



The Monte Cassino Society

Furthering an interest in the Italian Campaign 1943—1945

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Aim

To remember and further an interest in the experiences of all who took part in the Italian Campaign.

Winter 2020 newsletter

Welcome to our Autumn/Winter newsletter. What a year of changes this has turned out to be for every one of us, and I hope you have all managed to cope and keep well during the difficult times of the Covid 19 pandemic. It has certainly been a year for cancellations, and for the Society this meant not only the Arboretum commemorations in May, but latterly the Remembrance Sunday gathering in London on November 8th.



Remembrance Day in Ruthin, November 8th 2020



We are grateful to Liz Longman for all her hard work liaising with members and the British Legion in putting together the arrangements for Remembrance Sunday. Originally there were to be 44 members present in London for the march past at the Cenotaph, but then we heard that only 8 were to be permitted. At least, we thought, this would enable 4 veterans and their companions to attend and march, but alas even this was not to be, as very soon after we were informed that the whole ceremony would be scaled down to the minimum, with only 26 veterans representing the usual 10,000. Local acts of remembrance were similarly reduced or cancelled in towns and villages all over the country, and those of us hoping to attend and lay wreaths and crosses on the day, found ourselves booking timed slots online in order to do so in a socially-distanced way. Strange times indeed, but individual acts of remembrance were no less heartfelt for all that, as testified by the accounts in this issue.

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In so many ways 2020 will be a year best forgotten, but with the news of effective vaccines we look forward to 2021 in the hope of returning to some degree of normality in our lives. For the Monte Cassino Society this will be celebrated with the gathering at the National Memorial Arboretum in May to mark 77 years since the battle of Cassino and 76 since the end of the Italian campaign. Lesley is organising the event in the full expectation that it will go ahead as planned, so all fingers crossed, and we will be delighted to see you there.

In the meantime, please keep sending in your stories and memories of the Italian campaign. They are always a pleasure to receive, as I hope they are to read. This issue includes more personal stories, some from VE day, and the truly mind-boggling account of her experience by a child evacuee, which is almost impossible to imagine in today's world.

With best wishes for a happy and healthy new year,

Helen James, Editor

* photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, England

TWO IMPORTANT MESSAGES FROM OUR SECRETARY, LESLEY TEASDALE:

National Memorial Arboretum 2021

I am hoping that in May we will be able to hold our service at the NMA. If we are able to go ahead, then the date will be Saturday 15th May. I have contacted the NMA, but they cannot make any firm bookings at present and have asked me to contact them again in January or February. If you might be interested in attending (should we go ahead) could you let me have your details by email, phone or letter (my details are at the end of the newsletter) and I will contact you once I have more information.

Membership

Our annual Membership fees are due and a renewal form is enclosed. Fees can be paid either by Cheque (payable to The Monte Cassino Society) or Cash, sent to myself in Plymouth, or by Bank Transfer. If you are paying by Bank Transfer, please contact Diane Soady direct to obtain the Society's bank details. Both our Contact Details can be found at the end of the newsletter.

Please note that under the GDPR Regulations, unless we have received an updated Membership form from you in the last 12 months, and your Membership fees are paid and up to date (noting that these are waived for Veterans and their spouses) we will be unable to send you any further copies of the Newsletter after this one. The Newsletters will however still be made available on the Society's website.

Thank you, Lesley

Field of Remembrance 2020

By Lesley Teasdale

As you will be aware, the Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey was opened on Wednesday 4th November by HRH The Duchess of Cornwall. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions there were no representatives present for any of the plots, either beforehand or on the day. Instead, all of the crosses within the 308 separate plots were placed by the staff of the Poppy Factory (in addition to their normal hard work in

setting out the plots in the first place) and in the case of the

Society's plot, grateful thanks must go to Poppy Furnish who placed ours. Poppy, who in more normal times is the EA to the Poppy Factory's CEO, said "that it had been an absolute privilege to be able to assist with our plot this year, and to help ensure the Society's plot honoured our members."

I'm sure that you'll agree that our plot looked wonderful, with all of our dedications attached to the crosses.



One man's story

Written by Dave Mann.

For many years I have had the honour and privilege to arrange, for either myself or an attending Member of Meridian Chapter Harley Owners Group, to lay a wreath on behalf of the Monte Cassino Society. An occasion to remember all who fought and gave during the long and arduous battle at Monte Cassino, a battle overlooked in its significance for many years, including colossal allied troop casualties of 55,000.

Sadly the events of 2020 have resulted in the Royal British Legion significantly reducing in size the annual Remembrance Sunday ceremony in London. Additionally the 'rule of six' and need to socially distance also resulted in local events being reduced, or in some instances cancelled in their entirety.



Bombardier Harold Godfrey Mann



Harry's class at Goldsmiths school

Remembering those who gave is often with the collective in mind; this year I do so thinking more individually in terms of how life was for millions of people back then and how individual lives were shaped in ways that many, if not all, would have hoped never to be repeated again after the cessation of WW1. Thinking about it on an individual basis is less easy, and so to assist I reflect on one man – my Dad, his life and how War changed him, as indeed it would have many millions of others taking the same path - from civvy street into War and for those more fortunate, back into some semblance of a normal life again

afterwards.

Harold Mann and his older brother Sidney were born and raised in a Victorian terraced home in Peckham, London, a place that the family had occupied since my grandparents, who first met at the Bermondsey Settlement House, married in 1915.

