



The Monte Cassino Society

Furthering an interest in the Italian Campaign 1943—1945

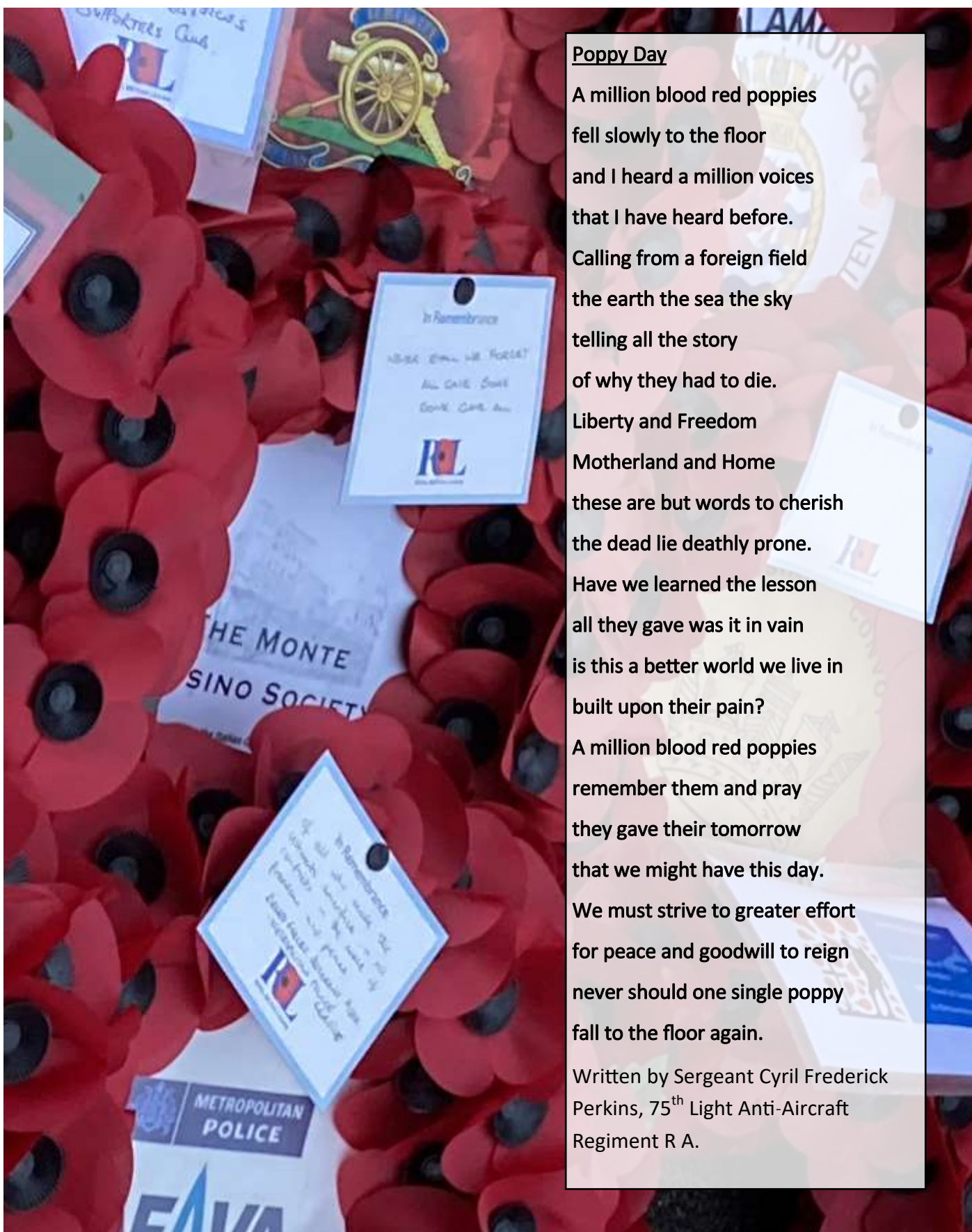
photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, England

Winter 2023

Poppy Day

A million blood red poppies
fell slowly to the floor
and I heard a million voices
that I have heard before.
Calling from a foreign field
the earth the sea the sky
telling all the story
of why they had to die.
Liberty and Freedom
Motherland and Home
these are but words to cherish
the dead lie deathly prone.
Have we learned the lesson
all they gave was it in vain
is this a better world we live in
built upon their pain?
A million blood red poppies
remember them and pray
they gave their tomorrow
that we might have this day.
We must strive to greater effort
for peace and goodwill to reign
never should one single poppy
fall to the floor again.

