Edward Carr, 1st & 2nd Btn Somerset Light Infantry

Edward was a member of the Boys Brigade where he was a messenger between warden posts. Later with the Air Training Corps where they undertook menial tasks releasing ground crews for more responsible jobs. At this time he was classed as being in the RAF reserve.

Later that week, we were on the move again. On orders it said we were making room for other troops, but the word had gone round – as it usually did – that we were going overseas. The second front had not yet started, so it was going to be in the Middle East or Far East, we would see. We paraded at the station with all our gear and boarded the train. We got a cup of tea and a sandwich from the Salvation Army and we were on our way again. After a few hold-ups to let fast trains pass, we moved slowly along side-tracks. Some of the lads recognised the place as Southampton. The train slowed down until we were right on the docks. There were ships of all sizes, some Navy-ones as well. I had never seen so many ships and there were hundreds of troops everywhere you looked. Now I knew the War was on.

I remember joining the line and walking up the gangway. That was around tea time on a Friday afternoon. The ship was called 'The Dunotter Castle', which in its time had been a mail boat. There was an announcement on the tannoy system that told us that "when you are shown to your deck, stay there as the ship was going oversees". This brought a great cheer from all on board: why else would we be going on a ship? We all had a kapok-filled life jacket which had to be worn at all times, and we also got a hammock each which was fun and games to put up. The hammocks were slung above where we sat and ate our meals. When they were all up, it was a bit of a squeeze to climb in and get your legs in.

When morning came, I looked out and troops were still coming aboard. The food was pretty good. I don't know how they did it. It was brought to us on the mess deck in large containers and was still hot. The day passed and the ship filled up. Nothing misses the troops, as early on Sunday morning, a big cheer sounded through the ship as some nurses had come aboard. Some old hand said 'We will sail today now that the nurses are aboard!' and sure enough during Sunday night we heard the engines starting up; we were on our way.

After breakfast I made my way on deck and found a place near the rails as I knew we were about to have a boat drill. After the boat drill, it was announced that we were on our way to join the first army in Italy. At last we knew where we were going. During the day we had talks on what to expect and what units we would be with. We had members of the 'Free French', some dark skinned lads from French Morocco, a few Canadians, a lot of New Zealanders and also a lot of Indian troops and some Gurkhas.

The weather was getting rougher and later on there was some activity among the escort vessels as there was a U-boat warning. The troops were ordered to go below deck or sit on the deck, as long as they didn't move around. I chose to stay on deck, and the captain announced that his boat could outrun any U-boat and make sure they were leaving the convoy and cutting across the Bay of Biscay. By this time the waves were getting very large and the bad weather was turning into a storm. There was a comforting word from the captain, again, that if the waves reached forty feet, there was little chance of a torpedo being fired as the water was too rough to hit a target. This massive ship was pitching and rolling like a rowing boat. The propellers kept coming out of the water making the ship shudder. I had got myself a place at the stern with one or two others and we enjoyed it. There was plenty of food as a lot of men were sea sick! I remember the bread; it was freshly cooked every day and used to smell just like the bread my mother used to bake. After about forty-eight hours the weather improved and we sailed past Gibraltar. The following morning we arrived at Malta. We only stopped long enough for a contingent of medical staff to disembark and to unload medical equipment. Then we were off again; this time with the rest of the convoy.

We saw one medium-sized aircraft carrier that had taken a hit from a torpedo and we could plainly see the crew lining up on the sloping deck getting ready to abandon ship when the order was given. I still have some photos of the ship and later we found out that the ship was called the H.M.S. Trumpeter.

Later on that day, we could see land. It was the land of the ‘wops’ and ‘spaghetti’ (sorry!). The ship had slowed down and at dusk we entered the harbour of Taranto, right in the instep of Italy. We started disembarking and our own lot got off the ship about midnight. We had had a good tea and were given a packet of sandwiches which was a good idea as we didn’t get another meal until dinner time the next day. As we went down the gangplank and onto the dock area, it could have been a dock anywhere. There was no damage to anything; it was a bit dilapidated but that was all. We moved away from where the ship was moored and waited for our transport to arrive. Eventually it did. They were Army three-tonners driven by Sikhs of the 4th Indian Division, and we were now part of the 4th British division. The Indian Division would be with us for the rest of our stay in Italy and later on in Greece.

