THE FINE NORMANDY 1944 'OPERATION BLUECOAT' D.C.M. RECOMMENDATION M.M. TO A 20 YEAR OLD CORPORAL OF 7TH SOMERSET LIGHT INFANTRY FOR HIS GALLANTRY ON 1 AUGUST 1944, DURING CLOSE QUARTER FIGHTING AT ST. PIERRE DU FRESNE, WHEN HIS PLATOONS POSITION WAS OVERRUN BY INFANTRY AND ARMOUR, HE STALKED TWO TANKS, ATTACKING THEM WITH PHOSPHORUS GRENADES AND FORCING THE CREW OF A JADGPATHER TO ABANDON THEIR TANK. TAKING PART IN THE ACTIONS AT LE SAUSSAY, 9 AUGUST, HE LED A RECCE PATROL ON 10TH AND PERSONALLY ELIMINATED A 'BUNCH' OF THE ENEMY HE RAN INTO. TWO DAYS LATER HE WAS KILLED IN ACTION DURING A 'HEDGEROW' FIREFIGHT WITH THE ENEMY

MILITARY MEDAL, G.VI.R.'14401018 CPL. J. H. L, MCCLERNON. SOM. L.I.', ON ORIGINAL PIN.

M.M. *London Gazette* 21 December 1944. The recommendation, originally for an immediate DCM, states:

"On 1 August 1944, at St. Pierre du Fresne at about 0900hrs, the position held by the Platoon to which Cpl McCLERNON belonged was attacked by Infantry and Tanks. One Section was over-run and only a sunken road divided the enemy from the rest of the platoon. Cpl McCLERNON collected and distributed ammo, stalked two tanks and threw grenades at close quarters. He moved continually about the platoon encouraging the defenders and was always present at the most exposed point. His bearing, example and initiative contributed materially to the defeat of an attack by a considerably superior force."

James Henry Long McClernon was born in London on 3 June 1924. He was obviously keen to join up and "do his bit" in WW2, as his service papers show he lied about his age to join the Royal Sussex Regiment three weeks after his 16th birthday in June 1940. He was given the service number 6405511 and served one year and twelve days before his true age was discovered. He was discharged for being underage in July 1941 but enlisted for the second time a few weeks after his 18th Birthday on 31 July 1942. Given a new service number - 14401018 and joining the 8th Battalion Middlesex Regiment on 28 October 1942, he was transferred to the 7th Battalion Somerset Light Infantry on 23 April 1944 and promoted to War Substantive Corporal two days later.

Serving with 'B' Company, Corporal McClernon and his battalion, as part of 43rd Wessex Division, landed in Normandy on 20 June 1944. During Operation Epsom (26 -30 June 1944), the Somersets took part in their first major action against elements of 1st SS Panzer Division. This offensive operation being a large-scale British attempt to out-flank and seize Caen.

The 43rd Divisions first major independent offensive action was during Operation Jupiter, the aim to take Hill 112, which had failed to be taken during Operation Epsom. Between the 11 and 12 July, the 43rd Division fought a bitter and close quarter battle against II SS Panzer Corps, with both sides sustaining large numbers of casualties. Control of this important hill, which overlooked Caen, was not secured until early August 1944.

After a short rest, 43rd Division took part in Operation Bluecoat, a large-scale British operation to take the high ground of Mont Pincorn, which would last between 30 July and 7 August 1944. It was during the fighting to take the small hamlet of St. Pierre du Fresne on 1 August, that Corporal McClernon would be recommended for the D.C.M. From his recommendation, War diary, history of the 7th Somersets and other research, including photographs of the tank he forced the crew to abandon (see pic). It is without doubt, Jagdpanther 314 of Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654, which had been brought up to support 326th Infantry Division during the British attacks of Operation Bluecoat

Having taken part in follow actions at Le Saussay on 9 August and led a recce patrol on 10th from Hau au Roi, Corporal McClernont was killed in action during a 'hedgerow' firefight with the enemy, whist his company was moving towards Mont Gaultie. He was just 20 years of age when he was killed.