Written by Sergeant Cyril Frederick
Perkins, 75th Light Anti-Aircraft
Regiment R A.



Editorial, Winter 2023

Welcome to our Winter 2023 newsletter.

It must be a sign of getting older, but November seems to arrive with increased rapidity every year, and with it the season of Remembrance. Once again, the Monte Cassino Society was proudly represented at the annual service of Remembrance at the Cenotaph in London, Blackhall St Columba's Church in Edinburgh, the National Memorial Arboretum, and countless other memorials and Churches throughout the country. As ever, we are indebted to all those members who attended, laid wreaths and crosses, and gave their support in many different ways. As 26 of us gathered on Horseguards Parade in London, it was a pleasure to see new and familiar faces, and to meet members who joined us for the first time to remember those who fought in the Italian campaign.

While we continue to welcome new members, some of whom will be with us for the 80th Anniversary in Cassino next year, we recognise that there are still many people out there with an interest in the Italian campaign, but who are unaware of the existence of the Monte Cassino Society. With this in mind, two new social media accounts have been opened, which we hope will raise awareness and encourage more people to join and support the work of the Society. Thanks are due to Gary Tankard for overseeing the X site (formerly known as Twitter), and to Des James for the Monte Cassino Society Group on Facebook. To access these sites, go to:

X: <https://twitter.com/MonteCassinoSoc>

Facebook: Search for 'The Monte Cassino Society' Facebook page and click on 'Visit Group' to access the 'Monte Cassino Society Group' chat page, where you can add your own comments and photographs.

Thank you to those readers who contact me to comment on individual stories in the newsletter. All feedback is much appreciated, and judging by that received from our summer 2023 issue, the story of George the Mule touched a chord with many of you. While a handful of individuals may have achieved legendary status, most animals used during conflict will often have been taken for granted as inevitable casualties of war, ultimately to be forgotten. There must be more stories out there relating to the role of animals in war, as in all conflicts up to the second world war they were employed so extensively to fulfil many roles. In this issue we have an interesting article by Sue Hughes, and I hope in future to be able to feature a few more and maybe slightly redress the balance.

Preparations continue for the 80th Anniversary commemorations in May 2024, both in the UK and Cassino, and details of planned events are given in this issue. Please do not hesitate to contact either Lesley or me if you have any queries about these.

With all good wishes for the New Year,

Helen James

Editor.

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Membership and GDPR.

Annual membership fees are due in January 2024. Thank you for your continued support so we can maintain the society's aim of furthering an interest in the Italian Campaign.

Membership of the Society is £15 per household, payable to our treasurer Diane Soady (see Contacts at the back of the newsletter). If you can pay by BACS transfer, this will save the Society bank charges. Please contact Diane for details.

As you may be aware, one of the pillars of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) is that Personal Data should only be held for as long as it is required and relevant. Given that membership of the Society has been taken as consent to hold that data, when someone leaves we then have a duty to delete it. To that end, anyone who has not paid their membership subscriptions since 2021 will be given a period of three months grace in which to do so, at the end of which those still outstanding will be deemed to have left the Society and the appropriate action taken with their data. For those members whose membership subscriptions are waived (Veterans and their partners), we will contact them directly to fulfil our responsibilities under GDPR.

Lesley Teasdale, Honorary Secretary.

Monte Cassino Society Ties and Scarves

While we still have MCS men's ties available to purchase, several female members of the Society remarked at the Cenotaph gathering, that we do not have an equivalent accessory to the MCS men's ties to indicate who we represent. To redress the balance, we have commissioned new scarves.

These are in pale blue with the words MONTE CASSINO SOCIETY embroidered in gold lettering, and are available to buy from Lesley Teasdale (Contact details at the end of this newsletter).

The cost for ties is £13 and scarves £20, both including postage.



Some images from Remembrance Weekend 2023 in London





Remembrance Day in Mottingham,

by Dave Mann



Remembrance Sunday was a bit of a strange one for us in Meridian Chapter as the Warr's dealership in South East London who sponsored us has now closed, and the business is now focused on the main store at the Kings Road Chelsea, so this year will be our last year of attendance within the local community as the link has now broken.

