

POST-GREECE

Captain Conal McD O'Donnell, 292 Field Company RE & SOE

My father ended the war in bad shape. A poor parachute landing left him with permanent back pain. An American Dakota crew was responsible. They declined to drop him at the correct altitude for fear of hitting mountains. O'Donnell threatened them with his sidearm and they relented a little. Still he was dropped in the wrong place and badly injured himself on impact. Local women rubbed honey and herbs onto his back but the novel treatment didn't really work.

Stress and a bad diet also caused a duodenal ulcer - the remedy for which then was drastic surgery. This put paid to his hopes of a regular army career which he so desired. He was disappointed too with the MBE. This was not vanity, but resentment in that he felt as a Southern Irishman he was being fobbed off with the MBE while his contemporaries got DSOs. A DSO would also have improved his chances of getting into the Regulars, or so he believed. Years later his wife, Teddy, wrote to Buckingham Palace asking for the medal. It was presented on the doorstep by the postman (Note 1).

A successful marriage put him back on track and he resumed his pre-war career in local government. Even so it was not plain sailing. Ever the individualist he found it hard to kow-tow to councillors. As surveyor to a small town in Norfolk he caused outrage by playing golf instead of attending a council meeting. The local paper headlines screamed for an apology but he gave none. Then in 1955 he successfully sued his employers - East Dereham Urban District Council - for libel. Clearly he had rubbed some councillors up the wrong way. But they made the mistake of saying he was incompetent which he most certainly was not. The case attracted national attention - leaders in The Times, BBC TV News - for then it was unheard for a public servant to sue a public body. He won large damages and bought a house and constructed a swimming pool. But it was something of a pyrrhic victory. He was unsackable but also unpromotable - a marked man but fireproof too. It suited him fine. The rest of his life he devoted to his family and to his garden.

In many ways his death was organised as if it was his last mission. He declined surgery which may have prolonged his life. "I'm not a piece of meat" he told his doctor. Then his best friend, Sir Ralph Howell, the former MP for North Norfolk and an ex RAF bomber airman, was summoned for a last bedside Bells Whisky. The priest followed. He gave the Last Rites. When he offered to call again my father replied "No more priests!". Then he fell asleep with the ease all ex-servicemen seem to develop - the nap between the action. Only this time there wasn't going to be any more action. He died in the early hours of September 3rd 1996 aged 81. Christos Anesti !

He never really talked about the massacre apart from remarking that the wailing of the women was "unbearable". The experience badly affected him. After the war he suffered dreadful nightmares- what might now be called "post-traumatic stress" as did hundreds of thousands of ex-servicemen. Too many to treat, even if the diagnosis had been made. His strong Roman Catholic faith helped him cope with the experience.

In 1978 he returned to Kalavryta with his wife and was generally well received, although he resented the way some Communist sympathisers tried to claim that the British were in some way responsible for the tragedy. He couldn't bring himself to watch TV footage of later violence in the Balkans in the 1990s. It reminded him too much of wartime Greece. He was also outraged that the UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim was never held to account for his role as a German staff officer in Greece. A German report on the massacre was initialled by Waldheim. Following O'Donnell's death in 1996 his family discovered he'd always paid for a Requiem Mass to be said for the people of Kalavryta each Dec 13th.

Dr Godfrey O'Donnell returned to the UK in poor health only to be sent to Arnhem. Years afterwards he'd visit the Dutch family who sheltered him following the Airborne troops defeat.

Note:

(1) In fact O'Donnell was mistaken in this. DSOs were awarded very sparingly - only one of his contemporaries Lt Col R P McMullen received it. In June 1944 O'Donnell and Major D L Campbell MC spent sometime distributing aid and compensation in the form of air dropped gold sovereigns to areas devastated by Operation Kalavryta. Campbell was also awarded the MBE for his role in the Peloponnese.