

David Galloway MC, 2nd Battalion, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders

Chapter I

"and this land be called,
The field of Golgotha and dead men's skulls."
(Shakespeare, Richard II)

In January 1944 at Mena Camp, near Cairo the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders once again became part of the 11th Indian Brigade. For the first time since the fall of Tobruk 11 Brigade was ready to do battle again and the military powers that be, like the centurion of old in the "Acts of the Apostles", soon "found a ship of Alexandria sailing into Italy, and put us therein". On January 26th this "ship of Alexandria" docked at Taranto, and we will long remember those warm winter days, and bitterly cold winter nights, during which, in the bustle of preparation for battle, we made the acquaintance of the little men of the 2/7 Ghurkha Rifles, and the tall men of the 4/6 Rajputana Rifles. We will remember too, the journey by rail over the mountains of Southern Italy to Naples, the first glimpse of that famous bay, the great squalid port where the children shouted incessantly for "caramelli", and our journey by night to the bombshattered mud-bespattered village of Pietramelara, (thirty five miles north of Naples, and twenty five miles behind the front line) where 11 Brigade rejoined the 4th Indian Division. But most of all we will remember Cassino.

By the 19th February the battalion was encamped among the olive groves of Portella, a small village clinging to the forward slopes of the mountains where the land rises east of the River Rapido. From Portella we had an excellent view of the country which was to be the battleground of the next month or so — the formidable Gustav Line — already breached, but far from broken, by the American 34th Division. Opposite Cassino the valley of the Rapido is about three miles wide; to the north of the town, a great wall of mountain rises abruptly, and stretches away into the indefinite north, until the line of the valley itself is lost in a circle of majestic peaks. The highest peak, Monte Cairo, is about five thousand feet above sea level; its bare, snow-capped crest, alone in God-like grandeur, looks down upon the countryside where mortal men fought and died. Cassino itself nestles at the foot of Monastery Hill, where the mountains end in the broad Liri valley to the south. Jutting out from Monastery Hill, three hundred feet above the town, is an outcrop of rock, Castle Hill; a thousand feet higher again is the great monastery itself — founded by St. Benedict, the father of mediaeval monasticism, in the year 529. The beautiful white buildings which we saw before us, however, were largely a nineteenth century restoration.

Highway Six, from Naples to Rome, runs through Cassino; along the route the armies of centuries have passed; Romans, Samnites and Carthaginians have fought around Cassino; the invading armies of France passed that way at the time of the Renaissance; so did Garibaldi and his army of liberation three hundred years after. Says war correspondent Christopher Buckley "The place should be numinous with the intensity of life and death that is bound up in it. I think it is. But for myself it is death that I associate with Cassino, — death in many forms."

Down in the plain, the New Zealanders had reached the South Western outskirts of Cassino; and just north of the town on the lower part of the slopes which ran up to the Monastery was 5 Brigade. The forward troops of 7 Brigade centred on the rocky slopes of point 593, lay about eight hundred yards North West of the Monastery; they were actually in a salient, firing Eastwards, in the opposite direction to the general line of advance. 11 Brigade, as such, took no

part in the battle; its battalions were detached under command of the other two brigades. To the north of the 4th Indian Division was the Free French Corps of General Juin; nobody seemed to be absolutely certain how far their positions stretched into the Central Apennines, and nobody seemed to care; it was Cassino that mattered.

For most of the Jocks, Cassino was the first — and, unfortunately for many, the last — ordeal of battle. Even before the battalion crossed the Rapido, the rifle companies had their experience of action when they acted as porters to the 1st Royal Sussex, during the latter's attack on point 593. The stretcher bearers too had been in action for a week, and during the 1/2 Ghurkha's attack on the night of 15 February, Corporal Anderson had carried the wounded Colonel Showers from below the very walls of the Monastery. At Portella things were none too comfortable — on the very first night we were there we suffered six casualties — one killed; but even in the midst of the shelling the Provost-Sergeant provided us with a laugh.

“Quick, sir” he shouted to the Adjutant, Capt. Willie Watt, who was lying face downwards doing his best to bury his head in the rocky soil.

“What is it?” said Willie.

“There's a man wounded.”

“Where?”

“Here sir!”

“Who is it?”

“Me sir!”

As dusk fell on the evening of the 24th February, the battalion, with its long train of mules, began its trek across the Rapido Valley into the Gustav Line. By day the road was in full view of the Germans on Monastery Hill, and alongside lay grim evidence of the hazards of a journey over it — knocked-out tanks, upturned lorries and dead mules. Jeep-head was at Cairo village, about three miles North of Cassino, and tucked away under the protecting shelter of the hills. From Cairo onwards all supplies were transported by mule or on foot, up the mountain track which clung precariously to the hillside, and which wound its treacherous way past 7 Brigade Headquarters, up to point 593.