Going forward, all our rides will commence from the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, a location from where we draw the Chapter name. Quite unique as such, but it will mean I need to align our Chapter with a different community, ideally in the Greenwich Park/Blackheath area. Watch this space!

I am not sure if world events played a part, but I thought attendance generally this year was notably down, including the number of wreaths laid, as you will see from the memorial image. However, Meridian Chapter Members attended the service, and I gave the honour of laying the Monte Cassino wreath to our long-time member Fred Blunden, himself an ex-Guardsman, and our Chapter wreath was laid by Road Captain Graham Allen.

In all it was still a very moving occasion and an honour for us to lay wreaths in memory of the fallen, and in particular those at Monte Cassino.

Dave added:

Aside from that, and as a member of The Royal British Legion Riders Branch, I ran the Poppy Appeal stand at the M20 Hollingbourne Services for the week running up to Remembrance Sunday, raising £2,095. I was quite happy with that given all that has been going on. I can't say I am a big fan of the new paper poppies, that said there is always plenty of RBL merchandise on the stand and over half of those who donate opt for the annual pin, many of whom collect them.



Armistice Day, Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh

by Michael Wilson

Armistice Day at Blackhall St Columba's Church was blessed with a glorious autumn day with blue skies and sunshine, with no wind this year! Fergus led a poignant service at the war memorial outside the church with a great turnout of folk from the congregation as well as local people. Thereafter the wreaths were laid and some planted small wooden crosses in memoriam.

The Monte Cassino bench was resplendent in the sunshine, picking up the red of the poppies and the black of the monastery. I had arrived early so was able to meet up with Fergus in the church and be given the wreath. It allowed me to have a look around the sanctuary where the wreaths from the dedication service in May had been displayed. I appreciated looking along the line of regimental wreaths, remembering the respectful splendour and emotion of that service.

The church was beautifully decorated with long chains of dozens of knitted red poppies hanging along the length of one wall. Across the table at the front there were more garlands of red poppies.

It was a memorable day, and very suitably honoured all the fallen.

80th Anniversary Commemorations.

In addition to the Service out in Italy at Monte Cassino, there will also be Services at the National Memorial Arboretum (NMA), Lichfield, and at Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh, on Saturday 18th May 2024.

The service at the NMA will follow the same format as the 2023 event, with everyone gathering at our Memorial stone by 1345 for a 1400 start. Afterwards we will once again gather at the Café for a catch up. In accordance with the NMA Website, "entry to the Arboretum is free, however they recommend booking your visit in advance to guarantee entry and save on parking."

The service at Blackhall St Columba's Church will (subject to final confirmation) begin at 1600, and will also be available to view live-stream, via their website.

Could Members please let Lesley know if they are intending to attend either of the Services so that she can keep a tally of the expected numbers - her contact details are at the end of the Newsletter.

Monte Cassino Society visit to Cassino – 12-19 May 24

The Battlefield Study and Remembrance event to Cassino in May 24 is coming together. The 12-16 May 24 Battlefield Study has 42 people on it and is now full.

The 16-19 May 24 Remembrance has 37 people on it with five vacancies. Anybody who would like to join the 16-19 May 24 Remembrance part of the Society's journey to commemorate the 80th Anniversary of the breakthrough of the Gustav Line should get in touch with Lesley Teasdale on lesandjeztea@talktalk.net

Please note that the last date for joining the Remembrance part of the visit is 15th February 2024

Itinerary for 16-19 May 24

Thursday 16 May

0800. Collect participants at Rome Ciampino Airport

0900. Collect participants at Rome Fiumicino Airport

0915-1630. Return to Cassino via a visit to the Piana delle Orme Museum at Latina.

(www.pianadelleorme.it) Lunch included.

This is a historical museum of the 20th Century with the majority of exhibits relating to the key battles of the Italian Campaign.

1745. Return to Hotel Sant Elia, Cassino.

2000. Dinner, Hotel Sant Elia

Friday 17 May

0930-midday. Optional guided boat trip with 'Cassino Adventure' on the river Gari to explore the bridge sites, led by Amazon Bridge expert George Cowie. €15 per person.

Lunch – Tomato & Cioccolatta, Cassino Station area. A Tavolo Calda in the centre of Cassino.

Afternoon. Activity to be confirmed.

2000. Dinner, Hotel Sant Elia.

Saturday 18 May

0800-0830. Breakfast

0830-1730. 80th Anniversary commemoration services for the battles of Cassino.

