

telling our stories
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Commonwealth Cadet Training Tragedy in 1967

By Chris Walpole



The Belstone Archive features information about two cadets. Frank Woodward lived at Green Vale from the early 1950s until his death in 2000. He was a solicitor in Okehampton and the Chairman of Belstone Commoners for many years, looking after their rights.

Copy of text of a report made to Devon and Cornwall Police by Frank Woodward, then 53, about an incident on the moor on 1.11.1967:

"On Wednesday evening 1st November, 1967, at about 10.35pm I was at home when I noticed a soldier knocking at my drawing room window. I went to the front door and invited him into the kitchen. He had a rifle, walkie talkie equipment (aerial broken) and a lot of kit strapped about him. He was soaking wet and seemed exhausted. He told my wife and me that he was in a party of three Officer Cadets on a whole-day map reading exercise and that one of them had been injured and could not go on and that he had left the other two out on the Moor and had himself gone for help. He said that from where he had left the other two cadets he could see house lights and he had been making his way towards these. He said that the three cadets had only one torch between them and he had left this with the other two and had gone off to seek help in complete darkness.

He looked at his watch and said it had taken him an hour and a half to reach the village and that in the course of his journey he had waded across a swollen river but had seen no bridge. When this cadet arrived it was still raining very heavily and there was a strong cold wind with the rain.

Immediately I got the gist of this cadet's story I telephoned the Battle Camp at Okehampton and spoke to the Quartermaster Sergeant there and told him that a rescue party was needed at Belstone as soon as possible. The cadet, who proved to be Officer Cadet PYEMONT, also spoke on the telephone to the Quartermaster Sergeant and asked for a rescue party to be sent at once. This telephone call would have been made at about 10.40pm.

We then got Pyemont's kit off him and my wife made tea and produced biscuits. While Pyemont was having a cup of tea I put on a mackintosh and wellingtons and went outside to see if I could see any torch light flashing from the Moor on the opposite side of the river. I flashed my torch myself in that direction but there was no response and I came in again. The wind and rain were appalling.

From Pyemont's story, which he told in an exhausted voice, it seemed obvious to me that the other two cadets in his party were on the South Tawton side of the River Taw and that he had crossed the Taw to get to Belstone. Knowing what the Taw is like after rain such as we had been having I thought he was lucky to have got across without being bowled over, badly injured and washed downstream. By this time Pyemont was starting to shiver despite the warmth of the kitchen and my wife ran a hot bath for him and I provided a track suit, underwear and sweater for him to change into.

Soon after 11.00pm the rescue party arrived headed by Captain TURRALL. They came in a Land Rover and Captain Turrall had with him a Sergeant and a private soldier as the rescue



party There was another soldier left in the Land Rover. Captain Turrall interrogated the shivering Pyemont who tried to be as helpful as possible over the position of the other two cadets in his patrol and a one inch OS map was studied. When it was clear that the rescue party would have to look for the two cadets on the other side of the River Taw, I volunteered to take the rescue party across the River by the footbridge just below the village and to assist with the search. At this stage Pyemont went off to have his hot bath and emerged quite soon in the dry clothes I had provided for him.

My wife produced two blankets and a camp bed which Captain Turrall thought would serve as a stretcher. I said I was doubtful about the strength of the camp bed, though it had the advantage of being light to carry, and that I thought a stretcher could be obtained quite quickly from the Police Station. I telephoned the Police Station to ask if they had a stretcher should we need one and was told that one was available, However, Captain Turrall said he would use the camp bed. I had a hand torch myself and provided another hand torch for Pyemont. Captain Turrall had a reasonably powerful hand torch and one other member of the rescue party had a small hand torch.

I lent Pyemont a duffle coat and we all set off down to the River led by myself. I should think it was then about 11.25pm. We crossed the footbridge and then at Captain Turrall's suggestion we climbed the opposite hill (Cawsand Beacon) to gain height in order to see if we could spot any torch light flashes from the missing cadets. At the same time we spread out but only enough to keep in touch with each other still by the light of our torches. It was pitch dark. The other members of the rescue party periodically raised shouts of "Thompson" who was one of the missing cadets.