Life in S.E. London was not particularly easy, but then the same can be said for many others; having only just breathed a sigh of relief at the cessation of WW1, the great depression was now looming! My grandfather, a coachpainter for horsedrawn transport, struggled to find work and the increasing use of motor transport meant his skills were becoming redundant.

To make ends meet my grandmother would take in washing, brothers Sid and Harry found work where they could, and it was a life most today could not remotely relate to. However, who could have predicted what horrors the future held for them in a way that would steal their youth forever and further exacerbate life at home, when having been called to War, both sons were no longer able to contribute? Without doubt this would be a family concern, playing heavily on the minds of both boys when leaving for War; worst of all, it was to be the beginning of a lost generation!



Harry aged 14



Harry aged 17 (front row, middle).

Pictured aged 17 with his mates outside the family home, 'Harry' loved cycling and was a member of the local club. Looking relaxed, he would not have known that in just 2 years' time he would be called to War along with most of the lads he rode with. Indeed, the same would apply to those in the previous school pictures, life for all of them was to change forever, in ways unimaginable – I have often wondered how many lads in this and previous school images left home never to return.

At the age of 19, my father followed his older brother Sidney into the Army at the start of WW2 – Sidney having joined prior to the outbreak of War. While Harry was in North Africa and Italy, his brother Sid was amongst troops focused on Europe, ultimately liberating concentration camps. When asked by a family member, Sid said everything reported was true plus more, and requested never to ask him about it again. Neither brother had occasion to meet for the duration of the War.

Sid gave me his medals when I was aged about 8, saying he had no use for them – I still have them. It is difficult to imagine the horrors locked inside the minds of Dad and his brother for so many years, ultimately to be taken to the grave by both.

It was of course a difficult time for many families, While Harry and Sid went through the entire war, my grandfather continued to struggle with both work and his mind, and my grandmother muddled through as best she could. I can only hazard a guess at the strain my grandfather would have felt. There was no question of who would or should have been the breadwinner in those days, and from stories told his life became quite miserable. Eventually this affected him mentally and he was "committed" to Cane Hill Hospital, Surrey.



Harold (left) at Deepcut Barracks in 1940 prior to posting;

After the War Dad received his medals; these he opened and then placed into a tin, still in the original delivery box, and there they remain to this day, never once mounting or wearing them. To me having them mounted and on display would be a dishonour to his memory and wishes. Dad was a quiet and unassuming man in many ways; he said very little about his time in the Army. I do however take the box of medals out once a year and keep them in my waistcoat pocket whilst attending the Remembrance Sunday Ceremony, I do this in both his honour and for all those with whom he served.



A moment to relax on active service.

It is hard to imagine the trauma these men would have endured at such a young age, there was nothing 'technical' about warfare in those days, but like many Dad was clearly and quietly proud of his contribution – occasionally he would talk about Monte Cassino, also his time in North Africa and Greece prior to the Italy campaign, but it was always clear his memories were not happy ones!

At the end of the war, My grandfather passed away in Cane Hill hospital suffering from cancer of the lung, and although my Dad had been 'demobbed', sadly it was not until two weeks after the funeral that he arrived back home – The war had also robbed him of this significant moment in life.

The annual Remembrance Sunday ceremony on T.V. would never be missed and he always sat quietly watching it in the chair without a word spoken. Dad passed away quietly in his sleep at the age of 83; he has finally found peace in a quiet Kent Churchyard, where Mum joined him a few years later – This year I placed the wreath on his grave, not just in memory of Dad, but for all who gave at the Battle of Monte Cassino.



This story of course is not unique by any stretch of the imagination, it is not intended to be, but it does reflect the similar path that literally millions of soldiers would have followed through life, war and ultimately death, Harry was but just one!

Rest in Peace ‘Harry’ Mann and all those who gave so much at Monte Cassino, many never to return –

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM.

Bombardier Harold Godfrey Mann

963394 31st Field Regiment - Royal Artillery



With remembrance in mind, who makes the memorials?



Phil Soady and Judith Coote’s father crafted two memorials to the First Army, one at the National Memorial Arboretum and one on Plymouth Hoe. He is remembered here by Judith;

Our late Father, Gerald Soady, lived his whole life – 93 years – in the town he loved, Looe in Cornwall. He was the youngest of a large fishing family. Two of his older brothers carried on the family fishing tradition, but Dad and another brother, Samuel were apprenticed to a local firm of stone masons. In 1931, aged 14, he embarked on a six year apprenticeship.

Gerald at work on the 1st Army memorial

In late September 1939 he married his childhood sweetheart Iris, and a short five months later was in

the Army doing basic training with the Duke of Cornwall Light Infantry. After several postings in the UK, Dad – now Sergeant Soady, Royal Artillery – found himself in North Africa in the First Army, part of Operation Torch. From North Africa, Dad was posted to Italy with the 8th Army.



On return to civilian life Dad and Samuel, who had also

Dedication of the 1st Army memorial on Plymouth Hoe

done war service with REME, started business on their own as monumental masons. Although their work was mostly monumental, Dad was a master craftsman who could, and did, make anything by hand from a block of granite. One of their first commissions was extending the town's WW1 Memorial and adding the names of the fallen in WW2. As all these men were known to them it must have been very challenging.



