

Bill Fitness, 2nd Coldstream Guards

Bill Fitness served with the 2nd Coldstream Guards. This account appeared in the February 2004 issue of the Wartime News.

The end of January 1944 saw my unit, 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards, based at Constantine, Algeria, ordered to Italy at short notice, and also to be ready for immediate action. Despite many difficulties inherent in such a situation, the battalion was made ready by 4 February and embarked at Phillipville on the Ville d'Oran arriving at Naples on 5 February. There followed an extremely uncomfortable journey by goods train to Capua.

It was cold after Africa where we had been training in light clothing, and it could be said that we were feeling more than a little miserable. Furthermore, it had been somewhat of a shock to learn that we had been so hurriedly ordered from Algeria in order to reinforce the 46th British Infantry Division in its bid to establish a bridgehead among the wild Aurunci mountains. This meant that our previous role as the fully trained motorised infantry of the 6th British Armoured Division had now ceased, and we had become an independent infantry battalion.

Having been taken by truck on 7 February to San Martino, the battalion debussed and began to climb the forbidding mountains. With no experience of mountain warfare the grim reality of climbing slippery, and at times treacherous, mountain paths laden with heavy equipment through total darkness and bitterly cold rain, was a constant reminder that there was no protection to be had from the elements on these bare gaunt mountain ledges. The forward units reached their positions by the next day. There followed thirteen days of vicious and at times close quarter fighting under the most appalling conditions. The bitter cold which caused the water in our water bottles to freeze solid, together with the heavy rain and exposure, added to the misery.

On 20 February the battalion was relieved. The name Mount Ornito would become a battle honour in our regimental history.

This initial battle in the mountains of Italy had taken a heavy toll of our manpower. The grim statistics were 35 dead, 157 wounded and missing; in addition 50 men had been hospitalised with frostbite. It was an awesome introduction to the war in Italy.

Reinforcements were urgently needed if we were to continue as a full strength fighting battalion and we were greatly relieved to learn that from 28 March a company of Scots Guards would bring our unit up to scratch.

Africa now seemed to be very much in the past and it was a sobering experience pouring over the map of Italy and noting the difficult terrain with its many rivers and formidable mountains which would have to be overcome. However, our opening battle in the campaign quickly became past history. We were to relieve the Second Division of the New Zealand troops in Cassino and the Coldstream battalion would take over the town.

Our fighting in the mountains had made it abundantly clear that a truly bitter series of battles loomed ahead, and we had no illusions about the grim fighting which must surely lie ahead. Put simply, Italy was an ideal country in which to wage defensive warfare and there could be no better place for such tactics than Cassino.

Four attacks were launched against Cassino during the period from 20 January to 15 March 1944. American troops had attacked on 20 January—this coincided with the landings at Anzio—and also at the beginning of February; New Zealand and Indian Divisions attacked on 15 February; and then came the bombing attack on 15 March. A total of 450 aircraft dropped 900 tons of high explosives, reducing the town to rubble and engulfing it in smoke and dust. New Zealand troops were able to occupy most of the town, but First German Paratroop Division still held out in the Monastery and in some of the buildings at the bottom of the hill. From their dominating position on Monastery Hill the defending troops had perfect observation over the Allied positions and their supply lines. It was clear by the beginning of April that a deadlock had been reached. The enemy could not be dislodged and the town was an impassable ruin.

No buildings had survived and all the streets had been destroyed. No civilians were left in the town and the stench of unburied bodies was all too clear. Large areas of the town were water-filled bomb craters, together with pools of stagnant water. This was the situation when my battalion moved into the town. Sanitary conditions were absolutely ghastly and this, combined with the decaying unburied bodies, did not make Cassino resemble a fragrant garden. The makers of our steel helmets would have been somewhat surprised to have seen the practical use we made of this item of equipment.

The battalion took over the centre section of the town from a Maori battalion on the night of 5 April with their headquarters in the crypt of a church. This was as safe as could be in Cassino and withstood a number of poundings from the heaviest of the German guns. The very small space of the crypt housed two command posts, a joint Regimental Aid Post and numerous wireless sets.

An advance party had lived in Cassino for 24 hours before the battalion had arrived in order to arrange the taking over of positions. Two companies were sited in the town and the other companies were outside the town in order to provide a reserve should a counter attack be necessary; also to relieve forward companies after eight days.

By midnight on the night of 5 April the companies were in position having filed up the 'Mad Mile' which led into the town. This was a perfectly straight stretch of road under complete enemy observation. All landmarks had gone and progress had to be made by rounding heaps of rubble and skirting the edge of water-filled craters.

The most pressing problem was getting supplies to the forward troops. Vehicles were not able to approach the town as the noise of their engines would have brought down a barrage on the road. All supplies had to be hauled forward by hand. Every night a thick smoke-screen was laid down by the artillery and under this screen a train of porters moved into the town. This was a journey full of apprehension with the constant fear that a burst of spandau fire would be directed down through the darkness of the 'Mad Mile'. Once the porters had reached the crypt they were marshalled into sections and took distributions to the forward companies.

For most of us in the forward positions the days followed very much on a regular pattern. The mainstay of the operation was based on the supply system. Life in Cassino without this would have been impossible. A considerable smoke-screen had to be put down to ensure the safe arrival of the porters as they delivered water, food and ammunition, each night after darkness had fallen.

Most forward positions were no more than mere holes in the piles of rubble or sangars which were built up with stones and usually running into further scattered ruins. There was very little

contact with neighbouring positions. Forward sections were entirely isolated, seeing very little else but total devastation, unable to move from their holes, the one contact being at night when porters came up with their rations. Patrolling was out of the question as the ruins were saturated with mines and enemy positions were far too close for comfort. There was nothing to do but to crouch among the crumbling stones of the section post, which resembled a tiny fortress with grenades, ammunition and items of equipment. All that could be done was to watch closely the area of ruin which could be seen from the section post. Shelling was heavy on both sides and harassing fire from machine guns and mortars kept section posts continually vigilant. As was inevitable with men serving in the front line there were the localised expressions, such as the "Organ Grinder" for the noise made by the heavy enemy artillery piece which was sited behind the Monastery and which carried out shelling at irregular intervals. There was also constant menace of the Nebelwerfers, deadly mortar weapons which fired clusters of six bombs at one time, and were referred to as "Moaning Minnies" due to the whining noise they made once they were airborne. Some days and nights were absolute hell. Nerves were stretched to breaking point. Propaganda leaflets of a lurid nature were fired into our positions on odd occasions usually depicting wives and girl friends having a good time at home while we men fought on in the rat infested ruins of Cassino.

Time seemed to stand still. The post occupied by my own section had been the famous Hotel Continental. It had suffered three direct hits and this led to the comment that the forward platoons of my own company had every modern convenience including running water in every room! Such was life in Cassino in 1944.

I attended a Remembrance Service at Canterbury in June 1990 by veterans of the Italian campaign and wishing to spend a little time in the area in the Memorial Gardens dedicated to those colleagues who had made the Supreme Sacrifice in Italy, I arrived early. The memorial plaque was positioned in a superbly maintained part of the Garden and it was most pleasing to see that it was so well kept. I became aware of a man moving towards me. Recognition followed. Fifty six years had passed and I was meeting a fellow occupant of the 'hell hole' we had shared in the ruins of Cassino.