

D. F. Hunt, The North Irish Horse

I served with the North Irish Horse in North Africa and Italy. A few days after we arrived in Naples the whole Brigade was moved across to the East coast, along with the 1st Canadian Infantry Division to practice for the attack on the Hitler Line located just north of Cassino. The defensive line ran from Aquino to Pontecorvo, which the Germans had been building for six months. It was vital to capture this heavily defended line in the Liri Valley because the main road and railway from Naples to Rome had to pass through this point, with the high mountains on either side making further progress impossible.

The Germans had been working on this defensive line for many months, (in the unlikely event of Cassino ever falling, in their eyes) digging anti-tank ditches, sighting huge anti-tank guns along side machine gun posts. Communication trenches were dug between each gun site where living accommodation was also constructed. All this took place in a heavily wooded area, where trees were cut down to construct 'killing' lanes to entice tanks to make progress with 88mm anti-tanks trained upon them. In front of all this anti-tank ditches were dug and barbed wire installed to halt the infantry.

The attack had to be a frontal one as there was no room to manoeuvre because of the mountains on either side. In effect it was an attack similar to World War One. We had Churchill tanks and we nearly always supported the infantry. I was a Troop Leader in No 5 Troop in 'A' Squadron and we worked with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI).

To move a Brigade of tanks plus all the back up vehicles and men plus an infantry division across the mountains, along narrow roads with their continuous hair pin bends was no easy feat and shows how important the attack was. The idea of all this was to practice on similar ground and to get to know one another for greater cooperation. We soon made friends with our opposite numbers. A great camaraderie grew up between the officers and men from each country. We were there for a week and then the whole process had to be repeated to get back to Cassino. To give you some idea of the slow process the tanks were carried on tank transporters but at every hair pin bend, (and there a lot of them), we had to dismount from the transporter, drive round the bend with a sheer drop of many hundred feet below us and re-mount!, a very slow operation.

Cassino had just fallen after months of heavy fighting and great loss of life. When we returned we were moved to an area just through the town, where bulldozers had to make roads through the fields for the lorry transport once the line fell, the roads and lanes being quite inadequate. We remained there for quite a few days while the Generals thought out when to attack. Four times the attack was cancelled which did not do our nerves any good as the Germans were shelling us all the time, making life very unpleasant.

In order to have greater communication with the Infantry our co-driver was replaced by a Canadian infantry wireless op. Unfortunately, I cannot remember his name. It must have been an awful experience for him, as he would be closed down with very little room to move; also the infantry thought the tanks were death traps and to be avoided at all costs. Later you will see that he was not far wrong. An extraordinary quirk of fate took place during the battle—the Germans were using the same wave length as our selves, so that you could hear the Germans giving their orders although we did not understand them. It gave me great pleasure to jam them when we were trying to speak at the same time.

A tremendous artillery barrage was put down by the British before and as the attack went in. The Germans replied. With the very dry ground in May, the dust from the tank's tracks plus smoke screens from both sides and the dust from the shells exploding made vision practically nil. It was an awful situation. Another hazard was the Germans had Hitler Youth snipers tied up in the trees killing any tank commander unwise enough to have his head above the turret.

The North Irish Horse (NIH) and the PPCLI were on the right of the line and as No 5 Troop we were the right hand troops of the whole attack. We were struggling to make progress and give as much covering fire as possible to the infantry when a message came through for me to try and find a way round on the right flank as a mine field was holding up the whole attack. Many of our tanks had been caught in the mine field and had their tracks blown off rendering them unable to move and then were blown up by 88mm guns. There are three tanks in a troop and I thought it best for me to try and find a way round. We were making some progress when I noticed a little hedge. I gave the order 'left a little' to the driver in order to run parallel with the little fence. The words were hardly out of my mouth when the tank lurched side ways, turned upside down, our six pounder gun going off and we landed on our turret with an almighty crash.

Our crash was so great that we bounced back onto our tracks again. The turret was in complete chaos. The wireless had been torn from its mounting, shells, personal belongings etc were strewn everywhere, and drawing dust from its hiding places to add to the confusion. My first thoughts were that the rest of the crew must be killed. I called out each members name and I was astonished and mighty relieved when everyone answered. I could hardly believe our luck. Luckily a bottle of whisky had not broken and I passed it round to each member. It transpired that the bank had given way at the top of a 300 foot ravine but we had been saved by a wide ledge about 50 feet below upon which we had landed and unbelievably our tracks had not been broken. Our wireless was useless which meant I had to go back on foot to find my Squadron Leader and report to him. It was a terrible sight to see so many Canadian soldiers lying about killed and wounded. While trying to cut their way through the barbed wire they had been shot like so many sitting ducks. Their bravery was immense.

The experience was bad enough for us. What the poor wireless op, first time in a tank, thought about it all, I know not. By a magnificent piece of driving, Davy Graham, (who I believe later went to Canada to live and sadly died there) managed to get out of the ravine. We had to stay in the line during the night to try to prevent any counter attack. We spent a nervous night with German patrols probing the tank, but the infantry soon saw them off.

Those who were left gathered in harbour. We, like our Canadian friends, had suffered terrible losses. The dead had to be gathered up ready for burial. It was quite extraordinary to go back to the field of the battle. Bodies and tanks lay scattered about.

Now the dust and fog had cleared it was grotesque to see where some of the tanks had been hit. If the Commanders could have seen where they were going, they would never have been in such positions. Many of the tanks were burnt out and the remains of the ashes of crew had to be gathered, put in small ammunition boxes for burial. It all seemed so unreal—today's piece and quiet—the war had moved on although you could hear gunfire in the distance.

The following day the burial took place. The three Canadian regiments—the PPCLI, the Seaforth Highlanders and the Loyal Edmonton Regt. The Canadian Regiments were buried on three sides of a square and they gave the NIH the place of honour at the head of the square. We were all

lined up ready for the service when out of the gloom came a Canadian piper playing a lament. It was a very moving service and men wept for our friends and comrades who had fallen.

The next day we went our separate ways to continue the war. I quote from the NIH Battle Report:

In the afternoon Brigadier Gibson honoured the Regiment by requesting the burial of NIH dead in the 2nd Canadian Brigade Cemetery and congratulatory messages for our part in the action were received from the Canadian Corps Commander.

From the Regimental history:

The Canadian GOC 1st Canadian Division added his own personal recommendation. Many tributes were paid to the regiment and, significantly, they were granted the honour of wearing the MAPLE Leaf on their sleeves, a distinction shared by all units of 25 TANK brigade and a constant reminder of true Canadian friendship which remains evergreen.

A few weeks later I was sent back to a rest camp at Amalfi; who should be there as well. but some of our Canadian friends. Unfortunately I cannot remember names, but one officer was engaged to a nurse, Mildred Arnold, who was also there. After the war Mildred wrote asking me to come over and stay with them with a view to emigrating to Canada. I got badly wounded at the Gothic Line and still not too well felt I had been away from home too much already.

To end on a more humorous note, again I quote again from the Regimental history:

Major "Snipe" Watson of the PPCLI lay all day under the muzzle of an 88mm anti-tank gun. Every time it fired (and this was often) he suffered the heat and blast from the discharge. It was a long day. He was wounded twice by shrapnel, once in the arm, and secondly in the head by a piece of his helmet and then by a Schmeisser bullet in his forehead. He was found next day by an old friend Colin McDougal. A witness swears the entire conversation went thus; 'Hello, Bucko'. 'Oh, Hello, Colin'.