Gerald by the memorial on Plymouth Hoe



Iris by the 1st Army memorial at the NMA

Much later, when he retired, Dad joined the First Army (Djebels) Association and regularly attended their Plymouth branch meetings. The branch wished to place a memorial on Plymouth Hoe to those who served in the 1st Army, and Dad volunteered to make it. Mum, Geoff and I attended the dedication service where Mrs Dixon - widow of the founder of the Association, Major Dixon - unveiled the memorial.

The national 1st Army Association commissioned the memorial in the National Memorial Arboretum soon after it opened; their memorial was among the very first. Dad made this memorial in Cornwall and with the help of a monumental mason friend transported it to Alrewas and erected it on the North African coast of the site already laid

out as a map of the Mediterranean. It was the second memorial in this sector, the Italy Star memorial – being one of the original brick designs – being the only other. Both 1st Army memorials were crafted by hand, even the extensive lettering was individually cut by hand. At the time of the dedication service, the NMA was very different from that which we see today. The site had been planted with a few trees but there were no paths as there were very few memorials. The only buildings were the Chapel, a gift shop and restaurant.



Dedication of the 1st Army memorial at the NMA



The memorial on Plymouth Hoe, November 8th 2020

Although Dad was not always happy at the time he spent away from home serving his country, he was proud to give his time and expertise to sculpting these memorials to honour his comrades.

Judith Coote, very proud daughter of Sgt Gerald Soady, RA

Kate Goldsmith sent this piece written by her mother's friend, Mary Compton. Mary was prompted to send us her story after reading the account of the SS Arandora Star which we printed in our 2019 Winter newsletter:

How we were nearly evacuated to Canada

When war was declared in 1939, my family lived in York, about ten minutes from the railway station. My sister, Ruth and I went to school at the Bar Convent, outside Micklegate Bar and only five minutes from the station. The station was a hub for troop movements up and down the country, and a prime target to be bombed.



Ruth on the left, Mary on the right

By 1940 my parents made the decision that we should be evacuated to Canada. I was not quite six years old and Ruth was nine. I was very shy and my speech was not good, so Ruth had strict instructions that we were not to be parted. The train was packed with children, each with a small case and a gas mask worn over the shoulder. Our destination was Glasgow, to wait for the boat to take us to Canada. My memory is a series of snapshots, one of which was the sky full of barrage balloons which almost touched so the sky was hardly visible, and another of an enormous gymnasium with rows and rows of camp beds. Apart from that I have no memories of what we ate or what we did or how we passed the days of waiting, which I believe were approximately 20.

Ruth was prone to suffer from severe sore throats, and true to form she developed one. I recall seeing her, wrapped in a blanket, being carried over a man's shoulder into the distance and looking back at me. I thought she was being taken to a Cottage Hospital, but Ruth says it was an Old People's Home. Eventually my luggage

was taken to be transported to the boat, and we were told we would follow shortly. Somehow Ruth got wind of this and insisted I was not to go. She must have been very forceful, as my luggage was retrieved. My next memory is of all the children departing, leaving behind myself and a little boy with black curly hair, and a teacher. The three of us caught a train back to York, leaving Ruth in Glasgow. My father had to hitch up to Glasgow, as civilians were not allowed to travel on trains unless on official business. Ultimately Ruth and my father arrived home.

On 29th April 1942, York suffered its worst raid, one of the Baedeker Raids*, when the railway station took a direct hit; 92 people died, and one of numerous bombs fell on one corner of the Bar Convent, killing five nuns. York Minster was not touched. The ship SS City of Benares*, which sailed after the one we should have been on, was torpedoed; out of 90 children on board, 13 survived. No more sailings were made.

Ruth and I often wonder how different our lives might have been had we sailed, and the agony our parents must have suffered when we left for Glasgow.

Mary Compton

Ed notes:

* The Baedeker Raids were so called because the towns and cities chosen to be bombed by the Luftwaffe were selected for their historical and cultural importance, from the German Baedeker tourist guides. As well as historical information, the Baedeker guides contained detailed maps which could be used to accurately pinpoint targets for bombing.

*The SS Arandora Star was torpedoed and sunk in July 1940, and the SS City of Benares suffered the same fate in September 1940.

Rosemary Hayward has been researching her father's letters and photographs.

A native South African, Cpl. John B. Hodgson served in Italy with 'B' Company the 1st Royal Natal Carbineers U.D.F. (Union Defence Force) CMF (Citizen Military Force). After VE Day, he spent some time on garrison and peace-keeping duties in the north of Italy, and eventually returned home on a troop ship in January 1946. Many years later he worked with James Bourhill, who drew on John's experiences for his book "Come Back to Portofino – Through Italy with the 6th South African Armoured Division", published in 2011.

Rosemary writes, "James found my father while researching the Italian campaign on the internet. At the time of James's research my father was the Chairman of the Board of Hilton College, Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. My father had kept all his letters that he had written home while he was in the army, and James used my father's letters extensively in his book."

There is a photograph and description in the book of John's ascent of Mont Blanc in early July 1945, which demonstrates his fitness at the time.

John wrote this letter home to his parents describing the end of the Italian campaign:

No 143.

CPL. J.B. HODGSON No 589269 'r'

'B' COMPANY

1st ROYAL NATAL CARBINEERS

U.D.F. – C.M.F.

Friday 5th May '45

My dear Mum and Dad,

At long last I have got the opportunity of writing you a good long letter telling you of how everything is going. I am sure you will understand why my letter-writing has been so poor; naturally there is a great deal about which I can write, and at the same time there is a fair portion which is bound to be frowned-upon by the censor, so is best left alone until it is released.

