

John Morcombe Hoskin



Private 5436103, West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince of Wales's Own)

Died October 31st 1943, aged 30

Memorial at St Endellion Churchyard

Son of Ernest Alfred and S H Hoskin of Port Isaac

John Morcombe Hoskin (*always known as Jack*) was born in Devon in spring 1912, the son of Ernest Alfred and Susie Hoskin. The 1911 census shows the family were living at Lower Hornbrook, Kelly, Devon, (*adjacent to Cleave Farm, about 2 miles south east of Lifton*), undoubtedly where Jack was born. The census records Ernest Alfred (46) was a farm labourer living in a five room cottage with his wife Susie (36 – *nee Honey*) and six daughters; Catherine Billing (13), Mary Brown (12), Susie (11), Liza (10), Ada (3) and Rebecca (1). The census records they had 9 children in their 15 year marriage, 3 of whom had not survived. The first four girls were born in Port Isaac, as were Ernest and Susie, but Ada was born in Lanivet and Rebecca in Blisland, so they had been moving about the previous few years. After Jack was born, Ernest and Susie had more children, all girls, and he ended up the only boy amongst 13 girls. The family subsequently returned to Port Isaac, where they lived in the cottage alongside the Harbour Café.

Jack was in the West Yorkshire Regiment and had travelled to many parts of the world. In World War 2 he fought in the Burma campaign, suggesting he was in 1st Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment as the 2nd Battalion did not arrive in Burma from the Middle East until a few months before he died. 1st Battalion was part of 17th Infantry Division (India) and was attached to the division on February 5th 1942, a fortnight after the Japanese had attacked Burma. The 17th Division had only arrived at Rangoon on January 9th 1942, and had to fall back as they were too few in number, wrongly equipped and inadequately trained, hence the need for reinforcements. It fought in the Battle of Sittang Bridge, where half its strength were on the wrong side of the bridge when it was blown in the early hours of February 22nd to stop the Japanese having a clear march on Rangoon. Instead of wiping out the 17th, the Japanese disengaged and headed north to find another crossing to get to Rangoon. A few thousand of the cut-off 17th Division managed to cross the river without any equipment. With only 40% of its establishment left, the 17th retreated north, narrowly escaping being trapped in Rangoon, and again at Kalewa in the north of Burma, before ending up in Assam, India. With the arrival of the monsoon in May, active campaigning ceased on both sides until the rains ended in December.



Brigadier Orde Charles Wingate
creator of the Chindits

The family recall Jack was in the Chindits, and it may have been during this monsoon time that Jack joined this special unit. The Chindits were created by Brigadier Orde Charles Wingate as a special force in the British infantry. It also included elements from the legendary Ghurkhas. It was named after the mythical Burmese beast Chinthay, statues of which guard Buddhist temples. The Chindits were a long range penetration unit to infiltrate the jungle on foot in columns to carry out guerrilla warfare, with supplies dropped by air. Heavy equipment was carried on mules, although every man carried 72 pounds (33kg) on his back. There were 306 men to a column, including 57 mule handlers.

The first action of this special force began on February 8th 1943 with Operation Longcloth, where some 3,000 Chindits began their march into Burma. Two columns marched south, one column successfully carrying out demolitions along the railway, but the second was ambushed and only half were able to return to India. The other five columns proceeded eastward, one attacking the main railway to demolish it in 70 places, although it was back in commission within a week. Many times the Chindits would have to hack their own path through the jungle with machetes or kukris, and on one occasion a commandeered elephant! Such long gruelling marches laden with equipment and often living on short rations led to sickness and disease such as dysentery and malaria. Wingate gave strict orders that wounded were to be left behind, although these orders were not always followed. Some were left behind with Burmese villagers, at considerable risk to them. Were the wounded soldier discovered, neither the Chindit, nor his native friends, could expect any mercy from the Japanese.

INSERT IMAGE



A column of Chindits with their mules crossing a
Burmese stream in 1943

At the end of March 1943 Wingate ordered the majority of forces to withdraw back to India since they had reached the range limit of air supply. The columns gradually broke up into smaller groups as they made their way back. Some headed east and made it into China, some escaped into the far north of Burma. Throughout the spring and into the autumn of 1943, groups of Chindits made their way back to India. Of the 3,000 men who had begun, only 2,182 returned, almost a third of which were too debilitated by wounds and disease to return to active service and were sent home.

The Chindits carried out further penetrations behind enemy lines in 1944, with over 9,000 men brought in by air to jungle landing zones. Wingate was killed in a plane accident in March 1944, leading to a change in command. They were finally disbanded in February 1945.