During the next two days we moved on, heading up the East coast, only stopping for food and the odd bit of air activity. The Germans had pulled back to their defensive lines further up North, so we wouldn’t find out how good they were until later. We arrived at a port town called Bari. It was a good sized town and a very good harbour. Our convoy drove to the West of the town on some higher grounds that had a few buildings that had been damaged from bombs or shells. They were, however, still intact enough to give us shelter from the rain. We were kept busy cleaning and preparing our equipment.

The next day the rain had stopped and there was an air raid warning. However, the planes were not after us; they went after the ships in the harbour, some of which had our supplies on them. We had a birds-eye view of the lot and looking across the town we could see the Junkers 87s (Stukers) peeling off from formation, and diving down, letting their bombs fall onto the ships. It appeared they kept coming back, but it also could have been a different lot. Before the air raid started there was about twelve merchant ships and two Navy ones of the ‘Destroyer’-type. At the end of the day we could count ten ships damaged or on fire and some listing badly. Where were the R.A.F.? The next morning at first light the jerry planes where back again, but this time five Hurricanes arrived and shot down two or three into the sea and two flew off smoking badly. There was a large explosion from one of the ships and a large yellow cloud lifted out of the ship and drifted across the town. We later learned that the yellow cloud was mustard gas that had been on one of the ships. It had caused quite a bit of a havoc in the town, killing and blinding a few people. It was never officially announced from what ship the gas had come. The R.S.M. said: "It could have been an old German ship, left there, as no British ship would carry mustard gas", which to me was just a very diplomatic statement. In 2004 it was announced that it was an American Ship, only carrying the gas in case the enemy would use it.

The rain had started again. It was coming down like stair rods. The word going round was that we were going North, up to where the War was. Transport could not be used as in this part of Italy the roads were raised higher than the fields which used to be marshes until Mussolini had it all drained and turned it into good agricultural land. He gave it to the peasants who produced fruit and vegetables, but now all this land had been flooded by the Germans as part of their defence tactics. Movement along the roads was out of the question; there was the problem of snipers and spotterson nearby hills. They could pick out any movement and could fire a mortar or shell on anything that moved.

The Hampshires who were in our division moved off first. We followed on, and led by the R.S.M. we turned off the main road and finished up in a railway siding of what had once been a factory. There was a line of railway wagons lined up and we were told to get on board with as many as we could fit into one truck. There were a few flatbeds at the back of the train and these were already filled with H.Q. Personnel and their gear. Someone had already been very busy, but had also been very quiet about it. We found out the R.S.M. had been out scouting when he learned we were moving out, and with the help of some of the lads who had worked among trains in 'civvy street' (civilian life) had got this lot together. They had got this small diesel engine, got it working and coupled up, full of fuel or at least enough to get us where we were going. The word came back to be quiet at all times and to keep a sharp look-out. If the train got hit we had to regroup at the front of the train and wait for orders. As usual it was raining cats and dogs, which helped to muffle the sound of diesel. We moved off at a gentle pace with a few stops at checkpoints. Before dawn we came to a halt and we were ordered off the train and found ourselves in a cluster of houses near to a pile of rubble that had once been a large building. 'B Company', which was us, led the way. Someone up front knew where we were going, and we just followed the section in front. We marched for two hours and the word came back that we had to "Keep alert", as we were approaching a small place called Capua, which was a small town south of Cassino. This was our destination and the rest of our forces would arrive later on.

We all found somewhere to bed down, to try and get warm and dry we weren't allowed to brew up. Sentries were posted and around 2100 hours H.Q. Company came round with tea and sandwiches. There were a few mortar and shells falling, but nothing close. The next day the troops we had left at Barri started to arrive, and we got a few calls such as "How on earth did you lot get here?!" or words to that effect. A few 88s that landed nearby put an end to that as everyone went for cover. The brigadier had said to our colonel "I don't know how you got your men here, and I don't think I want to know!"