The fact of primary importance is the unconditional surrender of all enemy forces in Italy and a good deal of Austria. Naturally this came as a very great surprise to us, and at the same time a very welcome one. When we initially launched the offensive here we were prepared for a terrific fight, because with the

collapse in the West, Italy became a very good entrance to his mountain hide-out, so we thought he would put up a bitter fight. The initial assault was inevitably sticky, but when he suddenly turned tail and went for all he was worth, I think everyone was left with his mouth wide open. Then the natural conclusion was that he was pulling back to another defence line; at last we became certain that he was pulling right back on to the Po, which was much further than we thought he would go.

Then, upon reaching the Po with practically no opposition, if any, and seeing what we did, it then dawned upon us that he would have to pull something very clever out of the bag to save himself from being pushed back into the mountains. What we saw on our side of the Po, you have no doubt read all about in the papers; namely the masses and masses of vehicles and equipment "scuttled" as it were. I have never seen so much stuff destroyed, ever – this was all due to his being unable to cross the river owing to the accuracy of our bombers, who left not one single crossing for the Hun; all the destroyed vehicles, etc that were destroyed along the roads leading to the crossings, was sufficient evidence of the way we harassed his retreat from the air. Even then we did not think that we had dealt him such a telling blow as we had.

With our experience of mountain warfare, we knew that with very little he could prevent us from penetrating very far into the Alps. Then came the capitulation of the enemy forces; it was too much to hope for, and nearly too much to believe. Even now, three days later, it is hard to believe that there is no more fighting to be done here, and as far as we are concerned, no more fighting at all. When we heard that they had surrendered, we could all imagine how pleased all you folks at home must have been upon the reception of the same news. Since then the war has progressed at a terrific pace, so fast that it is extremely difficult to keep up with it. At the present rate of progress it is only a matter of days, possibly a couple of weeks.

Naturally at this stage, all our thoughts have turned to the question of going home – as is only to be expected under the circumstances, there are many wild rumours flying about, but after being in the army for a little while one learns not to heed anything unless told officially, so as yet I have not been disappointed. I personally share the opinion with many others that now is the time to go home, and the sooner the better; the job that we came to do is over, so I wonder how long it will be before we do leave for home. We heard on the BBC the other evening in the "South African Newsletter" that it has officially been stated in Cape Town that South African troops are not going to be used for Garrison duty, and can be expected home in the near future. No doubt you know more about it than I do, possible that it was never even said. I suppose the BBC are known to have made mistakes in their time.

To get back to the Surrender here again; we actually heard about it at seven in the evening on the second of May. As I have already said, we could hardly believe our own ear 'oles. Struck dumb we were!! Before, when chaps had spoken about this event which was bound to come some time, big parties etc appeared as if they would be the order of the day when the occasion came. When it eventually did come it caught us in the middle of a move, so there was not much in the party line, so now the chaps have called things off until the surrender of the last enemy forces in Europe, which I think is a good idea. I am not too keen on telling you much about where we have been, what we have done, and so on. The reason being that the line of censorship is not too clear at the moment, and there is not much point in getting one's letters

cut about, so I will steer clear for the time being. Most of it will have to go by the board until I get home, which is actually by far the best.

Generally speaking, we have been a bit unlucky during the last couple of days, and weeks for that matter, but looking at it from another angle we have been lucky. A little while ago we stopped just outside Venice for a couple of days, but owing to circumstances we could not go in and have a look round; there were a couple of lucky fellows who managed to get in, and they said it was simply marvellous. All this about having to travel most places in Gondolas is all true. They went in in a jeep, but could not go far before they had to climb out and take to a boat. We were a bit luckier with Bologna, but even there we could not go and have a good look round – we only saw as much of it as our operations permitted. Then Milan; I saw the outskirts and some of the suburbs, which is at least something, if not very much. So now you can see how we have been lucky in one way and unlucky in another way. I must say that I have seen an enormous amount of Italy to date, and it is an experience that I will never forget.

During the Italian campaign, I have slept in many places, from pig-sties and cow-sheds, to Roman Villas and Fascist mansions, but never before have I lived in a King's palace. Believe it or not, but that is where I am at present – King Victor Emanuel has three or four palaces spread over the country, and at the moment we are living in one of them. I am living on the third floor, the five of us who live in this room are very well off. At the moment I am sitting at a very good desk in front of the window, looking out over the palace gardens to the main street, which passes by the colossal gates. We have got very good electric light, and a wash-basin in our room with water laid on (only cold, I am afraid!) We have got quite a few chairs, etc., so we are very well set-up. There is a tennis court out at the back in the palace grounds, but unfortunately we cannot get hold of any rackets and balls.

I am just wondering how long they are going to keep us messing around doing garrison duty, etc., in this country. I am sure that after a month or so, everyone will get very fed-up indeed, as we are all keen to get back home, and carry on with what we had to lay down when we left. It seems to be more or less taken for granted that we are going to fly home when we eventually do leave, which will be very nice indeed. There is nothing worse than a troop ship, of that I am quite convinced, but there is the one consolation now; i.e. if we do get into a troop ship now, it will be to set sail for home.

Well, I will close now, hoping that it will not be long before they decide to send us home.

