

Old Scouts Honour Inspirational Leader

In 2015, members of First Rochdale Rover Scout Group, all now in their mid to late 70s, travelled to Fort William in Scotland to honour the memory of their former leader, Bill Lee.

First Rochdale is one of the oldest Scout Troops in the world having been founded in 1908 - within the first year of Baden Powell forming the Boy Scout Movement.

In 1954, six members of the then Senior Section of the Troop were successful in achieving the Queens Scout Award and were presented with their badges and certificates by the Chief Scout, Lord Rowallen at a ceremony held at Gilwell Park - the world centre of Scouting.

It was then decided to form a Rover Crew for Scouts over the age of 18, and the Crew Members set about the task of recruiting a leader with suitable experience and expertise to take them forward. Following a wide search, they were introduced to Bill Lee, a relative of the then Group Scout Master.

Although Bill Lee had no history in Scouting, the Group was delighted to discover that he did serve in the elite Army Commandos during WWII.



Bill Lee

At first, Bill was reluctant to make a commitment to The Scout Group as, at the time, he was heavily involved in the Civil Defence Organisation - it being the mid-1950s and the time of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain - however, after a little persuasion, Bill agreed to become Rover Leader on condition that the members of the crew made a commitment to put Public Service at the top of their agenda.

During the early part of this new relationship some aspects of Bill's wartime army service became known, in particular that he had been a Commando Instructor at CBTC (Commando Basic Training Centre) Achnacarry, near Fort William...

Throughout his time as Rover Leader, Bill Lee was always reticent about his time in the Commandos, but Crew members were aware that he had been involved in raids from Scotland, across the North Sea, to Norway to destroy German targets, and that he had received serious injuries during the Italian campaign.

As Rover Leader, Bill introduced the crew to new activities and encouraged high levels of achievement. Learning of his Commando background, the Rovers were enthusiastic participants in climbing, camping and canoeing. One of the first tasks Bill set Rover Crew members was to construct two canoes similar in design to those used in the Norway raids.

In 1966, the most memorable event where Rover Crew members were able to demonstrate their public spirit was when they were amongst the first to arrive to try to help following the appalling coal slurry slide in Aberfan, in South Wales, which resulted in the death of over 100 school children.



Bill Lee and son Chris

Bill continued as Rover Leader for ten successful and enjoyable years and Crew members still meet annually for a commemorative dinner with between a dozen to twenty ex-members congregating from far and wide to reminisce and be ever thankful for those great times when bonds of friendship and camaraderie were formed and which have lasted for a lifetime.

At the 55th Reunion Dinner held in February 2015, Les Marshall, who had been unable to attend for some years, reported that he had recently been researching into Bill Lee's records in the Commandos and with the help of Bill's son, Chris, and nephew, John, was able to tell the Group more details of Bill's Commando Service.

As a TSM (Troop Sergeant Major) at Achnacarry, one of Bill's jobs was to train the first contingent of US Rangers generally known as Darby's Rangers. 'B' Company showed their appreciation by presenting him with a silver mounted inscribed swagger stick.



Engraved swagger stick presented by 'B' Company, US Rangers to TSM Bill Lee

But by then, Bill had already taken part in the West Africa Dakar raid and against German positions on the Norwegian Lofoten Islands

Bill also took part in the early Allied assault of Sicily and Italy and it was on his 24th birthday, in October, 1943, during the No.3 Commando raid on Termoli, that Bill was seriously wounded. For Bill, the war was over...

The First Rochdale Rover Scout Group were all very much aware of and thankful for having known and been guided by such an inspirational leader and now that Bill's full military record has come to light it was decided to commemorate his life in both capacities.

At the Rover Crew 55th Annual Reunion Dinner, it was proposed that some form of appreciation be made to mark the ten year contribution of Bill Lee, as first post-war Rover Scout Leader, by erecting an appropriate monument to his memory.

Although many miles from Rochdale, it was agreed that the most appropriate place for a tribute to Bill would be at the site of the CBTC at Achnacarry in Scotland

An initial enquiry to the estate received a warm response from The Cameron of Locheil (Clan Chief of the Camerons) who proposed 3 possible sites within the original Commando training area.

Working with Estate Manager Astie Cameron, one site was selected and work began to design and make the commemoration.

A granite block from Bodmin Moor was acquired and cut to receive the dedication which briefly lists Bill's Commando career and his association with the First Rochdale Rover Crew.

Members of the original 1958 crew and their wives visited Achnacarry on a couple of lovely days in mid-September 2015 for the informal, yet moving and enjoyable dedication.

All expressed their personal gratitude for having known Bill, for his guidance and inspirational example during their formative years, establishing the best principles of public service.

Following the dedication, the group enjoyed a visit to the Clan Cameron and Commando museum and a walk around the significant parts of the estate used for Commando training during the war and where remnants of that activity can still be seen.

The group was delighted when Locheil paid a visit and asked if all had enjoyed the experience.

The First Rochdale Rover Scout Group would like to express our sincere thanks to Locheil and Astie Cameron for their generosity and help in the realisation of the project.



Chris Lee at the site of his father's, TSM Bill Lee, No.3 Commando, memorial stone





Chris Lee, John Mainwaring, Les Marshall and members of the First Rochdale Rover Scout Group



Commando Instructors from CTCRM Lympstone, taking part in a Speed March, who were invited to take part in the unveiling of the stone.