The First Battle

It was described as the first battle, but to my mind it was when the allied armies who had advanced more or less unopposed came across the prepared defences of the Gustav Line. They had progressed North up the Liri Valley and had to cross the River Rapido if the plan to bypass Cassino were to succeed. The River Rapido was only 60 feet wide where it skirts Cassino. This was not wide as rivers go, but it was 9 feet deep and had a fast current; around 8m.p.h.and for most of its length it had vertical banks of about two or three feet above the water level.

The Americans had planned a crossing with about six battalions; some South of S. Angelo and some to the North. Continuous rain and flooding by the Germans as part of their defences had made the meadow land before the river into marshland and mud. The Yanks had bombarded the German positions with their artillery as they advanced, but as they neared the river, they could not depress their guns enough to engage the enemy.

From the very first they suffered casualties from the minefields (which should have been cleared) as they advanced. Mortars and gunners had open day; they advanced carrying their boats and the shrapnel from this barrage blew holes in the boats, making a lot of them useless. In the pouring rain and in the pitch black of the night a lot of the guides lost their way, odd individuals got separated from their units and got lost. To make it worse, they had lost their commanding officer and second in command among the first casualties. Other officers and N.C.O.s were struggling to reorganise their groups and many support groups lost those they were supposed to support. One bridging party also got lost. The rest of the force attempted to cross the river without artillery support in the face of murderous enemy fire. Fully alerted by the noise of the confused approach, the enemy (despite the dark, the rain and the mist that was rising) poured fire into the crossing places, which they could identify by sound alone. Many boats were sunk as soon as they were launched. Others capsized as men climbed into them under heavy fire. A few boatloads from two companies managed to get across and attack the enemy positions while the engineers attempted to put foot bridges across for troops that were to follow on. Of the bridges that were brought up, some were not serviceable, one was destroyed by mines and enemy fire knocked out the other two.

The engineers managed to get one across made up from bits of the others and two companies got across before it was destroyed by enemy fire. By dawn, there was no communications of any kind with the troops across the river. Radios did not last long in these circumstances. Only by the sound of gun fire was it that commanders at this side of the river could know what progress was being made. With Monte Cassino towering over the area, even at this distance of five miles providing good observation points for the Germans, the Yanks found themselves with their backs to the river, surrounded by self-propelled guns and German tanks as the Germans systematically began to wipe out the American force. The American officer in command asked permission to withdraw back across the river, but was refused. By the time he got his reply he had already ordered a withdrawal on his own responsibility. In the morning, the commanding officer ordered the rest of the Americans on this side of the river to make a crossing under cover of a smoke screen. A foot bridge had been erected and a third battalion was across before midnight and by dawn we had another three battalions across, including the one that had withdrawn the night before. During the morning, the German artillery, who had the crossing well-registered, waited until the mist lifted and then destroyed the footbridge and the remaining boats, along with the telephone lines which the Yanks had put up. Pockets of men held on for a while, but then the volume of fire gradually died down and by 4pm it was all over.

In forty-eight hours, the Americans had lost 1681 men dead and 875 missing. It was the worst single loss in battle since Pearl Harbour. Three nights before the British had carried out a successful opposed crossing of the Garigarlo river just a few miles away by the 10th Corps. To get the Rapido crossing in perspective, the Americans were relatively inexperienced; the British had learned lessons three years earlier in the desert, although it was a hard way to learn a lesson.

While this was going on, our battalion was busy doing many types of patrols, testing out enemy strong points and keeping the top brass happy. We had been joined by a New Zealand division, the American 1st Armoured Division and the full 4th Indian Division. It was pretty obvious that something was in the wind. We were ordered to approach the railway station following a shallow causeway which the railway ran along as it left the sheltering slopes of Monte Trocchio.