Timings to be confirmed.

- CWGC Cemetery
- Polish Cemetery
- New Zealand Railway Station Memorial
- Indian Army Memorial
- Royal Engineers Memorial
- Beds & Herts, East Surreys & DCLI Memorials
- German Cemetery

Lunch – place and time to be confirmed depending on commemoration timing.

1730. Return to Hotel Sant Elia

2000. Dinner

Sunday 19 May

0630-0700. Breakfast

0700-0845. Move to Rome Ciampino Airport

0845. Arrive Rome Ciampino Airport. Leave those departing from Rome Ciampino

0845-0915. Move to Rome Fiumicino Airport

0915. Arrive Rome Fiumicino. Leave those departing from Rome Fiumicino

- All hotel accommodation will be provided on a Half-Board basis.
- All participants will need to have an up-to-date Passport with 6 months to run, and the necessary Travel Insurance cover.
- Members will be required to book their own flights in and out of Rome airports. With two airports to collect from, those wishing to fly into Rome Ciampino need to be clear of Arrivals and ready for

pick up at 0800 on 16th May 24. For Rome Fiumicino, the pick-up time will be 0900 on 16th May 24.

- **For return flights**, please do not book to fly from Rome Ciampino before 1030 and before 1130 from Rome Fiumicino.
- Please note when booking that at least one member of each party should be a paid member of the Monte Cassino Society.

Based on 35 confirmed participants for 16-19 May 2024, the costs for coach transport and hotel accommodation on a Half-Board basis – breakfast and evening meal, the costs are

- **Single** - £237.86 per person.
- **Twin/Double** - £207.86 per person or £415.72 per room.

More participants will bring the cost down slightly.

Allow extra for drinks, lunches, and river trip.

Snippets

Good documentaries featuring the Italian Campaign and the Battles for Cassino are sometimes hard to find. Here is a small selection of recommended programmes which are currently available.

“The Savage Storm, the Allied Invasion of Italy” by James Holland

As a subscriber to Dan Snow’s “History Hit” channel, I have been disappointed in the past to find little content among programmes about WW2 which relate to the Italian campaign. However, patience has now been rewarded with a series of programmes just released on the channel entitled “The Savage Storm, the Allied Invasion of Italy”, presented by author and battlefield historian James Holland.

To date, two episodes have been released, Part one dealing with the landings and campaign in Sicily and the early days of the campaign in Italy in 1943, and Part two covering events in the south, Salerno and Naples, and north, on the river Sangro, in the months leading up to the battles for Monte Cassino in 1944. Holland takes time to address areas of the campaign which are sometimes glossed over by other authors, and so far the series is well-presented and informative. His book “The Savage Storm – the battle for Italy 1943” which has also been recently released, is available in both hardback and Kindle versions, and is reviewed in this issue by Gary Tankard.