From PYEMONT'S description of what he could see of the village when he left the other two members of his patrol it was difficult at this stage to know if the rescue party should search the moor in the direction of Sticklepath or in the direction of Birchy Lake, Belstone. On balance of probabilities it seemed more likely that the missing cadets were on the moor towards the Birchy Lake direction and on Captain Turrall's instructions we spread out again and made in that direction. By this time the rain had stopped and the wind had dropped considerably. It was still very cold. Captain Turrall and the private soldier were on the lower stretches of ground while the Sergeant and I climbed higher up. After some time we crossed the tributary which runs into the river Taw from the Cawsand Beacon direction near the house called Tawcroft beyond Birchy Lake, Belstone. The Sergeant and I were below and within about 50 feet of a pile of rocks where I thought the missing soldiers might be sheltering as Pyemont said that they were by some large boulders when he left them and we were about to set off for this pile of rocks when a shout from further down the hill told us that the others had found the missing soldiers. The Sergeant and I immediately went down the hill towards the others. I would think it was then about 1.00am.

By the time we had got there the blankets had been put over the Kenyan cadet who seemed to be unconscious but moved his legs and arms now and again. The other cadet, Thompson, was coherent but just about all in from exhaustion. The Kenyan was put on to the camp bed



as a stretcher and I suggested to Captain Turrall that the best way to get him out was to take him along the sheep track along the South Tawton side of the Taw and across the footbridge which we had crossed earlier. We accordingly started to carry the stretcher in that direction but we were in a particularly rough part of the moor. There were large boulders, pot-holes, heather and bracken and it proved impossible to move the stretcher more than a few feet at a time, partly due to the difficulty of the ground and partly due to the fact that the other members of the rescue party, who had been out all day on the Moor themselves since 5.0 am that morning had not the strength left for a carry of this kind. It became obvious that more help would have to be obtained and I suggested to Captain Turrall that I should get back to Belstone as quickly as possible along the tracks I knew and organise reinforcements. Captain Turrall thought, however, that the stretcher could be got across the River and up to the Birchy Lake road whence the exhausted cadets could be taken by motor transport to hospital and this would be much quicker than my suggestion. I said I would not attempt to cross the swollen river there myself for fear of being injured and washed down. However, Captain Turrall went off with the private soldier down to the River and evidently got across because quite soon afterwards I saw his torch flashing amongst the trees on the other side of the river. In the meantime the Sergeant told the other soldiers to massage the Kenyan's legs.

It was then I think about 1.35am. I told the Sergeant that I was quite sure that, though Captain Turrall may have managed to get across the river, we would never be able to get the stretcher across with the Kenyan on it with the River in spate as it was.

After a further interval during which Captain Turrall disappeared on the other side and his torch was no longer seen, the Sergeant made up his mind and said to me, "You go back, sir, like you said, and get a proper stretcher and a carrying party." After suggesting that during the wait for help the others should huddle up to the Kenyan to provide him with warmth, I immediately set off back to the village by means of the sheep tracks well known to me from walking on the moor with my dogs, and I reckon I reached the village in about a quarter of an hour by fast walking and part running. As I got to the top of the slope from the River I saw Captain Turrall's Land Rover was still there and another Land Rover just then drove up and an officer got out. I quickly told him what we had been doing and what the position now was and that we needed a proper stretcher and a strong carrying party who could take it in turns to get the stretcher out. He at once said he would go for a stretcher and an ambulance and I said that I would guide them to where the first rescue party was with the injured Kenyan cadet. He again said he would go for a stretcher and eight men and would be back in 20 minutes and he left at once in his Land Rover. I went into my house and had a cup of tea and hung about waiting for this officer and the fresh carrying party to arrive. It was then I think about 1.55 am.

At about 3.0 am this officer and another officer arrived in three Land Rovers with an ambulance and about 15 men. I spoke to the officer and told him that we could set off immediately and I could take them directly to where the first rescue party was with the injured Kenyan. The carrying party had a fair number of hand torches and we set off within



a minute or two of their arrival with myself in the lead. I led the party at a fast walk down to the river, across the footbridge and along the sheep tracks to the first rescue party. We reached the first rescue party in about 20 minutes. When we arrived the new officers spoke to Captain Turrall who said that the Kenyan cadet had passed away about half an hour earlier. There was further talk which I did not hear.

Captain Turrall at once had the Kenyon strapped to the proper stretcher which the new carrying party had brought and they got it down to the River where, by forming a human chain across the swollen river, they somehow got the stretcher across. All this was done very quickly and efficiently. They must then have got the stretcher up through the woods on the other side on to the Birchy Lake road and carried it back to the village along that road to the ambulance. My wife later told me that she had seen the stretcher being carried along that road to the ambulance which was parked near my house.