God bless you all, Your affectionate son,

John



Original caption read: "On the summit of Mt Blanc (15,632ft) at 11.35 a.m. on 4 Jt Temperature 14°–17° F below freezing. The background is Italy. Left to right: John an American who climbed up from the French side & we met on the top; Murton French guide (with his back to the camera); Ellissio [Eliseo] Croux; Evaristo Crou H. Newey." Photo: J.B. Hodgson collection

Lorna Muir wrote about her father, Captain K.E. Muir M.B.E., 25TH Indian Infantry Brigade, Signal Section, G.M.F.



Ken was 21 when he volunteered to join the armed forces in 1938/39, and was commissioned into the Royal Corps of Signals after 8 months training at Catterick camp. He served for a further 5 months in the U.K., mostly in Northern Ireland, before being sent as a replacement officer in the Middle East battle zone. After serving in Egypt he trained as a beach invasion officer in readiness for the invasion of Italy. However, before the invasion took place there was trouble with the French populations in Syria and Lebanon, and the 10th Indian Division was sent there to restore peace. Ken was then Adjutant to the Commanding Officer of the Signal Corps. By the time peace was restored in the area, the 10th Indian Division were not able to reach the front line in time for the invasion at Anzio. Hence Ken and his Ghurkhas were sent into the desert for special operations training in 'silent fighting' to work through and within enemy lines.

Soon after arriving in Italy, through Taranto rather than Anzio, Ken volunteered for Brigade Duty and was made Officer Commanding 25th Indian Infantry Brigade Signal Section. This Brigade of 200 Ghurkhas fought mostly in the mountains and rural areas of Italy, often needing to pass through enemy lines at night to set up communication centres ready for the advancing troops the following day. Working through Foggia, some respite in Naples, then on to Florence, Monte Cassino, Longiano, and many bitter battles, after 4 years Ken reached the Yugoslav border. It was during this time that Major Ken Muir was awarded a Military M.B.E for bravery in the field of battle and constant concern and care for his men.

When the European war ended, leave was granted to those who had served at least 3.5 years overseas and Ken was granted leave to return home to get married. By this time, he and his Ghurkhas, with their special operations training had been posted to Yugoslavia, where the mountain freedom fighters were fighting the Italian army. The Yugoslav partisans were attempting to retake Italian territory that was lost by the Ottoman Empire and had been transferred to Italy as reparations at the end of the 1st World War.

Ken's new officer in charge denied Ken leave on the grounds that it would clash with his own leave, and the two could not be away at the same time. Ken reapplied for leave and the wedding was put back to a new date of October 1945.

When the date drew near, Ken was again told his leave had been cancelled as it clashed once more with the senior officer. Having found out that this officer was on his first posting abroad and that his previous leave had been to return home for a polo match, Ken refused to accept his cancelled leave and went home to get married. Because of food shortages, the cake comprised two layers of decorated cardboard and a top layer of decorated sponge; the photographer was unable to get film for his camera and so the 'wedding photographs' of just bride and groom were taken months later when Ken returned home again.

After his wedding Ken returned to Yugoslavia, to learn that he had been demoted to Captain for disobeying orders. His fury was further aggravated by the fact that he had to continue with his duties as a Major

because the army was unable to find an officer of the rank of Major who had the training and experience that Ken had. Initially his return term of duty was to be 8 months, but this was extended by one year so that he was not 'de-mobbed' until 1948.

Copy of a letter sent by Ken Muir to his employer and work colleagues, explaining the circumstances which lead to him being awarded the Military M.B.E.:

26TH April 1945

Dear Sirs,

Very many thanks for your letter of congratulations. I fear it will be impossible for me to fulfil the request you make, as due to circumstances I have not yet seen the citation which should accompany the award of the M.B.E. I do, however, understand that the award was made for action during the period May-August 1944. During this period, I was engaged on Signals duties with my present Indian Bde., who were in action against the Germans in the Tiber Valley. We fought along the main valley road from a point N. of Perugia to an Italian City called Citta di Castelle. This was followed by a period of fighting through the lower Tuscany mountains to a village called Chuisi de la Verna (noted for its monastery built on a site where St. Francis of Assisi received the marks of the stigmatization).

During the whole of this period, the Unit had to fight through mountainous country against heavy opposition and bad weather conditions, to clear the valley for the following Divisional forces. This they did, and extremely well, but it presented numerous problems for me as an Officer in charge of Brigade communications.

Wireless communication was almost impossible and never reliable, and so line communication had to be relied on. Hundreds of miles of cable were used on the advance, and most of it had to be laid by hand and on foot across bad, hilly, and often mine strewn country.

We were constantly shelled and mortared, and in a very short space of time I had lost more than half of my linesmen. By going with the men myself and encouraging them, I found that they could still provide the necessary communications. At first I found it difficult working with the Indian troops, but soon they proved to me that they did not know the meaning of fear and providing I, their Sahib accompanied them, they were capable of anything.

On one occasion when some 24 of us had been in a forward position and had been severely shelled and mortared for some 2 or 3 hours and had sustained 18 or 19 severe casualties with the remainder very badly bruised and shaken, I decided to try and get back to H.Q. to get some medical aid as some of the men were dying for the want of attention. I crawled outside the house only to find my own jeep had been blown sky-high, but eventually found another jeep into which I put my Havildar (sergeant) and drove off like fury in the direction of our own H.Q. We were very badly shelled for about one mile, and the whole time my Havildar sat quiet and motionless at my side. Suddenly a bridge immediately in front of us received a direct hit and I swung the jeep off the road. We careered down a bank and ended up with the nose of the jeep in a ditch. With the impact my Havildar was thrown over the bonnet of the jeep. Only then did I see that his battledress blouse was soaked in blood. I stripped him and found that he had a large piece of shrapnel in his back. I applied a field dressing and laid him in a nearby ditch and then

proceeded to run back towards my H.Q. After 8 miles I met another Officer who took me to the Medical H.Q where I collected four ambulances to guide them back to the scene of the shelling. The shelling was still very bad, but we managed to rescue all except 2 who had expired. We then collected my wounded Havildar and salvaged the jeep. On returning to H.Q. I detailed more men and we went out and completed the line.