For ten days we were in reserve in a bowl-like valley, where we relieved the 1/6 Rajputana Rifles. The Indians eagerly enquired after Camerons they had known in days of Sidi Barrani and Keren; luckily we could tell them that a few of their old friends were still with us. The Rajputana Rifles, having been under command of 7 Brigade, were off again to 5 Brigade to do the “big attack”. It was snowing gently as Wellesley's Rifles gathered their belongings together and left the bowl, and we felt sorry for those inhabitants of warmer lands whose destiny had thrown them into the mud and snow of an Italian winter. They waved cheerfully as they went — four hundred of them; at the end of the Cassino battles about seventy were left.

The ten days in the bowl will be remembered chiefly as being about the wettest the battalion ever spent. On the few occasions when the sun was out the whole valley looked like a vast rabbit warren, with all the little rabbits hanging their blankets out to dry. Then a dark cloud would pass overhead, the rain would come down, and all the rabbits slithering and cursing on the slippery slopes would make a mad scramble for their blankets, and pop back into their holes.

On March 4th the battalion relieved the Royal Sussex on the slopes of 593. Troops of the crack 1st German Parachute Division held the top of the hill, and enemy sangars extended for about fifty yards down their forward slopes. Our own sangars, lower down still, were in some places no more than thirty yards from the Germans'. Brigadier Griffin summed up the situation when he said "I have seen no worse positions in this war or the last." The Royal Sussex had reached the top of the hill in their first attack, but the paratroops had met them with a devastating shower of grenades; in the darkness and confusion it was impossible to hold the position and they had retired to their original sangars. For the moment the idea of attacking 593 had been abandoned; the main offensive was to be aimed at Cassino town and Monastery Hill; so the task of the 2nd Camerons was the unspectacular one of sitting on a cold, bleak hillside, waiting.

Perhaps the hardest thing of all in battle is just to sit and wait. Nothing is more demoralising than to sit for day after day, night after night, while shells, mortar bombs and rifle grenades crash into your position, and take a steady, inevitable toll of your comrades. During the three weeks we were on point 593, casualties averaged eight a day, including two killed. Inevitably through the minds of every man in the battalion ran the question "Is this necessary?"; on a front of six hundred yards there were six hundred men – two companies of the 1/2 Ghurkhas, one company of the 2/7 Ghurkhas, and three companies of the Camerons. Everyone almost touched one another, and it was no wonder that when a blonde paratrooper tossed his grenade from his rocky pinnacle he stood a very good chance of hitting somebody. If we had been going to attack, we might have understood this concentration of manpower, but our role was a defensive one.

Although the main function of the troops on 593 was just to sit and "take it", and although it was impossible to move by day, there was a certain amount of activity by night. After dark the 1/2 Ghurkhas often used to send out patrols into the valley to the West; one night their patrol met a German one, there was a short, sharp encounter and the Ghurkhas came back with some ears. The little men were very annoyed when on counting them, they discovered they had eleven – an odd number – and that somebody therefore must have forgotten a perfectly good ear. Pte. Turnbull of 'C' company defied all the critics by patrolling to the top of 593 in broad daylight where he found two Germans with a machine gun. Unfortunately his tommy gun jammed, but he managed to dash back safely to his foxhole amidst a hail of bullets.

Every night the mule train under Lieutenant Bob McKenzie came up with the rations, along the steep-sided valley which rejoiced in the Wild Western name of "Dead Man's Gulch"; occasionally a mule with its tins of biscuits or bully beef would stumble on the track and disappear into the darkness of the ravine below, but curiously enough the bulk of the rations always arrived safely. Even after they had arrived, it seemed incredible that the Germans did not destroy them, for they were unloaded amidst a nightly clatter only two hundred and fifty yards from the enemy positions. Just as the mules always came up nightly with their burdens for the maintenance of life, the stretcher bearers went down daily with their wounded and dying. Our own stretcher bearers evacuated the casualties from the companies to the R.A.P. about two hundred yards in the rear, and Indian stretcher bearers carried them down the track to the Forward Dressing Station in Cairo village. How many journeys the stretcher bearers did each day; we do not know, but they must have been familiar with every rock in that mountain track; and always they were full of care and solicitude for their burdens.

Apart from stretcher bearers and muleteers, the signallers deserve special mention as

belonging to that body of men who walked the hills by night. During the day the lines to the forward companies were consistently broken by shelling, and just as consistently the signallers under Capt. Teddy Cameron repaired them. For the first few hours of darkness the hills were alive with silently moving figures; signallers laying lines, messengers carrying pieces of paper from one headquarters to another, reliefs on their way to 593, and a host of assorted denizens of the darkness each intent on performing his little part in the war. Often one group of men would pass within a yard of another. Seldom did they speak; a slight pause perhaps, and then they would pass on in an eloquent silence of perfect understanding.