Thompson, the cadet who had been left by PYEMONT with the Kenyan, said that his legs had gone and that he could not cross the swollen River and asked if he could come back with me on the South Tawton side. I said he had better ask his officer which he did and the officer agreed to Thompson, Pyemont and the private soldier who had been on the first rescue party coming back to the village with me via the footbridge. I accordingly took them back along the sheep tracks. As I was the only one with a torch and the main sheep track runs along the top of a nearly vertical slope about 50-70 feet in depth, I had to go a few yards at a time and then shine my torch back to let the others come forward along the track and then continually repeat the process. Accordingly this took considerable time – I should think about 35 to 40 minutes. Anyway, when we breasted the slope into the village, the ambulance had gone and only Captain Turrall's Land Rover remained and with it was one of the officers from the second rescue party. Pyemont then collected his kit from my house and after a cigarette they all piled into this Land Rover and went off. It was nearly 4.30am.

The times given in this statement are very approximate and may not be accurate as I did not keep looking at my watch. The time when Pyemont arrived at my house, namely 10.35pm, is accurate and the time when the second rescue party with the ambulance arrived outside my house, namely 3.00am, is accurate. [Signed F J Woodward, 6th November 1967]

Daily Express article, dated 21.11.1967; 'Coroner accuses Army of neglect; A Coroner yesterday accused the Army of negligence in the case of two Commonwealth officer cadets who died of cold and exhaustion during an endurance test on Dartmoor.

He was Lieut-Col Derek Brown, whose area covers West Devon. 'It is difficult to understand' he said, 'that while every effort is made in training to avoid casualties at the hand of an enemy, no training is given to avoid casualties by other means such as exposure. It is clear there has been some neglect or negligence.'



Patrols were expected to be out on the moor after dark he said. If each man had been issued with a torch, rescue would have been easier.

The patrol on which Gabriel Tarkumbul Ugba, a 28 year-old Nigerian died, had only one torch between three men to read their map and instructions. 'The whereabouts of any individual would have been much easier to find and a great saving of time would no doubt have resulted' said the coroner. 'In spite of the weather, the clothing issued was not waterproof and no spare equipment, sleeping bag, tent, or shelter was carried. Furthermore, when the casualty showed signs of stress, every effort was made to urge him on. It is said to be impossible to over-emphasise the importance of not forcing a casualty to bash on. Physical exhaustion in cold kills quickly. I can only hope that full instructions will now be given to all concerned with exercises on Dartmoor and those taking part will be suitably attired and sensibly equipped.'

The colonel praised the efforts that were made to rescue the two Africans who, he decided, died from misadventure.

He singled out 19-year-old cadet Christopher Pyemont, who fought his way through a river in flood to get help for Harrison Gideon Kalani, a 20-year-old Kenyan who was also training at the Mons officer cadet school at Aldershot. Said Colonel Brown: 'It is difficult to imagine how in pitch darkness, and in a very exhausted condition, he made his way over most difficult terrain and managed to cross a river 4ft deep said to be running like a torrent. He showed courage and determination of the highest order.'

There was praise too for Captain Richard Turrall, of the Devon and Dorset Regiment who led the rescue party called by Cadet Pyemont. The coroner also commended his deputy Mr Frank Woodward, of Belstone, at whose house Pyemont sought help.'

Finally, this is what I wrote about 'The Irishman's Wall' in *The Book of Belstone* (2002);

The Irishman's Wall: Various theories have been put forward to explain this wall, which runs east to west across Belstone Tor. It closely follows the old boundary between the Forest of Dartmoor and Belstone and South Tawton Commons between Cullever Steps and the summit of Cosdon, leading some to believe it was a deliberate marking of that boundary. Others have identified further sections of the wall, in particular along the Black-a-ven Brook, and seen it as part of an early 19th century attempt to enclose 2000 acres of Forest, probably with Duchy sanction. Matthew Crawford, one of the main "improvers", is believed to be responsible for employing the "Irishmen" – which may have been a derogatory term for any outsider – who did the work. In *Dartmoor Worker* (1903) William Crossing noted those employed in the building astonished the people of the moor, by their utter contempt for boots and stockings. He also believed he had found, on the eastern side of the Taw above Holloway's Field sheepfold, the ruins of a house that locals said the "Irishmen" had lived in.

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The attempt at enclosure failed. The story that comes down to us tells of irate Belstonians (including Clifford Pike's great-great-grandparents Thomas and Elizabeth Brock) and men from Okehampton biding their time before marching to the wall, pulling it down and driving the intruders away.