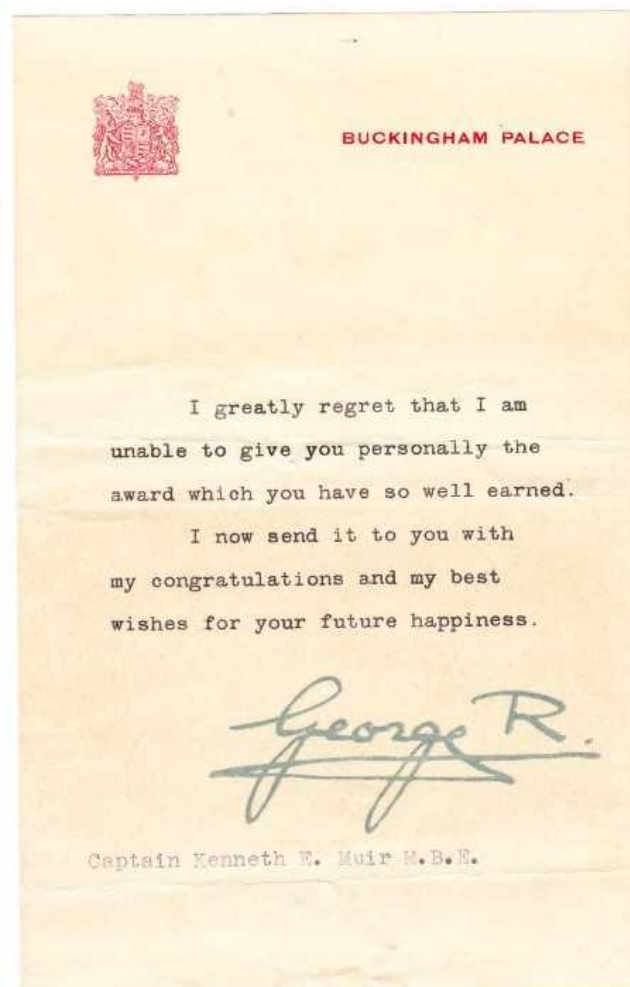
My admiration for those little Indian lads knows no bounds and I would risk my life with, or for them anywhere. There are no heroes or gallant gentlemen out here, we are all doing what we think is right knowing full well that each and every man has done and is doing his bit as a soldier. Some of us are fortunate and get awards for it, but we know that every man here is just as entitled to that award.

Once again, many thanks for your kind letter and my very best wishes and hopes for an early peace to you and all the members of Cardiff Gas Light and Coke Company.

Yours sincerely

(Sgt) K.E. Muir

(At the age of 80, Ken graduated with an Open University degree in Economics and Modern History. As he used to say, he had first-hand experience of the Modern History!)



Mike Lemmon wrote about his involvement with the “Military Voices” project:

With a team of volunteers in West Sussex under the auspices of West Sussex County Library Service and the Lottery Heritage Fund, we interviewed a large number of veterans to capture their military accounts (voices).



Ben Kerridge

Being the son of a Monte Cassino veteran, I had requested that should a veteran of that conflict be found, I would like to speak with him. I was never able to speak to my father about his time in the army as a professional soldier for over twelve years; and so I was delighted to be put in touch with Ben.

Ben was not very well, and his sons were obviously very protective of him; eventually we found a day when we could meet. He had previously been interviewed by two other volunteers; the process was part of our training. One would carry out the interview while the other would look after the technology, recording in audio and video. Both coming in at the end to ask questions that might have been overlooked or to bring a different perspective.

James Kerridge (known as Ben) was in 16th/5th Queens Royal Lancers, and interviewed in 2016. Born June 1922 in Essex, he sadly passed away in June 2016.

Ben was sent to Africa in 1942, and drove Valentines and Shermans....he was “clobbered” at the Rapido in Italy, and placed in a precarious position on rear mountain passes where the Germans knocked out the rear tanks to trap them; the significance of being the last tank was not lost on Ben’s crew. You can read Ben’s account in “Military Voices – Past and Present” available from West Sussex Libraries. It can also be purchased for £10.

The account of one story that Ben told me is in the “Military Voices” book, but not as he told it to me, so I will retell this short story here....

It was a clear bright day as a column of three tanks entered the pass, all the men were nervous as this could so easily be a trap. Snipers could be bristling from every crevice along the mountain pass, so they were sweating in the confines of their tin can. The procession carried along in strict formation, there was nowhere else to go.

The three tanks clattered and banged their way up the pass, you couldn’t hear yourself think. There was a sudden veering to the left as Ben lost control of the vehicle. They hadn’t really noticed the thud that had come from under them, as they were surrounded by a cacophony of other sounds, thumps and intent on watching (as best they could) for any enemy presence. They all soon realised that as the rear tank they were losing ground from the others. In fact they had ground to a halt; they had no way to communicate with the lead pair as they sat in their immobilised vehicle.

They all realised that they had probably hit a mine and that the track was in pieces.