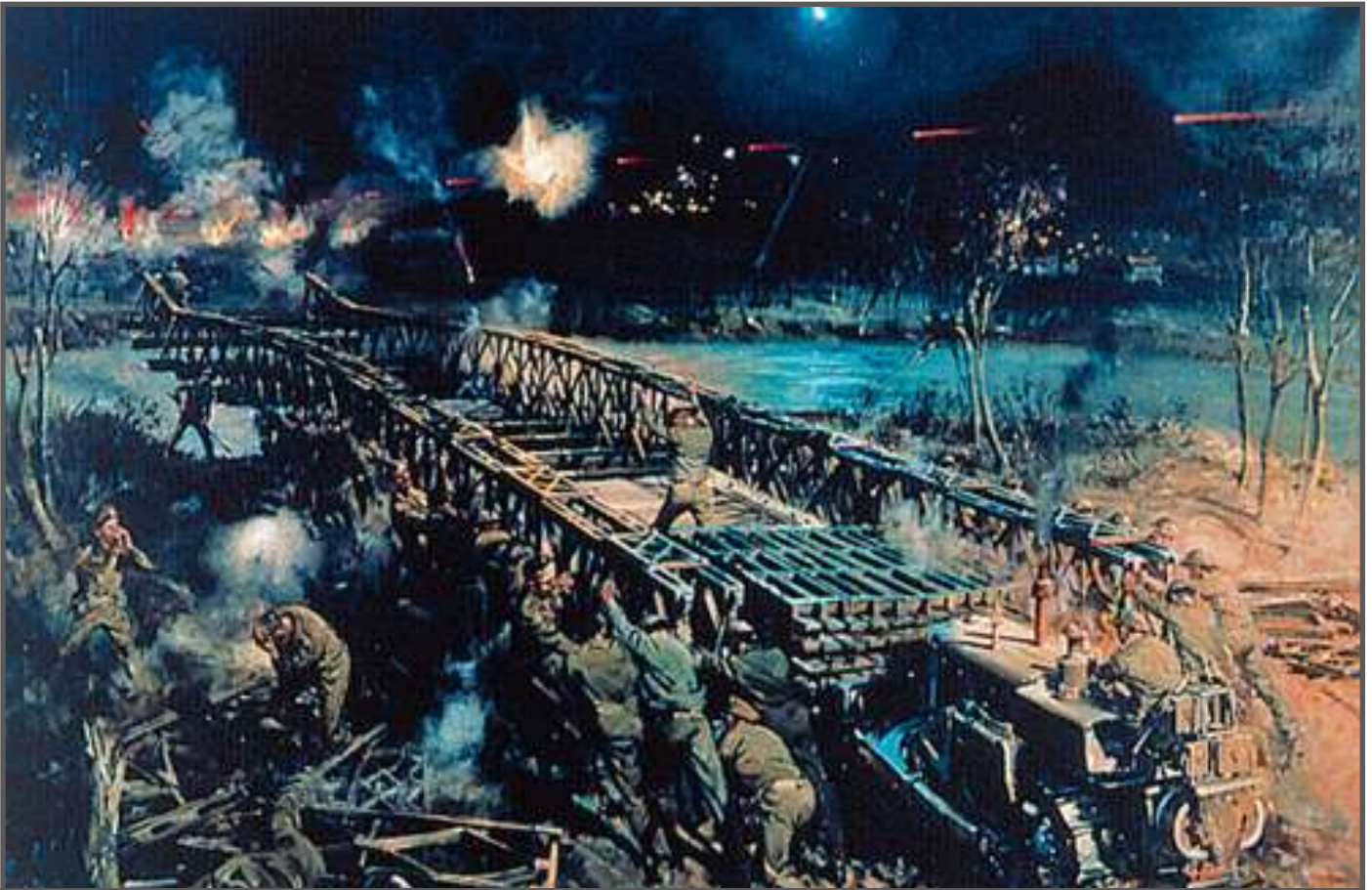
“My Grandfather’s War”, Channel 4

In this series, the Italian Campaign and battles for Cassino are featured in the episode about actor Kit Harrington, whose grandfather was awarded a Military Cross at Cassino.

“This Week in the Italian Campaign” on YouTube

Well worth watching, this weekly video is produced by Eddie O’Sullivan, whose father served in 2nd Battalion London Irish. Recent episodes include the battles for Monte Camino and St Pietro Infine.

Helen James



Painting by Terence Cuneo of the building of the Amazon Bridge.
Picture reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Engineer Headquarters Mess.

Amazon Bridge Commemorations, Monday 13th May 2024

The completion of the Amazon Bridge across the Gari river on 13th May 1944 represented a huge milestone in the breakthrough to the Liri Valley and, indirectly, improved the likelihood of forcing the Germans off Monastery Hill after months of bitter fighting and stalled progress. It was completed “against all odds” and many men were killed or injured in the process.

Those members who will be in Cassino in 2024 for the 80th Anniversary commemorations will be interested to know that two Services are organised by the Royal Engineers Association. Details have been provided by George Cowie, and are:

Monday 13th May 2024

0500. A Last Post and Reveille service on the Amazon Bridge construction site.

0900. A service on the Amazon Bridge far bank, after which those present will be piped up to the memorial for a wreath laying ceremony. The Monte Cassino Society standard will be present, and the Society will lay a wreath.

All are welcome to attend either or both services. For those members who are joining the guided tour with Frank de Planta, the itinerary has been adjusted to include the service and parade at 0900, and the

activity previously scheduled for that time on the Monday morning will now be covered on Sunday evening.

If you require any further details, please contact George Cowie on georgecowie103@yahoo.co.uk



Map for the Amazon Bridge Commemorations on Monday, 13th May 2024

Historical unboxing.

by Sue Hughes

Following the moving story about George the mule in the last MCS newsletter, a surprise unboxing occurred over the Summer at a Hampshire museum – a Casualty Carrier from 1944.