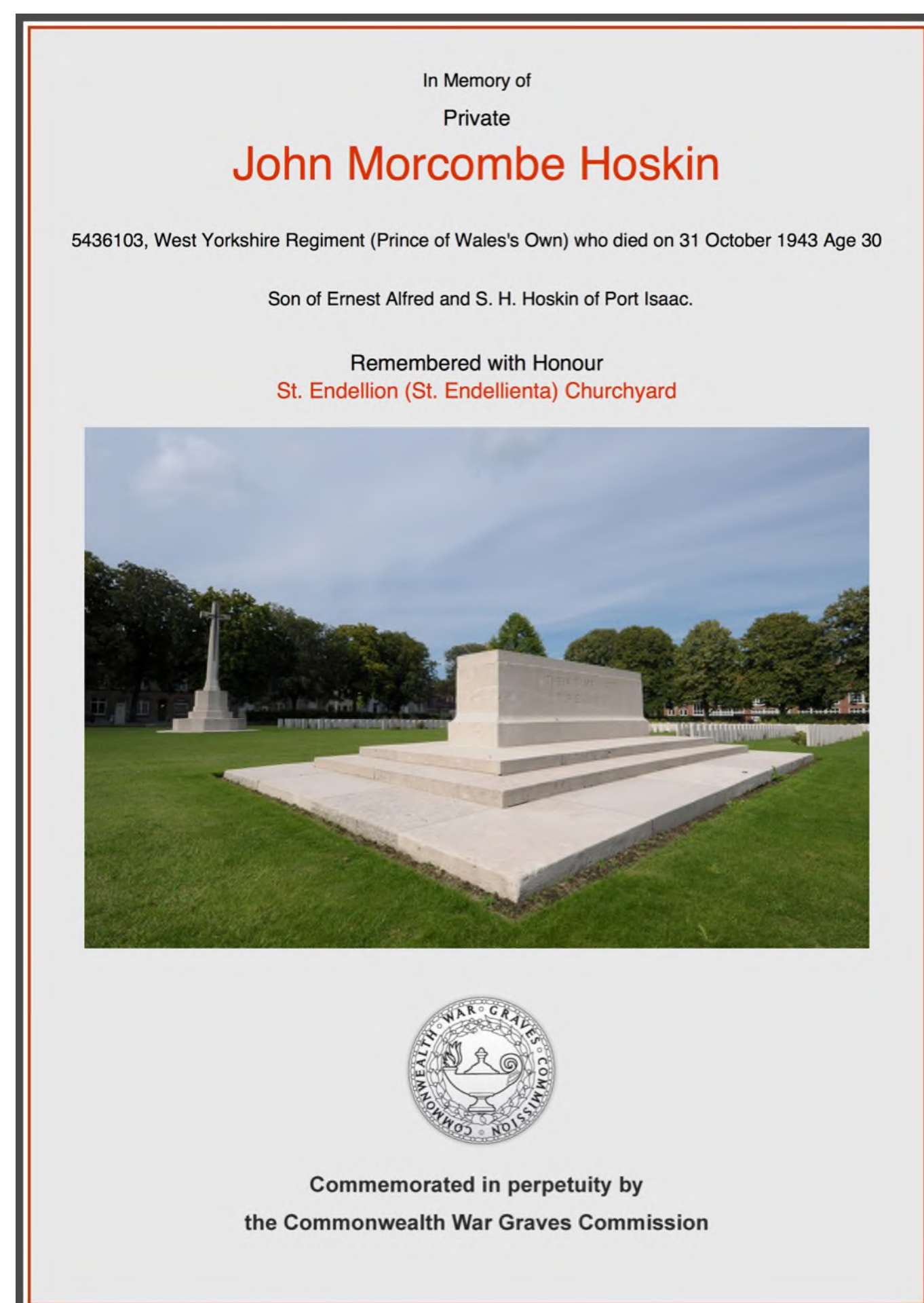
There was some criticism of their effectiveness, especially given the high casualty rate. Their exploits received much publicity and the effect on morale of Allied troops in India was refreshing after all the defeats and setbacks in engagements with the Japanese.



Grave of Private John (Jack) Morcombe
Hoskin in St Endellion Churchyard

Jack returned to the UK in the autumn of 1943. No death certificate has been located in the UK registers, so perhaps he was already weak and died on the ship close to home and his body was repatriated.

Private Jack Hoskin is commemorated in St Endellion churchyard.



Sources:

West Yorkshire Regiment in World War 2: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Yorkshire_Regiment#World_War_II

17th Infantry Division: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/17th_Infantry_Division_%28India%29
and <http://www.ordersofbattle.com/Units/UnitSuperiors?UniX=7166>

Battle of Sittang Bridge: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Sittang_Bridge

Chindits: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chindits>

Operation Longcloth: <http://www.chinditslongcloth1943.com/war-correspondents-with-the-chindits-including-the-story-of-moti-lal-katju.html>