A discussion was briefly held, and all agreed they would sit tight; the leader would realise they were a tank short. This did not happen. Instead, night began to fall, and the cold began to set in; no one was prepared to venture out as snipers could be waiting. They all spoke in hushed voices and tried not to make a sound as the reverberations would be heard halfway up the valley.

After a stiff, cold and very uncomfortable night, where sleep had eluded them, they heard the clatter and banging of what they could identify as the (“The Wrecker”) recovery vehicle. After being quiet all night and speaking in whispers, this incongruous vehicle that was made up of the parts of something from the age of the dinosaurs, was coming to their rescue.

The crew all looked at each other in horror as they expected a barrage of fire on the rescue vehicle and themselves. To their relief, the barrage never came. When later that day they arrived at the rallying point, they were informed that they were not missed until the other two tanks arrived back without them.

Bad language ensued.

Ben on Monte Cassino

In Italy, Ben said everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. They couldn’t get the tanks around the mountainous terrain and the tanks were put on tracks behind the mountain range, where the Germans knocked out the rear tanks, so they were all stranded. Ben described his role at Monte Cassino as supporting the infantry. It was at the Rapido River where he was “clobbered”. He didn’t remember much more than waking up in a dressing station. He said it wasn’t just loss of blood from his injured leg that he suffered from, but also malaria. Two of his “blokes” died of malaria. He was taken on an air ambulance to Naples, when he was put on another plane; he thought he was going home, but instead was taken to Catania where there was a base hospital. He was patched up and taken back to Cassino where he was just in time to be involved in Cassino 4. If he had been back two days earlier, he would have been involved as lead tank on the break out of Cassino over Amazon Bridge.

The unit headed to Rome to trap the German forces and wanted the Americans to cut off their escape routes. Ben was scathing of US General Mark Clark, who he said disobeyed orders and because of this Churchill’s plan hadn’t worked. He felt the war would have been over by Christmas if orders had been followed.

Author’s note: US General Mark Clark left for Rome to seek self-glorification, putting many Allied lives at risk.

As regards to the comments that troops who remained in Italy were D-Day Dodgers, Ben commented they “weren’t very pleased” to have that said about them after all they had been through.

While on reconnaissance in Italy, their unit was going along a track which ran down towards the canal. Dug in behind them were what they later realised were new Panzers with a high velocity gun. The Germans opened fire on their troop; one tank was hit on the turret, track and sprocket, and Oliver Bills and crew were all killed. Ben’s tank received a hit which went right through the vehicle and he believes if the

shot had been a foot either side, he would have been killed or the tank blown up. Towards the end of the war, in March 1945, they managed to get across the river Po in their Sherman and ended up in Austria.

The German troops at Monte Cassino were good, but there were fewer Germans there towards the end, and they still fought, even in their vastly reduced numbers. When asked about the Germans as opponents, his answer was: "You got a job to do, kill or be killed, simple as that."

With thanks to Martin Hayes of West Sussex County Libraries and the volunteer interviewers Sophie Plachcinski and Irene Read. And to the sons of Ben Kerridge, Nigel and J for allowing us access to their father at a very private time.

Corrections from the last newsletter

Perry Rowe contacted us with information about the two photographs we printed of the bridge over the river Sangro:

There is one error I would like to correct. The bridge over the Sangro (the longest Bailey bridge built during the war) was not at the river mouth. There was a railway bridge but the road bridge there was not built until the '60s. The original pictured bridge (though of course rebuilt) is still in use a few miles upstream of the mouth, though it carries much less traffic as the Autostrada now takes most of this. If you were to look over the ridge from the cemetery you would see the bridge down to the left. Some veterans will swear they stood on/crossed/rebuilt the bridge at the river mouth (I know - I have heard them) but I'm afraid that is a displaced memory.

There are several photos of the bridge in the IWM, and the two you included are from there.

Tiki and Heartbeat bridges were NZ assault Baileys built for our approaches to Castel Frentano and Orsogna. They are both several miles upstream from 'the longest bridge'.

The British built several (4) of their own assault bridges in the vicinity of the longest bridge, which was built after all the assault bridges were washed out.

Private Leslie James, Queens Own Royal West Kent Regiment, died 21st March 1944, at the age of 32.

In our Spring 2015 Newsletter, we printed the following request from Edward James asking if there were any veterans who served with his Great Uncle, Leslie James:

From Edward James: I hope someone may be able to help me with finding out a bit about one of my relatives that was killed in action at Monte Cassino in 1944. As a result of watching the last Remembrance Sunday I was made aware of the Monte Cassino Society and I hope that there may be survivors out there who may have known and served with my Great Uncle. Please would you be able to pass this information around to your members in the hope that someone remembers him? Private Leslie James, 787916, 6th Battalion Queens Own Royal West Kents—K.I.A. 21/03/1944. Leslie came from Brighton, East Sussex. Thank you for your help, Edward James.

Michael Haynes and Kathleen have recently been in touch with the Society to say that they visited Cassino War Cemetery in 2011 with Kathleen's father Richard Booth, a veteran Lancashire Fusilier. While there, they met one of Leslie's sons, accompanied by his wife, who had gone to place a new family photo on Leslie's gravestone. Michael and Kathleen, whilst they do not have any details of Leslie other than a photo of his gravestone with photo attached, have several other photos which might interest Edward. They have tried several times to contact the James family they met in 2011, but so far without success. Kathleen's father died in 2013; he wrote a book about his life, and in it he mentions the James couple he met at Cassino. Should Edward, or the couple from 2011 read this, please get in touch with the society, who will provide Michael and Kathleen's contact details.

