company were dug in on D.I.S. Hill, with 'D' Company just behind them. Major EASTEN and Company Sergeant Major William Frank HAINES, M.M., of 'D' Company faced a dilemma.<sup>7</sup> The company had just driven the Japanese from the bakery, which they had captured earlier in the night.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> EASTEN was promoted to Acting Major on 7 April 1944. No. 6090378 Corporal (acting Sergeant) William Frank HAINES, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment (Guildford) was awarded the Military Medal on 4 February 1943.

The maps shown below and on Page 11 illustrate the intensity of the fighting that took place within a small geographic area. The British and Indian garrison were literally fighting for their lives, against sustained and determined Japanese attacks.





Although some of the Japanese had been driven back, there were a number still occupying trenches within the perimeter. Some Japanese soldiers had occupied an empty foxhole and set up a machine gun that was causing significant problems for the West Kents. HARMAN was stood nearby as EASTEN and HAINES discussed how to deal with this machine gun. He interrupted his company officers by saying, "I think I know what to do, Sir". Without hesitation, HARMAN leapt out of his trench and ran the thirty yards to the Japanese bunker. He lay down and crept under the firing slit, withdrew the safety pin from a grenade he was carrying, paused for two seconds and then dropped the grenade into the bunker through the firing slit. As soon as the grenade exploded, HARMAN charged in to the bunker. He emerged a few minutes later carrying the Japanese machine gun and returned to his own trench.

On 8 April, the Japanese attacked D.I.S. Hill repeatedly; steadily wearing down the defenders and managing to secure some positions on the hill. As soon as the Japanese gained any ground, they dug sophisticated bunkers from which they could bring down mortar fire, and grenades onto the British positions, as well as subjecting them to rifle and machine gun fire. During the early hours of **Sunday, 9 April 1944**, the sound of digging gave a warning that the Japanese were about to launch yet another attack on the positions of 'C' Company. Japanese snipers were active, keeping the men of the Royal West Kents pinned down in their foxholes and trenches.

A sniper managed to hit twenty-two years' old Private 5347094 Frederick (Fred) HALL. As with most people called HALL, his fellow soldiers knew him as 'Nobby'. Nobby HALL was hit in the head and critically wounded. The stretcher bearers were pinned down so could not get to his trench. Private NORMAN and a couple of colleagues did their best to comfort HALL as he died a few hours later. Private Fred HALL is now buried in Grave 8.E.13. of the Kohima War Cemetery. He was the son of Thomas and Ellen HALL and came from Birmingham.

It was clear that the men of 'C' Company were to need the support of the men from 'D' Company more than ever. As the sun rose over Kohima, it revealed that the Japanese had managed to gain a foothold onto D.I.S. Hill. Major EASTEN was thinking through his options, none of them easy, when suddenly he heard HARMAN shout, "Give me covering fire." With that, Jack HARMAN fixed his bayonet to his rifle, leapt out of his trench and ran downhill towards the Japanese positions. A Japanese machine gun opened fire on him but he reached the enemy trench unscathed. One of HARMAN's colleagues, Sergeant TACON, shot dead a Japanese soldier who was just about to throw a grenade at HARMAN. He got to the edge of the Japanese trench and opened fire.

Jack HARMAN shot dead four Japanese soldiers, and then bayoneted to death a fifth soldier. He got up and began to make his way back to his own trench. Some eye-witnesses state that he merely walked back, with his colleagues shouting at him to run.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Accounts vary on whether HARMAN said anything to Major Donald EASTEN and Sergeant-Major HAINES or not. In BAILEY Roderick *Forgotten Voices of the Victoria Cross* (London, Ebury Press, 2010) p.309, apparently quoting Major Donald EASTEN states that HARMAN said nothing before he got out of the trench to attack the Japanese position.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> It is also reported he said, "Right, give me covering fire."

Major EASTEN makes no mention in his accounts of HARMAN walking back, but it is known he did not take the threat of snipers seriously. As he reached his trench, a machine gun bullet hit HARMAN's side, and he collapsed. Major EASTEN risked his own life, climbed out of his trench and pulled HARMAN back into it. EASTEN shouted for stretcher bearers to come to assist him, but HARMAN said, "Don't worry sir, I got the lot – It was worth it." Donald EASTEN held the twenty-nine-year-old soldier in his arms as he died.