Casualty Carriers or ‘Cacolets’ have been used for centuries to convey injured or infirm soldiers – one way of doubling up on the load a horse or mule could carry.

“Naturally you need a pretty hefty and sure-footed animal to start with – rather than a donkey or pony – but provided the load is balanced it was an effective means of ‘casevac’ from mountainous terrain before helicopters were available,” said Major John Butler TD.

“The latest (WW2) British pattern could be used on either the General Service pack saddle or the artillery pack saddle, but are quite heavy – weighing about 60lb before any casualties were loaded, and could take either sitting or stretcher cases or a combination.”

Major Butler explained how the carrier was unearthed: “The carriers now on display in the Royal Logistics Corps Museum, Worthy Down, Winchester, were in a crate that had not apparently been opened since they were newly packed in 1944 and were probably destined for operations in Italy or Burma.” “End of hostilities kept them in store in Didcot until the Depot closed in the 1990s and the residual stocks of pack

saddlery were disposed of. RLC Horse-Drawn Heritage has inherited much of this, amongst which this box was found.”

Historian and guide Frank de Planta added: “Casualty carriers tended to be used to transport the wounded from the Regimental Aid Post (RAP) – the location immediately behind the forward troops where the Regimental Medical Officer and his team triaged the casualties and assessed their chances of surviving the journey from the RAP to the Advanced Dressing Station, where surgery would take place. In difficult mountainous terrain like that at Cassino, mules were ideal and perfect for moving casualties to ambulances waiting in the valleys.”

rlchorse-drawnheritage.com

royallogisticcorps.co.uk/museum



A pack mule with one of the Casualty Carriers, moving through Adriano, Italy, 1944
(black & white image courtesy of Major John Butler TD)



A pack mule with a Casualty Carrier, location unknown
(sepia image courtesy of Major John Butler TD)



The Casualty Carrier now on display at the Royal Logistics Corps Museum, Worthy Down, Winchester, discovered a day before the annual showcase Horse-Drawn Heritage event.

The Uncle I never Met

by Des James



My mother's older brother, Alfred Buckner, was 18 years old when he joined the Army. It was a tradition as his father, Arthur, had also been a regular soldier. In 1937, after basic training at Aldershot, he was sent out to India to join 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment. It was relatively peaceful at that time, so Alf was able to pursue his two hobbies, sport and photography. He participated in football, athletics and boxing and his photograph album is full of pictures of army life and places he visited whilst on leave.

In September 1938, the Battalion received unexpected orders to move to Palestine for a peace keeping role. Then in July 1939 they left for El Daba in Egypt, and war was declared on 3rd September 1939. After some training and exercises, the Battalion were moved back to Palestine for more peace keeping. On 2nd June 1940, while the 2nd Battalion Hampshire Regiment were retreating via Dunkirk, most of the 1st Battalion were sent to Moascar, on the Suez Canal. Italy had now joined the war, so they were subjected to heavy bombing by the Italian Air Force.

After much fighting in North Africa, the Battalion left for Malta. There they became part of 231 (Malta)



Infantry Brigade with the 2nd Devons and the 1st Dorsets. In Malta they endured tremendous bombing and shortages of food and supplies. This must have been extremely difficult for Alf, as he was born in Malta to a Maltese mother and would have known many relatives there.

He believed he was due home leave after being overseas for nearly 7 years, but this was war. After some more training in Egypt, the Independent Brigade, now part of the Eighth Army's XXX Corps, sailed for Sicily. They landed on the Pachino Peninsula in heavy weather, but with very little opposition. As they moved North, the Italian resistance was very light, until they reached Catania Airport where the Germans had landed troops to bolster the defence. Several battles were fought advancing around Catania. On the 29th/30th July 1943 the Brigade took heavy casualties at Regalbuto Ridge, and my uncle, aged 25, was killed in action.



He is buried in the CWGC Cemetery in Catania, and I was able to visit his grave in 2014 and place a cross there. Although I never met him, I feel I know him as I share his interests in sport and photography.



The Savage Storm

Book review by Gary Tankard

The Savage Storm – The Battle for Italy 1943 is the latest release by James Holland. It covers the Italian campaign from the initial landings in September 1943 until the end of 1943, including viewpoints from all sides – British, German, American and Italian. The author's aim was not to produce a military history but more to impart a sense of the campaign's brutality and individual participants' experiences.