My Uncle, Alfred Horace Buckner 1918-1943, by Des James



As well as being a story about my uncle, this is a description of how to obtain information about veterans. Alf was a regular soldier who was killed in Sicily during the war. I started with a few of his photographs and I had asked my mother about her elder brother. She thought he was a despatch rider and died at the end of the hostilities in Sicily. She said he was a keen athlete and a champion army boxer. The pictures showed that he had been with the army to India, Palestine, and Africa.

My first enquiry was online to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. A search on their website using the information I had, revealed that my uncle was in the 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment, his service number was 5497564 and he was a corporal. It also told me that he died on 30th July 1943 and was buried at Catania War Cemetery in plot I.J.9. So, he had died midway into the Sicily campaign, not at the end as my mother had thought.

When I was in Hampshire, I visited the Museum of the Hampshire Regiment in Winchester. Armed with dates and the service number of my uncle, a friendly researcher set about trawling their archives to find some information. Nothing new was discovered until I mentioned that I understood him to be an army boxing champion. In the Regimental Sports reports she found a reference to my uncle. He had taken part in one boxing contest but had been knocked out in the first round. So much for a boxing champ! It was also highly unlikely that he was a despatch rider. This misunderstanding was brought about because of a photo of Alf on a motorbike. The researcher pointed me to the book of the history of The Royal Hampshire Regiment. In this book I found out that at the time my uncle was killed the



battalion were involved in heavy fighting near Agira. On the evening of 29th July 1943 they attacked Regalbuto Ridge, an action which resulted in many casualties. So, it is highly probable that it was there that my uncle was killed.

During a holiday in Italy, I was able to visit Sicily and the Catania War Cemetery. It was not easy to get to without transport but thanks to a friendly bus driver I made it. I already had the grave reference but if I had not, there was a record book of all the names and their locations. It was an emotional moment to stand at the grave of an uncle I had never known. I also went to Malta, where he was born and where his regiment spent the first half of the war. My grandfather, also a regular soldier, had served in Malta and had married a Maltese lady. In the museum in Valletta I discovered that after fighting in North Africa, the Hampshires and Devonshires had combined with others including a Maltese division to form the XXX Corps, which was to lead the landings in Sicily. This was the first time British troops had set foot on European soil since Dunkirque.



I also want to get the service record for my uncle from the Army Personnel Centre in Glasgow, but this has been delayed because of the pandemic. There are certain restrictions to protect confidential information, but if you meet the criteria, for £30 you can obtain the full service record of someone who has been in the services. I already have my father's record.



The War Memorial on Plymouth Hoe, 8th November 2020

In Memoriam

Alex Sutton, October 2020. Veteran, 6 Royal Welch Parachute Regiment, 2nd Parachute Brigade. Alex was well known to many in the Society, and will be fondly remembered as one of the veterans who visited Cassino with us in May 2019.

Diane Preston, April 2020. Daughter of Jack Preston, Royal Engineers. Diane was a stalwart member of the Society, always attending the opening of the Field of Remembrance and the Cenotaph parade, the latter with much difficulty in the last few years. She travelled with her dog Judy and always booked her London hotel for the next year before returning home to Chester. Diane also supported us by writing to newspapers, the Government, anyone she could think of, about the lack of public awareness of the Italian Campaign and particularly Cassino. A very friendly, bubbly lady - always joking, and self-deprecating. We will miss her.



Diane at the Field of Remembrance
with her late father Jack.

Thomas "Stuart" Worthington, September 2020. Veteran, 2nd Lieutenant B, Company, 2nd/4th Battalion, the Hampshire Regiment.



Although he was from Staffordshire, Thomas was moved to the Hampshires when he landed in Italy, from a pool of soldiers at a base just below Vesuvius. Wounded at Monte Cassino, he was always very proud of his association with the Hampshires, and of being part of that battle.

Our thanks to Thomas's family for their generous donation in his memory.

His daughter Maxine sent this photo of Thomas, commenting on his "film star good looks – but then we are a little biased!"

Henry McKenzie Johnston, 6th Battalion, the Black Watch.

Reginald Scott, Cameron Highlanders

Ken Seager, 6th Battalion, The Queens Own Royal West Kent Regiment. Ken was another of the veterans who visited Cassino with the Society in May 2019.



Ruthin, November 8th 2020

Books

“Blood and Bandages” Fighting for life in the RAMC Field Ambulance 1940-1946, by William Earl and Liz Coward. (William was one of the veterans interviewed by Gary Lineker in the TV programme “My Grandad’s War”, recently re-shown on the BBC).

“Peace and War” Growing up in Fascist Italy, by Wanda Newby

“Even the Brave Falter”, by E.D.Smith

New Members

Mr Alan Bidgood, Veteran, C troop, 102 Medium Battery, Shropshire Yeomanry, 75th Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery.

Mrs Alison Bicker, daughter of Mr Alan Bidgood

Mr Richard Doherty, son of Gnr JJ Doherty, 9th (Londenderry) HAA Regt RA (SR)

Mr George Lesniak, son of Cpl Franciszek Lesniak, 5th Workshop Company, 5 Kresowian Infantry Division, Polish II Corps

Mr Stuart Green, attended Monte Cassino each year with friends whos’ father fought at Monte Cassino

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