We came across a storm drain running under the road. The night before it was crammed tight with Italian women and children; women whose faces showed the deep furrows brought on by hard work, worry and sorrow. Most were dressed in black and as one lad remarked, they looked like black currants crammed into a box. I don’t know how they had managed to breathe. With shells and mortars falling on both sides of the road it was a dangerous place to be in; "one shell on the drain would kill them all!" I shouted to Corporal Wyatt, who was on the other side of the road nearest to them. "Make them understand if they stop there they will all be dead!" He went across and pointed to where the sea was over the mountains and said "Signora! Multo pericolo, go to the sea! Boats, escape, safety!". A young signora, raven black hair sticking out from under her scarf and great brass earrings hanging down to her shoulders smiled shyly at him and edged back into the drain, clinging to her child. Maybe his Italian wasn't as good as he thought. I shouted "Try again! Pull her out and push her down the road!", which he did. The shy smile had then gone and she bit him. We decided to leave them where they were. I wondered later if any of them had survived. A Madonna in black, stuffed in a drain surrounded by other women also in black with shawls like hoods, black, always in black. Have you ever looked down into the black hole of a cellar in the middle of the night and shouted "Is there anyone down there??" before you pulled the pin from the grenade, before throwing it in? All that came back was the echo of your voice, coming back out of the stillness. And just when you are about to drop the grenade in, an enormous sound comes from the cellar, and these same black clad women swarmed out of the hole in the ground, screaming and hollering their heads off, and disappearing in the night like a swam of bats. I remember, weeks later, when I passed the spot, there wasn't even a part of the road left.

The next morning we got word that the abbey was to be bombed. We couldn't believe it. The German positions did not seem to be in the abbey, but round it on the hill sides. The next day the sun shone now and again. Wet socks and shirts kept appearing in hidden places, trying to dry out. Anyway, the advance to the railway station was stopped and we consolidated the positions we were in. We moved about only with great caution; German snipers were very good! I once had a go with one of their rifles and it was very accurate. At 300 yards, using the special sight, you could pick out details of a face! However, it had a kick like a mule!

We were in a small farm house. When we had arrived here, the occupants had done a quick retreat. There even was a large pan of spaghetti left on the stove, still cooking. Before we could give a warning, two of the lads had tried it and said it was tasty! After waiting an hour to see if the food was poisoned and the lads being OK, we all tucked in. We took up positions, lookout and sentry. The next thing we knew was the cellar door bursting open and German soldiers coming into the room shouting "Kamerad! Kamerad!" with their hands in the air. They must have thought the whole battalion was here to give themselves up like that. You could see the surprise on their faces when they saw it was a small platoon. We checked them for any weapons and then put them in one room with a guard at the door. We got in touch with Head Quarters, who were pleased to hear we had 27 prisoners. We never said how we got them. They sent two three-tonners to pick them up. We had been lucky. It could have been us that were now prisoners. It was a lesson we didn't forget: don't make yourself at home in a house until you have checked the cellar.

The bombing was a first. Heavy bombers were to operate with medium bombers in close co-operation with the infantry. The morning of the bombing was a lovely sunny morning. We could hear aircraft very high up and we could see vapour trails of a lot of aircraft. An officer looking through binoculars said "They are flying fortresses and they must be at least 20,000 feet up!" Even from where we were we could see the bombs falling, and as they exploded huge clouds of dust arose from the abbey. Quite a few bombs missed the target and fell on Snakes Head, a hill near the abbey that was occupied by Americans. That first wave was followed by a second wave and a third wave. Some bombs falling on the town of Cassino itself, parts of which were occupied by our mob and the Shropshires.

The next wave to come consisted of Mitchels, which were medium bombers, and they were low enough for me to recognise what they were. The bombing continued for most of the day, and by dusk they had reduced the abbey and the town itself to great piles of rubble. I could see part of the post office still standing, and also a hotel, poking out of the rubble. We looked up at the abbey; it was almost unrecognisable. The shape had changed, the square cut walls had gone with a great pile of rubble in the centre. Some of the walls were still intact two thirds of the way down.