Cpl McClernon's M.M. was presented to his widow, by the King, on 14 May 1946. His 39/45 Star, France & Germany Star and War Medal were posted to his now remarried widow (Mrs. M. D. Gepp) on 29 March 1950.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/43rd_(Wessex)_Infantry_Division

MENTIONS IN PUBLICATIONS

McClernon is mentioned several times in "The Story of the Seventh Battalion The Somerset Light Infantry" by Captain J. L. J. Meredith. Here he describes the action for which McClernon was awarded the MM:

"Enemy infantry were now discovered in Eleven platoon's forward post. There was heavy and close fighting in which Corporal Burge and three men were wounded, two more were killed, and the remaining two had to withdraw. In consequence the 75 Grenade tank trap was never closed. Confused fighting then ensued along the banks of the road with Twelve platoon grenading their infiltrating enemy and Eleven platoon firing two inch mortar H.E. at low angles.

It was extremely difficult to bring effective small arms fire to bear on the road owing to the deep banks and thick hedges. Several enemy were eliminated and their officer was killed by a 77 phosphorus grenade thrown by ***Corporal McClernon*** *(formerly of the Middlesex Regiment)-the remainder of this group withdrew.*

Captain Pinn with Company Headquarters took on some more enemy on the left with their two-inch mortar, and the Gunner officer directed this fire as well as the artillery. They all enjoyed this shoot and several enemy were dislodged from the banks and ditches.

The first, tank, covered by the second, was by now right in the middle of the Company and approaching "C" Company. Its guns were firing viciously at the buildings, but fortunately "B" Company's positions were all in the gardens. Suddenly, no-one quite knows when, the crew abandoned the tank unobserved and left it grinding forward still in gear.

JAGDPANTHER 314 WHICH WAS ABANDONED BY ITS CREW AT ST. PIERRE DU FRESNE

The second tank, blinded by phosphorus grenades bouncing on its roof, withdrew. ***Corporal McClernon*** *played merry hell with his grenades-throwing them about like tennis balls, and at the same time leading his own section and another which had lost its N.C.O.*

Soon after this the action died down, not too soon for the Company who had, by now, exhausted their whole stock of grenades and mortar bombs. The crew-less tank was finally brought to a halt by "C" Company in their area."

McClernon's actions during a patrol on the 10 August 1944:

"Early on the tenth Colonel Nicol put the gunners on to a selection of probable enemy assembly and forming up areas in case they should be contemplating a counter attack. We later found that the Boche were in the process of withdrawing and some groups of them were well plastered

Corporal McClernon *led a recce patrol due south from Hau au Roi with a gunner observation officer. He left his patrol on some high ground and went on by himself-the F.O.O. following at a discreet distance. On a stretch of road he met a small bunch of enemy and they saw each other simultaneously. It was* ***Corporal McClernon*** *who came back!"*

On the 12 August 1944 the Somersets were moving towards Mont Gaultier and in the ensuing action Cpl McCLernon was killed:

"The battalion advanced crocodile fashion along the track on the southern slope, Twelve platoon, led by ***Corporal McClernon****, in the lead.*

"B" Company had reached the "clear" position, when Corporal Baker saw enemy in the hedgerow between his platoon and the remainder of the Company, and opened fire. A general battle ensued in which ***Corporal McClernon*** *was killed, and Private Foster and Lance-corporal Moody were taken prisoner (later making their escape by knocking their captor unconscious."*

Of Corporal McClernon Colonel Nicol wrote:

"He was the best type of soldier and a very gallant man. His conduct in battle was always an example to all and as a patrol leader he was quite first class, notwithstanding that he had an intuition that he would be hit sooner or later and quivered from head to foot before setting out on a mission."

Further details of McClernon's sustained gallantry can be found in a newspaper article titled 'The Somersets in Western Europe, in the Wells Journal, 3 November 1944. The following during the attack on Le Saussay, 9 August 1944, when "B" Company of the 7th Somersets broke through a dense, fortified area of orchards, hedgerows, and farms to seize Le Saussay:

"…The attack on Le Saussay had its dramatic moments. One platoon entered the village, set out to neutralise a heavily defended house at the end of a lane and found a German car blocking their passage. ***Corporal McClernon*** *shot the German machine gunner who was positioned to cover the lane and the approach to the buildings and the car was quickly set on fire and the strongpoint neutralised….The company which attacked Le Saussay had the satisfaction of eliminating well over 100 casualties on the enemy, at a cost for but 12 to itself.."*

Condition EF. Sold with copied research: MM recommendation, full service papers, WW2 medal card,, Copy photograph, pages from 'The Story of the Seventh Battalion The Somerset Light Infantry', newspaper article in the Wells Journal, Copy Battalion War Diary (digital) June – August 1944

A really quite outstanding Normandy M.M. to an extremely brave and seemingly fearless young soldier