Whilst this was happening, another member of the Royal West Kents was killed. Twenty-seven year-old 6025570 Corporal Trevor John REES was a married man who came from Pen-y-Graig, Glamorgan. Being a Welshman in an English regiment, REES was inevitably nicknamed 'Taffy'. Unfortunately, absorbed by HARMAN's daring, he stood up in his trench and was promptly shot twice, in the side, and fell outside the trench. Private NORMAN tried to pull REES into the trench, but REES would not let him. The Japanese had their sights on this trench, so any movement provoked a sharp response. Sergeant TACON then tried to reach REES, but was shot in the arm and leg. REES lay there becoming increasingly delirious, screaming and crying in pain. At times, he called for his wife, mother and father; all many miles away and oblivious to his suffering. His colleagues could do nothing but listen to his cries, frustrated that he was only a few yards away, but powerless to help him. Gradually the screaming and crying subsided. Corporal REES died alone on D.I.S. Hill, Kohima, reminding us that war can be brutal, savage and unkind. Corporal REES is one of twenty-six thousand eight-hundred and fifty-seven men commemorated on the Rangoon Memorial in Myanmar, where his name appears on Face 16.<sup>10</sup>

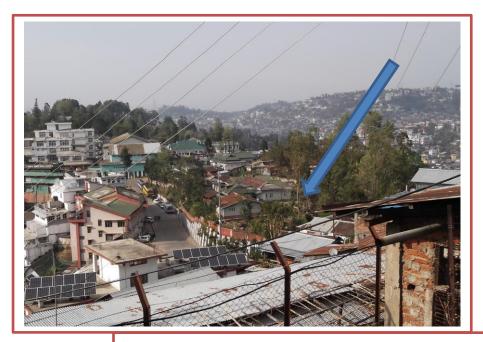


A view of Jail Hill. The Police Headquarters for Kohima are now located on the hill.

> Taken by the Author – October 2011

<sup>10</sup> 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Trevor REES was the son of Bert and May REES, and husband of Margaret May REES and came from Pen-y-Graig, Glamorgan. There is some confusion about the identity of Corporal REES in various accounts. It appears that the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Royal West Kent Regiment absorbed a draft of Welsh soldiers prior to the Siege of Kohima. 3972795 Lance Corporal Leonard REES lies in Grave 8.E.7. of the Kohima War Cemetery. He died on 14 April 1944. Leonard REES was thirty-two years' of age, married and came from Canton in Cardiff.



Above: A view from Jail Hill, where it is believed that the Japanese sniper was located who shot and killed Lance Corporal HARMAN.

NOTE: The arrow points to the believed location of the foxhole occupied by The Queen's Own Royal West Kents.

Below: The location where it is believed that HARMAN was shot and died, which is today a private garden in Kohima.

Taken By the Author – April 2014



The siege of Kohima was lifted in the morning of 18 April 1944, when troops from the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab Regiment and 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. 7<sup>th</sup> Rajput Regiment managed to fight their way onto Garrison Hill. Two days later, the tired survivors of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Royal West Kent Regiment were evacuated from Garrison Hill as men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade assumed responsibility for the defences. This was not the end of the fighting, as it took a further two months for the combined efforts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division to clear the Kohima area of Japanese troops.



HARMAN's Grave Plaque at Kohima.

Taken by the Author – April 2014

Lance Corporal John Pennington HARMAN now lies in Grave 8.E.3 in the Kohima War Cemetery. His grave is inscribed with the words: 'Of Lundy' 'The Earth is The Lord's'. Lieutenant Colonel LAVERTY wrote a recommendation for the award of the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry in the British Army. The Military Secretary approved the award with the following details appearing in the London Gazette dated 20 June 1944:

No. 295822 Lance-Corporal John Pennington Harman, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment (London, E.C.2).

In Burma at Kohima on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1944, Lance-Corporal Harman was commanding a section of a forward platoon. Under cover of darkness the enemy established a machinegun post within 50 yards of his position which became a serious menace to the remainder of his Company. Owing to the nature of the ground, Lance-Corporal Harman was unable to bring the fire of his section on to the enemy machine-gun post.

Without hesitation he went forward by himself and using a four second grenade which he held on to for at least two seconds after releasing the lever in order to get immediate effect, threw it into the post and followed up immediately. He annihilated the post and returned to his section with the machine-gun.

Early the following morning he recovered a position on a forward slope 150 yards from the enemy in order to strengthen a platoon which had been heavily attacked during the night. On occupying his position, he discovered a party of enemy digging in under cover of machinegun fire and snipers.