Battalion Headquarters was in “Dead Man’s Gulch” about a thousand yards from point 593. It shared a ramshackle low-roofed farmhouse with a forward A.D.S. On the ground floor were two rooms. We had one, the A.D.S. the other. The first floor was a mere jumble of broken beams, smashed tiles and wrecked furniture, but out of the rubble stuck a long chimney in perfect condition. As you approached up the valley from 7 Brigade Headquarters you would inevitably sense an atmosphere of death and decay. Fifty yards from the farm were fifteen American bodies wrapped in blankets lying stretched out in three neat rows. A few Boche lay disintegrating on the edge of the track, while under loose rocks were pieces of flesh hanging to the leather of old boots. Around the building were scattered tins of ‘K’ rations, a few rusty rifles, many rounds of ammunition, and a representative selection of the personal equipment of the American army. If this were all that characterised Battalion Headquarters it would be hardly worth describing it, but the old farm was almost a hotel — a traveller’s rest, a halfway house, and a haven of hope in a land of despair. Everybody on their way up to, or down from, 593 called in. There were certain regular customers, but casualties were always welcome. At about midnight, by the light of a hurricane lamp or a guttering candle, with grotesque shadows dancing on the walls, there would be preliminary bustle to impending sleep, and many silent prayers for a quiet night. Tattered valises, sheepskin rugs, duffle coats, corduroy trousers, mountain sweaters, lay scattered on the floor in careless profusion and from beneath them, throughout the night, came the steady breathing of well earned rest. There they all were: colonels, adjutants, signals officers, mortar officers, gunners on their way to 593, sappers who had lost their way, counter-mortar officers, visitors to the front, and various people whose exact business in life was not clear. There they all were on a cold night of early spring in the hills above Cassino, thrown together by the fickle fortunes of war. It was an insubstantial building this ruined farm in “Dead Man’s Gulch”. Its roof would hardly have withstood an 8cm. Mortar bomb. Many shells dropped near, but none hit the roof. So, in the minds of all who were there it will forever be a symbol of security and sanity in a world gone mad.

Towards the middle of March the weather improved and everybody waited for the “big attack” to begin. There had been one “big attack” already and it had failed, but this one was to be bigger and better. It could not fail, and prospects of spring in the Eternal City seemed entrancingly bright. If anything was bigger and better in this new attack it was certainly the aerial bombing. The monastery had been bombed before, on February 14th, and was badly scarred; but essentially it was still standing.

March 15th dawned clear and bright, and just before 8 o’clock a faint drone in the Eastern sky – as tiny black specks grew ever larger and approached Cassino — betokened that the “big attack” had begun. For five hours, wave after wave of Fortresses, Liberators, Bostons and Mitchells poured two thousand five hundred tons of bombs on Cassino and Monastery Hill — at least they poured almost two thousand five hundred tons of bombs on Cassino and Monastery

Hill — because one wave of Fortresses went astray, and to the delight of the Jocks on 593, dropped a stick of bombs on 'B' Echelon at Venafro, fifteen miles away. At one o'clock the artillery took up the assault and a pandemonium of noise broke loose from over fifteen hundred guns. Morale on 593 soared – the period of waiting was over. Everything for a time seemed to be going well. The New Zealand infantry pushed through Cassino, and 5 Brigade crept up toward the monastery. By the evening of the 16th a company of the 1/9 G.R. had reached point 435, better known as "Hangman's Hill" - the last lap before the monastery itself. So great was the debris caused by the bombing of Cassino, however, that the New Zealand armour found its advance blocked, and so well had the Germans been dug in below the buildings that they were able to pop up again amidst the rubble. The 1/4 Essex failed to pass through the 1/9 G.R. to "Hangman's Hill", the Germans recaptured some of the lower slopes of Monastery Hill, and the 1/9 found themselves cut off. Meanwhile on the 18th March 7 Brigade Recce Squadron with an American combat group attacked up the valley to the West of 593. For six hard weeks the sappers had worked on this secret tank track which ran all the way from Cairo Village. Their labour was thrown away in a single morning. When the tanks appeared to the West of 593, the panic stricken Germans wirelessly "British tanks have broken through our main positions"; but there was no infantry to follow through, and all that is left of that fine but futile morning in March, in the valley below 593, is a graveyard of burnt-out Shermans and Stewarts.

The 2nd Camerons left 593 on 24th March. As they did so shells were crashing onto the smashed but unconquered monastery, and sparks were flying into the night air. But the barrage was not in preparation for an attack; it was to cover the withdrawal of the 1/9 from Hangman's Hill.

Two days in the 'bowl' and then the Northamptonshire Regiment from 78 Division arrived to take over. On 26th of March we crossed the Rapido again, going East. The results of the Cassino battles had been singularly unproductive. A couple of miles of ground in and around the town, and a few spurs, was all the New Zealand Corps had to show for its enormous loss of life in the past two months. Two fine divisions had been frittered away in bits and pieces. Our own casualties were two hundred and fifty, including fifty one killed — and we had lighter casualties than any other battalion in the division. The two Rajputana Rifle Battalions each had over four hundred.

As day broke, a lovely day of early Spring, our transport wound its way over the hills to the 'B' Echelons at Venafro. A mist hung over the valley of the Rapido, but above it all, apparently floating in the morning air, was the great abbey — magnificent even in its destruction — in detached splendour, seeming to mock the efforts of the men who had tried to capture it. As we turned to the East we were glad to be rid of Monte Cassino and all its works.