The next day there was a brief visit from some fighter bombers. I guess they were taking photos, but apart from that there was no air activity at all. The monastery or abbey as it’s called looked worse than ever. Just one big heap of rubble. No event of the war caused more heated controversy than the bombing of the abbey. After the war, general Mark Clark, in his memoirs, wrote "I say the bombing of the abbey was a mistake". It was more than a mistake, even, it made the job more difficult, more costly in terms of men, machines and time. He disclaimed responsibility for an order which he himself had given and blamed it on his subordinate commander, General Freyburg.

It was reasonably well established afterwards that the abbey was not occupied by the German army at the time of the bombing. However, this could not have been known at the time and ultimately this was (deemed) irrelevant. The piece of ground called Monte Cassino, a 1,700 foot mountain with rocky sides, a zigzag shelf of roadway, providing shelter for tanks and guns was a powerful fortress. In military terms this was called ‘a single piece of ground’.

The Second battle

The morning of the attack found the troops of the 4th Indian and 4th British division facing another day that was unlike any we had experienced before. Only a jagged lump, which was formerly known as the town of Cassino, separated the forward positions from the Germans. We had the New Zealanders on our left, this time. They were in my opinion some of the best soldiers you could wish to fight with. Our Colonel Hunt said to the officer commanding the Kiwis "Your men don’t salute much, do they?" The officer replied: "Try waving, they always wave back!" By the time we left our rest area, the winter weather was worsening; rain sleet and snow with a bit of hail thrown in was following one another, the ground in the flat areas was a waste land of mud, marsh and flood.

The attack had been ordered to start at 2300 hours, but the mules bringing the ammunition had not arrived. It must seem odd to anyone who had not fought in mountainous country to use mules, but at Cassino you could not put trucks on the road; they would be spotted and blown off the road. All our supplies, everything from ammunition to water to petrol, had to be brought seven miles across the valley on mules and then man-handled the last few yards to the forward positions. The supply route took five hours to cover, and was shelled most of the way, so only a percentage of the mules ever got through. On many nights, the wounded had to endure the same long journey in the opposite direction.

It was well after midnight when the attack started eventually. We had got our ammunition and it had been handed out. I remember the R.S.M. saying "Try and wait till the enemy is stood in front of each other! Then you will get two with one bullet!" since most of our ammunition was still at the bottom of Bari Harbour. He could always be relied on to bring a smile to the lads' faces. Our objective was to cross the river on the east side of Cassino where, since the bombing, the level of water had dropped two or three feet, so it was possible to wade across it. The 4th Indian and the Polish were putting in an attack on the higher ground to our right. As we approached the river, it looked different to me than when I had passed that way on a patrol a few days earlier. There was a patch of scrub about 50 yards back from the far bank, which I could not remember. I put this to our platoon commander Lieutenant Bashly. He said "You must be mistaken! Probably it was another place you remember!" We got across the river without any opposition, which was odd, and as the leading section approached the scrub there was explosion after explosion. It was not a scrub at all, but a strong thicket of thorns that Gerry (the Germans) had dragged there. It was reinforced with barbed wire and anti-personnel mines. As those that had not been hit ran for cover, there was a shower of grenades from the other side of the thicket, followed by fire from Spandaus, which were Gerry machine guns. Someone had ordered smoke and as the smoke bombs came down, we withdrew back across the river. We carried the wounded back with us, one of them was Lieutenant Bashly. He was in a bad state, but somehow he was still alive. I never heard if he survived or not. Sometime later, our artillery pounded the spot until it was just a heap of mud. A and D companies went through and consolidated the position. The action that went down was skirmish.

I had to go down to Head Quarters to report as I was the senior N.C.O. in the platoon left standing. Our platoon sergeant had been killed outright. We lost 8 dead and 7 wounded and also had 3 walking wounded. I was made up to ‘WS/SGT’, which means ‘War Substantiated Platoon Sergeant Promoted in the field’, a good rank to have. It had been a bad night all round; the Gurkhas had lost 11 officers and 135 men. The Indian rifles had lost 196 officers and men. The R.S.M. said "Your platoon is 19 men short. With two other platoons in the same boat, we are making them into one platoon until we get reinforcements. You are being seconded to the 1st/2nd Gurkhas. It will be a good experience for you." At the time I didn’t think so, but later on I would have agreed with him. I went off down the road with some of our walking wounded and made sure that my lads got in the queue for treatment and then went off to find Battalion Head Quarters. I found them in an old building with something stacked in every room I saw. I located the quartermaster’s store. It was like an Aladin’s Cave. I had my three stripes issued, plus a new battle dress top. They had no trousers to go with it. The quarter master said "Here, give me the jacket and the stripes. One of my lads will sew them on for you." This was quite a surprise; I was used to doing all my own sewing. That extra stripe made all the difference.