Ordering his Bren gun to give him covering fire he fixed his bayonet and alone charged the post shooting four and bayoneting one thereby wiping out the post. When walking back Lance-Corporal Harman received a burst of machine-gun fire in his side and died shortly after reaching our lines. Lance-Corporal Harman's heroic action and supreme devotion to duty were a wonderful inspiration to all and were largely responsible for the decisive way in which all attacks were driven off by his Company.

Lance Corporal HARMAN's Victoria Cross is displayed currently at the museum of The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment at Maidstone, in Kent. The HARMAN family had a stone memorial made, which sits in the quarry on the eastern side of the island of Lundy, to commemorate Jack HARMAN's death and his award of the Victoria Cross. Any visitor to the island can see this today.

5825023 War Substantive Sergeant Stanley TACON was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his courage during the same period of the siege. His citation reads:

At Kohima in the D.I.S. area on 8/9 April 1944, Sgt TACON was in command of a platoon in the forward area which was subjected to continual attacks in strength by night and day. By skilfully directing and controlling the fire of his platoon, he succeeded in beating off all attacks with heavy losses to the enemy, at least 15 falling to his own rifle; and later was severely wounded when attempting to recover one of his forward section comds who had been wounded knowing full well that the area was swept by MMG fire.

His courage, devotion to duty and complete disregard for his personal safety was an inspiration to his men and of a very high order. Recommended for an immediate award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

This citation was written by Lieutenant Colonel LAVERTY, the Commanding Officer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment on 22 April 1944, and was approved by General George GIFFORD, General Commanding-in-Chief of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group on 20 May 1944. The award was gazetted on 27 July 1944. It was well deserved.

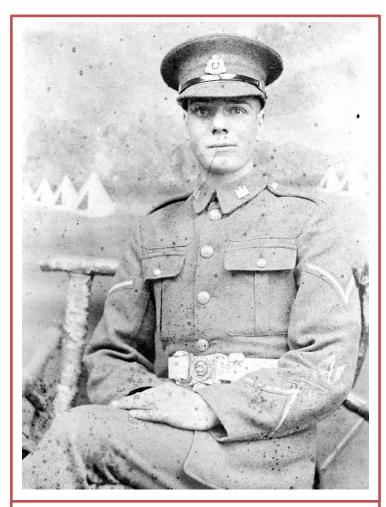
#### **Stanley James TACON**

Stanley James TACON was born on 29 August 1911 at Peasenhall, near Saxmundham, Suffolk, a son of Robert Henry and Lily TACON. His family were farmers in the Cratfield area of Suffolk, and had been there for at least five generations (about one-hundred and twenty years). Stanley had an elder brother called Robert. Robert and Stanley grew up in Suffolk, and after leaving school, Stanley gained employment as a baker's roundsman. Apparently, during his time working as a roundsman, he was prosecuted for driving without a licence, and was fined £2.

Robert joined the Army at Bury St. Edmunds on 10 January 1922, aged nineteen years. He was posted to India in September 1922. Robert served in the Second World War as a gunner in the Royal Artillery (service number 1840718), with the 258<sup>th</sup> Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment. Aged forty-two years, he died on 2 March 1944 in Palestine, and is buried in Grave 3.N.18. of the Ramleh War Cemetery, which is now in Israel. It is presumed his death was from natural causes, or as a result of an accident. He left a wife, Gertrude, and family following his death.

Probably following his elder brother's lead, Stanley enlisted in The Suffolk Regiment on 14 February 1930, and signed on for seven years, with five further years on the Reserve. He enlisted at Bury St. Edmunds, and at the time of his enlistment, he was aged eighteen years and five months. At this time, he was 5' 8" tall, weighed one-hundred and twenty pounds (eight stones and eight pounds), and had a fresh complexion, grey eyes and brown hair. His religion was Church of England. Stanley completed his initial training at the Depot of The Suffolk Regiment, and on 11 August 1930, he was posted to the 1st Battalion of the Regiment, stationed in the U.K.. He spent just under four years at home, before being promoted to the rank of Unpaid Acting Lance Corporal with effect from 8 December 1933. At the same time, he was posted to the 2nd Battalion, stationed in India, and he arrived in India on 23 December 1933, and joined his battalion on 28 December in Madras, southern India. The battalion was engaged on internal security and associated ceremonial duties, with spells of operational training when possible. Sport was a major factor in the life of the British Army in India, with a wide variety including football, hockey, boxing and hunting available to those interested.

