

## Douglas Harry Search, 1923-1944



### Private No.5445316 2nd Battalion DCLI

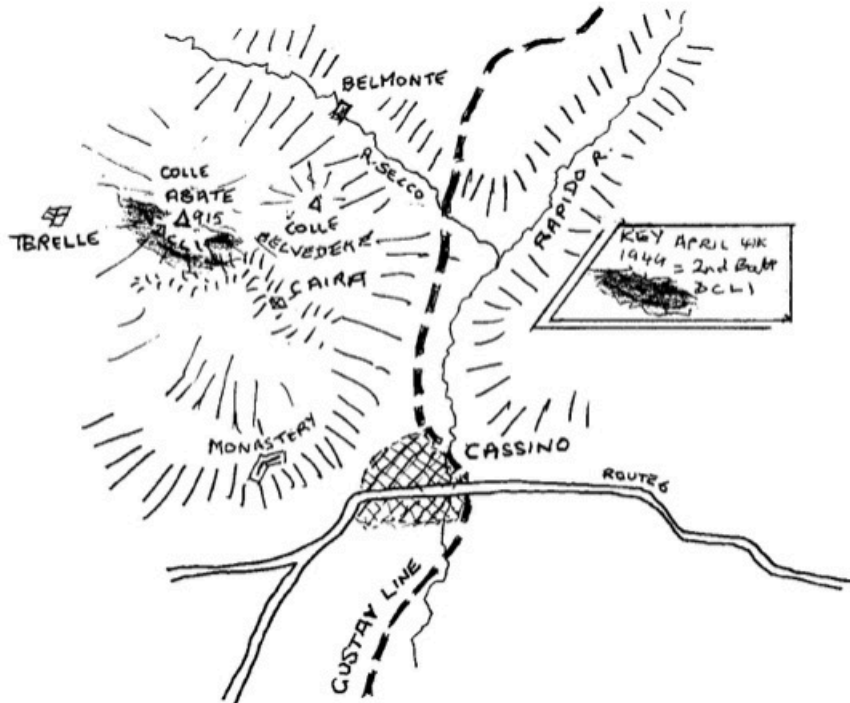
Douglas Search's birth was recorded in January 1923 in West Ham in East London, son of Harry Samuel Search and Elsie Maud Mary Search (nee Leader). Harry Search, at the time of his son's death, was landlord of the Royal Oak (now The Weary Friar) in Pillaton. Harry had been a successful fruit trader in East London throughout the 1920s and 30s and he went back there after the war so perhaps his family had had to leave London because of the bombing raids in that area.

Douglas enlisted on March 19th 1942 into the 2nd Battalion of the DCLI (Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Regiment). By that time the battalion had already seen much action. World War Two had been declared on September the 3rd, 1939 and by February 1940 the second battalion had been deployed as part of the British Expeditionary Force to defend the French Maginot line. This so-called "impregnable" line of defence was bypassed through the forests of the Ardennes by the Germans during the invasion of Holland and Belgium in May. Hard fighting followed but the German Blitz Krieg could not be held up for long and the 2nd Batt. found itself part of the rear guard during the evacuation from Dunkirk. The battalion then spent a couple of years refitting and undergoing specialist training. Douglas Search joined the 2nd Batt. just as it was sent to Scotland for intensive training in combined operations, especially beach landings.

In March 1943 the battalion was sent to Tunis as part of the 8th Army 4th Division. Tough fighting followed with the 2nd Batt. opening the final battle for Tunis in May. Casualty rates could be high. "A" and "D" companies for example lost five officers and 77 other ranks killed and Douglas must have known some of these men but we don't know which company he was in at the time. The Italian and German armies in North Africa capitulated on May 11th and 12th. and the battalion had a few months of rest and training. Numbers were brought up to strength by transfers from the 4th and 5th Batts.

Meanwhile, developments had been underway in Italy. In July 1943 Mussolini had been deposed and in August the Allies captured Sicily. Further landings were made on the toe of Italy and then in Salerno and the Germans were forced back northwards. They had prepared a number of carefully built defensive positions including the "Gustav Line". The Gustav line followed the Garigliano and Rapido rivers with Monte Cassino where the valleys joined. By November 2nd 1943 advanced Allied units reached the Gustav line. There followed three set battles over five months to capture the town of Cassino and the ancient monastery that overlooked it. The battles are claimed to be the hardest fought in WW2. The Allies decided to use overwhelming force to finally dislodge the stubborn German defenders in a decisive 4th battle and then break through to Rome. The 2nd Batt. DCLI was going to be part of this final attempt.

In February 1944 the 2nd Batt. left Egypt for Naples. It was then sent to defend Monte Ornito. Here they had their first experience of crossing steep mountains covered in boulders and large stones, where mules were the only feasible transport, and snow, rain and mist made for miserable conditions. There could be no comfortable shelter but rough sangars or indentations in the rocks with low piles of stones for protection but which in turn became dangerous when subjected to continuous shelling and mortar fire. In mid-March, the battalion was relieved and rested near Naples. The 2nd Battalion was then sent to relieve the third Algerian division in the mountains north of Cassino on the forward slope of Colle Belvedere. When further deployed on Colle Abate (point 915) to the West of Colle Belvedere the battalion could watch the heavy bombing and shelling of Cassino to the South East.



Map for the Battle of Monte Cassino,

1944

On April the 4th, the 2nd Batt. with other units of the 4th Division was ordered to be relieved and sent for river crossing training in preparation for the planned massive attack to try and breakthrough the Cassino blockage.

The DCLI War Diary for April 4th reports on the arrangements being made for the relief on the night of April 7th and 8th. This was a relatively quiet week apart from sporadic shelling and mortar attacks and by the early hours of April 8th the handover by A, C and D companies had been successfully completed. The only casualties mentioned in this period were two C company men wounded on April the 5th, two B company men wounded by mortar fire on the 6th., and another B company man killed on the 8th by a burst of heavy fire just before the relief was completed. Douglas, who is recorded as having died on the 9th of April, could have been one of those wounded on the 8th of April, or the B company man killed also on the 8th. There were no other 2nd Batt. casualties during this otherwise unopposed relief so Douglas was very unlucky to be killed at this time. He is commemorated in the Cassino War Cemetery (plot 1.A.4).

Preparations were now underway for a final major push to try to breakthrough to Rome and, on May the 13th under heavy German fire, the battalion crossed the Rapido river just South of Cassino followed by tanks and other units of the British 4th Division of the 8th Army. The battle for Cassino was as good as over.

My thanks to Deborah Vosper, volunteer researcher, at the DCLI museum in Bodmin for access to the 2nd Batt. DCLI War Diary and other material.

Don King  
(October 2022)