New publications on the Italian campaign are few and far between, especially for the lesser-known operations. I was looking forward to this book when it was announced. Unfortunately, I'm disappointed in what was delivered.

Firstly, the positives. It is well-written and readable (with caveats). It is aimed at the popular military history market, although this should not be considered an issue. It is also to be commended for including Italian civilian experiences, which are usually forgotten in most military histories. The primary debates on the campaign's conduct are covered competently at a higher level. However, the takes on some aspects could be more convincing, and little hard evidence is presented for them.

Now, the negatives. The first is style. Much was made by the author of using original diaries and letters where possible, which is admirable. An issue with this approach is that personal diaries and letters can be bland, boring even, and usually concerned with the monotony of day-to-day existence. To counterbalance this, the author, rather than quoting directly from the sources, repeatedly projects emotions and sometimes conversations onto the participants, which becomes increasingly annoying. I understand the need to make the book engaging, but sometimes, I felt I was reading a work of fiction rather than factual history.

Seasoned readers of other books on the Italian campaign will also notice that some sources are not original diaries or letters but have previously been included in other works. These are not explicitly identified, which brings us to the second major issue – the lack of footnotes. Most serious, or even semi-serious, history publications have footnotes denoting where the information has been sourced from. Amazingly, this book doesn't have any footnotes apart from where direct quotes from diaries and letters have been used. I am not sure whether this is by design or a rush to get it published, but it makes difficult to understand what research has been done.

This brings up the third point – factual errors. Some of the general ideas in the book (for example, that the Allies were slugging it out with the Germans on a man-to-man basis) are debatable. And some of the facts quoted are just wrong, a sign of poor or non-existent research. Without footnotes, it is impossible (unless recognised from another book) to understand how some conclusions were determined and where facts have been sourced from. Once you identify a couple of factual errors, it casts doubt on the accuracy of everything else. Even some of the photos are miscaptioned.

Sadly, I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone but the casual reader on the Italian campaign. It sits at the popular end of the military history market, and I fear it would infuriate some readers and bore others. It feels rushed, probably unsurprising, as the book seemed to go from inception through research to publication in a little over a year. I found the book hard to finish mainly because of the 'story-style', character-driven text, factual errors, and unsupported opinions. It is a missed opportunity to produce a definitive historical work on this part of the Italian campaign.

New members

Jane Parisella, daughter of John Dudley, 1/6th Battalion East Surrey Regiment

Martin Dudley, son of John Dudley, 1/6th Battalion East Surrey Regiment

Luke Shaw, grandson of Michael Slesar, Carpathian Rifle Brigade, 2nd Polish Corps

Benjamin Shaw, grandson of Michael Slesar, Carpathian Rifle Brigade, 2nd Polish Corps

Anne Jarvis, daughter of Cyril Povey, 132 Field Ambulance, Royal Army Medical Corps

Lois Teasdale, granddaughter of Robert Randall, 2nd Battalion London Irish Rifles

Fred Teasdale, grandson of Robert Randall, 2nd Battalion London Irish Rifles

Bob Adams, son of Bob Adams, 8th Battalion Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders

Dr. Colin Evans, son of Lance Corporal William Evans (3131995) who served in support of a 4.2 mortar unit at the Battle of Cassino

In Memoriam

Denis Curry, Veteran, Sapper, 11th Field Company and 225 Field Company Royal Engineers.

This message was received from MCS member Michael Wilson on 3rd November:

Maria Dlugolecka-Graham

Last week I represented the MCS at a funeral. Maria Dlugolecka-Graham was in my medical year, and we linked up again around the time that Blackhall St Columba's Church became involved with the Monte Cassino Society.

Maria's father was a Polish officer who came over to the UK after WW2 and Maria became involved over the years, looking after Polish veterans from Monte Cassino.

In addition, in the 1980s she and her family were involved in taking supplies to Poland, for which Maria was awarded in 1997 the Gold Cross of Merit, and in 2006 the Knight's Cross of the Republic of Poland. She was most helpful and enthusiastic with our Polish contacts with the Blackhall Church events. I was pleased that I had mentioned to the priest and family that I was attending for personal reasons and on behalf of the Monte Cassino Society, when specific mention was made in the eulogy of Maria's trip to Monte Cassino, as it was so important to her in the past to honour the Polish dead and injured in the battles.

Contact us:

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