On 4 March 1935, Stanley TACON was made a paid Lance Corporal, with his pay backdated to when he was first promoted, but unpaid. He was also a qualified marksman and signaller within the Regiment. In 1936, the battalion moved to Mhow in central India, which was another large British Indian military cantonment. On 24 June 1936, Stanley extended his service to twelve years, and on 15 July 1937, he was promoted to the rank of Corporal. In the same year, the battalion moved to Bombay, and then spent a spell on the North-West Frontier of India during the disturbances in Waziristan. Having completed six years overseas, in August 1939, Corporal TACON was posted back to the U.K.. He disembarked on 29 August 1939, and reported to the Regimental Depot in Bury St. Edmunds.



Above – Stanley TACON as a Lance Corporal in the Suffolk Regiment. Note also the Signaller's badge, Marksman badge and one Long Service strip on his left arm.

Courtesy of: The TACON family

On 1 October 1939, Stanley was appointed an Unpaid Lance Sergeant, and then a month later, an Unpaid Acting Sergeant. This was later made a paid appointment, backdated to the date of his promotion. He was made a substantive Sergeant on 1 February 1940, and was posted to join the British Expeditionary Force in France. On 1 March 1940, he joined No. 1 Infantry Base Depot, but only eleven days later, he was posted to the strength of Headquarters South District at Rouen. Between 11 and 27 March 1940, he was appointed Acting Colour Sergeant, with the role of Company Quarter-Master Sergeant. During this period, he re-engaged for the full twenty-one years' service. Being located at Rouen, Sgt TACON was not evacuated through Dunkirk, but through one of the other French Atlantic ports. He arrived in the U.K. safely, and was posted to Walton Hall in Warwickshire. Here he met a farmer's daughter, Evelyn Muriel BERRY, and they married on 1 January 1941 at Tredington, Warwickshire.

It appears that Sgt TACON served with the Headquarters of the 25<sup>th</sup> Army Tank Brigade for a period towards the end of 1941, and was then sent on a course at XII Corps School at Gravesend in July 1942. After this, in January 1943, he was posted to the 30<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Royal West Kent Regiment, but by March 1943, he had been transferred to the 7<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Royal West Kent Regiment. The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was required to send a draft of men to India, and Sgt TACON was one of those selected. By this time, his daughter Muriel Evelyn had been born (8 October 1942), and mother and daughter were living at The Grey House, Blackwell, Shipston-on-Stour, Warwickshire. Keen to see his daughter again, Sgt TACON was granted pre-embarkation leave, but exceeded his leave by one day for which he was fined one day's pay and was severely reprimanded.



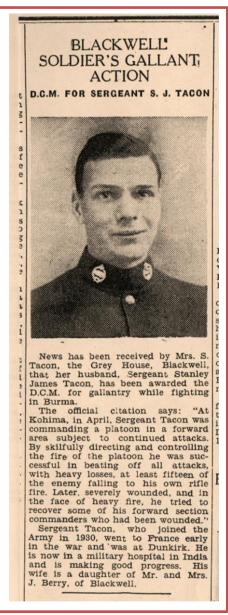
Above – Stanley TACON in the uniform of the Royal Tank Regiment, as a Sergeant circa late 1941, while serving with the 25<sup>th</sup> Army Tank Brigade.

Courtesy of: The TACON family.

On 11 September 1943, the draft embarked for India. On his arrival in India, on 13 October 1943, he was posted to the large reception camp at Deolali, near Bombay. On 10 January 1944, Sgt TACON was posted to the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Royal West Kent Regiment. This is when Sergeant Stanley TACON and Lance Corporal Jack HARMAN met up, with fate then decreeing that their lives would be inextricably linked. Sgt TACON suffered severe gunshot wounds on 9 April 1944 on D.I.S. Hill at Kohima. He had to sustain those injuries and the pain for several days before the garrison at Kohima was relieved, and the wounded could be evacuated. He was taken initially to the 66<sup>th</sup> Indian General Hospital, and then onwards to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Indian General Hospital on 24 April. These were both in Assam, but on 4 May 1944, he was evacuated (probably by aircraft) from the operational area, and taken to the 47<sup>th</sup> British General Hospital.

The hospital transfers continued, with the 128<sup>th</sup> Indian Base Hospital being his next location on 13 May 1944, followed by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Base Hospital on 2 August 1944. By this date, he had been notified of his immediate award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Stanley TACON left India on 11 September 1944 as a medical evacuee, and arrived back in the U.K. on 5 December. He was discharged from the Army as permanently medically unfit for any form of military service on 26 April 1945, bringing to the end a distinguished career.

