

# Devil's advocate

*Cousin's passion keeps dead soldier's memory from fading*

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LUNENBURG — S/Sgt. Frank Harvey may have died in the line of duty, but Mary Bhagan is determined not to let the same fate happen to his memory.

It was while she was growing up in Moncton, New Brunswick, that the Lunenburg resident first heard family members speak about her mother's first cousin who had perished in Italy while serving his country during the Second World War.

"We always knew Frank died overseas during the war, but that's all we were told," she recalls. "When his brother passed away, he left everything to my mother."

After her mother's death in 2004, Ms Bhagan began looking through her things, and discovered some interesting memorabilia relating to her cousin's war days.

"I found newspaper clippings and other things saying he belonged to this special unit, this commando force that trained in Helena, Montana. I kept thinking, what is this?"

Thanks to the internet and other research, Ms Bhagan soon learned that S/Sgt. Harvey was no ordinary soldier, but was in fact a member of a unique group known as the First Special Service Force, made up of a combination of American and Canadian troops who wore a common uniform and operated under a single command.

"They were paratroopers highly trained in mountain climbing, skiing, demolitions and hand-to-hand combat," she explains.

Formed in 1942, the force was originally destined to be dropped behind enemy lines in Norway, but when that mission

was abandoned due to logistical problems and other issues, they were rerouted to the Aleutian campaign to help drive the Japanese out of the Alaskan island chain.

Prior to landing in Kiska, however, the Japanese withdrew under cover of fog, turning that mission into a "dry run," and rerouting them to Italy where they saw their first combat.

It was during their Italian mission that force members, their faces blackened with burnt cork, partook in nighttime raids on enemy installations. Those soirees earned them the nickname "The Black Devils," after one German soldier wrote in his diary that "The Black Devils are all around every time we come into the line and we never hear them come."

Ms Bhagan says that her cousin was a member of the St. John's Fusiliers when he volunteered for the force, and that at the time "none of them knew what they were getting involved in."

The more she dug into S/Sgt. Harvey's history, the more she began developing "a real passion" for the unit, and was driven to learn more about them.

"Number 1, I wanted to go to Helena, Montana, to find his name on the monument which the force [erected and] paid

for themselves, collected money during the war and after," she says. "I did that, and the more I did, the more I ended up doing."

Following her trip south of the border, Ms Bhagan's next goal was to travel to Italy to find S/Sgt. Harvey's gravesite, a journey she finally made in 2007.

"At the first reunion I went to in Helena, which happened to be the 60th in 2006, I made a connection with a gentleman from Italy who attended the reunion, because he is ... an honorary member of the association on the Italian side of it," she says. "He said, 'if you ever come to Italy, e-mail me and I'll make sure you get to the cemetery.' He ended up doing far more than that."

During that trip, Ms Bhagan spent three days touring areas of the country that were liberated from Axis occupancy with the help of the force, including such towns as Monte de Difensa, Monte Majo and Monte Cassino.

Earlier this summer she returned to Italy, one of 36 people who are either descendants of, or hold a special passion for, the First Special Service Force members. They, along with force veteran Eugene For-

ward of Lancaster, Ontario, spent a week touring the Italian battlefields where the unit fought over six decades ago.

Ms Bhagan says Mr. Forward's presence with the group "made the trip for the rest of us, to have him there at each point remembering and telling us the stories."

"It was very emotional for a lot of these people, sons and daughters. Some of them knew their dads, some of them didn't," she says.

Ms Bhagan says that for her, the quest never stops as she continues to seek out more information on S/Sgt. Harvey, including trying to find the exact location where he was wounded.

One valuable resource she has uncovered is another local Italian gentleman who, with four colleagues, developed the Winter Line Museum in honour of one of the German lines of defence the force helped eliminate during their push to liberate Rome.

"We were looking for a certain mountain peak where I knew, in that area, my relative was wounded," she recalls. "Through connections and phone calls, we ended up meeting him and he said, 'I know exactly where [it] is.'"

She says that through historical archives, she has also located another site where she believes S/Sgt. Harvey was "tagged" by stretcher bearers, and her Italian connection promised to take her to that spot on her next visit.

For Ms Bhagan, a proud member of the First Special Service Force Association, it is a trip that can't come soon enough.

"It's just amazing.

"I've never experienced anything like this," she says. "Truly, when they say First Special Service Force, there is a force driving everyone. We don't know how to describe it."



S/Sgt. Frank Harvey, a member of the First Special Service Force known as the Black Devils, was killed in Italy in January 1944 at the age of 27.

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