

Lost soldier's letters find their way home after 70 years

IT'S the kind of story which almost beggars belief, the kind of story great films are made about and the kind of story which instantly captivates.

The tale of what happened to a cache of letters belonging to Armley-born Rifleman Laurence A Armitage, of the London Irish Rifles, in 1943 is nothing short of extraordinary, for not only does it transport us to the very heart of one of the most momentous periods in recent history – the Second World War – it offers a rare insight into the feelings of those who lived through it. We can only guess at the circumstances which led to Rifleman Armitage becoming separated from his personal letters. They had been lovingly penned by his mother, sister and friends and were full of news of events at home, his mother's worries and her aspirations for a son so far away.

That the 19-year-old kept the letters safe and about his person is evidence enough of their importance to him. Indeed, that when they were rediscovered more than 20 years later, they were safely stowed inside a German ammunition tin, is further testimony as to how dear they really were.

Whether they were dropped by accident or abandoned in desperate need is uncertain, all that can be said is that at some point during 1943, Rifleman Armitage was separated from those letters.

He would never find them again. Fast-forward 21 years and Italian schoolboy Levino de Fidelibus, then 13, was in the process of clearing some ground in a field on the edge of his home town of Rocca San Giovanni (about 100 miles north of Napoli), so he and his friends could play football, when he came across a rusty old tin. He picked it up and opened it. Inside he found several letters written in a foreign language. He took them home to his mother, along with a number of English helmets he had also found. His mother eventually threw out the helmets but Levino made sure she kept the letters.

That was where they remained for the next 45 years, by which time Levino had become a librarian in his home town.

It was there in 2009 he met by chance Canadian-born amateur historian Martha Sarmatiuk, who had moved to the Abruzzo region some 26 years earlier and fallen in love with the place. She was researching the role of Canadian forces in the Italian campaign during the Second World War when Levino mentioned the letters to her. Martha became fascinated by their story.

Martha, 58, said: "I was speechless as I first held the letters and realised what history lay behind them. I felt incredible emotion. "Levino explained how as a young boy he uncovered from the ground a few English helmets and a packet of letters in a German ammunition tube while clearing a soccer field.

"I told Levino with a bit of looking I could easily find the owner of the letters. How wrong I was. "My paper trail took me all over the world, even to Australia. I placed notices on forums and received various responses but no definite leads."

Two of the letters in question were

A stash of letters dropped by a Leeds soldier in Italy in 1943 have re-appeared almost 70 years later and not only are they on their way home, they have helped re-unite a family, as **Neil Hudson** discovered



REUNITED: Julie Armitage with her mother Edna Armitage and brothers, from left, Dennis Bainbridge, David Armitage and Richard Armitage with their father Laurie Armitage's WW2 medals

FIND: One of the letters discovered in Italy



PAPER TRAIL: Martha Sarmatiuk and Levino de Fidelibus

written by Laurence's mother, Janet, of 39 Station Road, Armley, while one was from his sister Wynne and four more were from friends. They were addressed to Rifleman Armitage while he was stationed with the British force in North Africa. The letter from his mother is among the most emotive. Part of it reads: "My own dear son... My dearest and sweetest kisses and tightest hugs, ever and always, your own sweetheart. xxx Mam."

In another letter, she speaks of her joy at having received a reply from him: "Now at least I have been rewarded and believe me, I feel at least 10 years younger!"

In March 2010, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* published the story of the lost letters in the hope of finding information about Rifleman Armitage.

Then, out of the blue, in December 2010, a man named Dennis Bainbridge contacted Martha to say he was the son of Laurence Armitage.

Martha said: "On December 1, 2010, with hands shaking, I opened an email from Dennis Bainbridge of Leeds, stating Lawrence A Armitage was his father. My search had ended." In fact, not only had she found 'Laurie', as she had come to call him, they had helped reunite two sides of his family.

Dennis Bainbridge, 59, a former BP engineer, was born after Laurence met and married his first wife, Marisa, now 83, in Caserta, near Naples, Italy. He also had a daughter with her called Janet.

He said: "After the Battle of Monte Cassino, dad restored electrical power to the palace at Caserta, which is where he met my mother. She was an interpreter for the Allied forces and he was considered a hero for what he did for the people of the town.

"Dad moved back to England, re-married and had a further four children, David, Richard, Julie, and Andrew who died in 2004."

Father-of-three Mr Bainbridge, who also has three grandchildren, grew up with only scraps of information about his half-brothers and sister.

He added: "The discovery of the letters has brought all this to the surface and helped re-unite our family."

Mother-of-two Julie Armitage, 51, of Pudsey, who is a senior sister at Robin Lane Medical Centre, Pudsey, and is Dennis's half-sister, said: "We first found out about the letters after Dennis came home after living in Bulgaria for a time. He wanted to track us down and came across the *YEP* story.

"He only knew dad for about 16 months because he never got in touch while his step-father was still alive." Laurence Armitage died aged 83 in

February 2006, and his story is even more astonishing. Richard Armitage, 52, a refuse collector and father-of-three, who has five grandchildren, said: "Dad told me a lot of what went on in the war.

"While in Italy, he and five others became separated from their company and they had to live rough for two weeks – they had no weapons and no food, they had to steal from farms just to live, they were on the run in enemy territory.

"One day, they spotted a German dispatch rider heading their way. They managed to string a rope across the road and when he got near they



FUN-LOVING: Laurie Armitage, front, pictured during WW2

pulled it tight and knocked him off. "The German had a sub-machine gun and one of my dad's group wanted to shoot him but my dad said 'I'm not slotting anyone' because he didn't want it on his conscience, so they let the German go.

"All six climbed onto the motorcycle but they weren't on it long because when they tried to set off, the bike was in reverse, so they all fell off.

"They managed to get going and found their platoon, it sounds like something from a film but the way he told it, it was like it was nothing." He added: "When I was 12, he once spoke about being in close quarter combat with some Germans and it was a kill-or-be-killed situation using bayonets. He said he could still see their faces, he wasn't proud of that, he was very upset about it. They were all just young lads but it was him or them."

David Armitage, 56, a father-of-two, said: "My father was fun-loving but when we were kids he was a bit of a disciplinarian, he brought us up right, you could say."

Julie added: "It's such a shame dad didn't get to know about his lost letters as I think they would have meant a lot to him. He didn't used to like talking about the war but he started to open up a bit more as he got older. When dad died, we played the

song, the *D-Day Dodgers* at his funeral. It was poignant.

The soldiers fighting in Italy were called the D-Day dodgers by Lady Astor [Britain's first female MP] in one of her speeches, implying they had it easy – it so upset those fighting in Italy they wrote a sarcastic song about it."

One of the stanzas goes: "Dear Lady Astor, you think you

know a lot/ Standing on your platform and talking bloody rot./ You're England's sweetheart and its pride;/ We think your mouth's too bleeding wide./ That's from your 'D-Day Dodgers' in sunny Italy."

Laurence's widow, Edna, 78, who met her late husband while working as a waitress at The Downcliff Hotel, Filey in 1950, said: "I was astounded when we found out about the letters. I only wish Laurie could have been alive to see them."

The story does not end there, either, because the family plan to visit Martha and Levino in Rocca San Giovanni in May to be re-united with the long lost letters. Martha was assisted in her search by Leeds residents Brenda Hull, an amateur genealogist, and Kate Rulli, who first suggested she contact the *YEP*.

She added: "I am really looking forward to meeting Laurie's family. After more than a year-and-a-half of searching, I have finally got the answer I have been looking for and after nearly 70 years, Laurie's letters are finally going home."

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