Stanley TACON received his Distinguished Conduct Medal (D.C.M.) from King George VI at Buckingham Palace on 28 September 1945. He never fully recovered from his injuries, but continued with desk duties for the army as a civilian, and managed to raise a family of four girls. He passed away on 6 January 1973, and is buried at St Gregory's Church in Tredington, where he and Evelyn were married. Evelyn, lived on for a further forty years before passing away herself on 31 December 2014, and is buried alongside her husband.

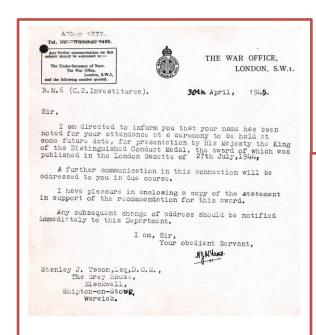


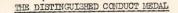




Above Left – Stanley TACON at Buckingham Palace after receiving his D.C.M. from King George VI, together with his wife Evelyn and sister-in-law Joan BERRY. Above Right – The front of Stanley TACON's Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Courtesy of: the TACON family



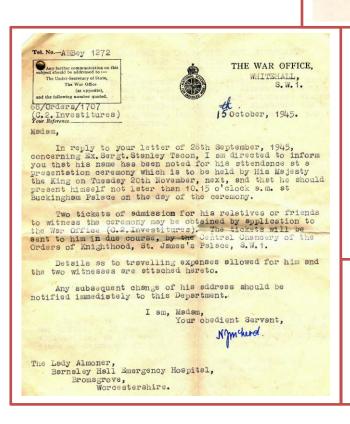


No. 5825023 Sergeant Stanley James Tacon, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment.

At KOHIMA on 8th/9th April, 1944, Sergeant Tacon was in command of a platoon in the forward area, which was subjected to continual attacks in strength by night and day.

By skillfully directing and controlling the fire of his platoon he succeeded in beating off all attacks with heavy losses to the enemy, at least 15 falling to his own rifle. He was, later, severely wounded when attempting to recover one of his forward section commanders who had been wounded knowing full well that the area was swept by medium machine gun fire.

His courage, devotion to duty and complete disregard for his personal safety was an inspiration to his men and of a very high order.

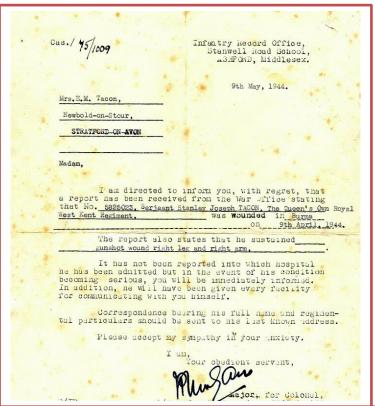


Left Top — Original letter notifying Stanley TACON of his award of the D.C.M.

Right Centre – The recommendation submitted by Lieutenant Colonel LAVERTY.

Left Bottom – Follow up letter regarding the investiture.

Courtesy of: the TACON family



Above – Letter notifying the family of the injury to Stanley TACON.

Right – The letter from General SLIM congratulating Sjt TACON on the award of his D.C.M. Courtesy of the TACON family



#### **Epilogue**

John's brother, Albion HARMAN, inherited Lundy Island upon the death of his father. Albion died in 1968, with the island being put up for sale the following year. It was purchased by an individual who gave it to the National Trust, who in turn have leased it to the Landmark Trust. There is a stone memorial to John HARMAN placed by his father in the quarry Jack so loved on the eastern side of the island. The memorial is a slab of blue-grey stone (Oxfordshire gault) set on a granite base in the disused quarry. It was dedicated in 1949 by the Reverend H. C. A. S. MULLER, the priest-in-charge of Lundy, in the presence of the population of sixteen people. In addition, there were about one-hundred special guests present. The inscription reads:

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

To the memory of JOHN PENNINGTON HARMAN, Aged 29 years

Son of Martin Coles Harman and Amy Ruth Harman

who died of wounds in Burma on Easter Sunday in the month of April 1944

For his bravery he was awarded the VICTORIA CROSS

The tablet was erected by his brother, Albion Pennington HARMAN; and his sisters Ruth Pennington HARMAN-JONES and Diana Pennington KEAST.



The memorial stone plague on Lundy Island.

Taken by the Author – June 2012

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[Accessed 13 May 2013]

# Lance Corporal J. P. HARMAN, V.C.

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