I was taken up the road to meet my new men, if only for a little while. They had, like us, had taken a beating. A few more than my platoon, there were 35 of them. The young officer who took me to meet them was or looked even younger than me. I said "My name is Carr. Carry on what you were doing and I’ll come round an meet you all. I was on the river crossing with you last night." I went up to everyone of them, had a word and asked their names. I shook everyone’s hand and repeated the name, but I knew I would never remember them. The Ghurka sergeant who followed me around said "They don’t all do that. They know you as CPL Gun as you always carried a Bren gun.".

I soon settled in with these men. They were real soldiers in every sense of the word. The next day, around tea time, I was called to the major’s office, which was a small cellar, and I was told "We have a job for you". I was introduced to an American who had turned out to be a priest. I was told "Go and pick three men and two drivers". When I got back we were given a truck, which had blankets in the back, and some food in containers which we were told was not for us.

There was a convent on the approach road to Cassino on route 6. A lot of the nuns had already moved away, but as the army was taking the convent over as a casualty clearing station there was a number of nuns there, that did not have training as a nurse and did not wished to remain, who needed to be moved out to a safer place. When we arrived at the convent, we could see it had survived the bombing, and we parked up. The American priest, who – as it turned out – could speak fluent Italian, was speaking to a nun who had opened the door and after a minute or so some five other nuns came out. We put them in the back of the truck, showed them the blankets and the food, and they were told "Make yourself as warm as possible and eat the food; it's good for you!"

We were on our way to a place called Pletoni, where there was another convent, about an hour's drive away. We found the place with the help of one of the nuns and the priest. The roads, as we got nearer the place, weren't very good; a lot of mud and deep ruts. We got stuck twice, and the second time everyone had to get out and push, only the driver remained in the truck. One of the nuns had bare feet, and the weather was really cold. As they all got back in the truck on harder ground, one of the Gurkhas gave the barefoot nun a pair of socks from out of his pack. They were bright red, his good luck colour. The priest said later on "I bet she was the only nun in Italy with red socks!"

When we got to the new convent, they were whisked away, but we were given a large pot of tea each, and some brown bread sandwiches, which went down very well. Then we set off again to get back to the unit before it got light. On the way back, one of the Gurkhas said "Pull under that tree and wait for us for twenty minutes" and then they were off into the night. They returned about ten minutes later with a tin hat full of eggs and two chickens that had not been dead long, and presented them to the priest. They said "We cannot cook the chickens, but we can cook the eggs!" When we dropped the priest off, he said "I'm glad you were with me; I was a bit frightened of those men!" Later, when we ate the eggs I told the men what he had said, and they roared with laughter. They said "We were nervous of him, that's why we got him the chickens!"

The Italians who lived among the ruins were always stealing the boots off our dead comrades. You never saw anyone, but if soldiers swapped their boots with a dead soldier, they always left their old pair. Another reason we knew was if the body was badly mutilated, they left the boots alone, as they couldn't always face the more gruesome of the corpses. One or two were shot as they robbed the dead; they didn't only take the boots. They must have lived in cellars, and kept quiet during the daytime.

I learned later that I had passed my test with the Gurkhas. I had always done the same as them and not just said "Do this or do that!" I always got a good welcome, later on, when I was back with my own unit and they saw me. In the next two weeks I went on many patrols with my Ghurka platoon and the more I got to know them, the more I admired them as soldiers. We were in a part of Cassino that had been full of houses. No large buildings and sometimes, on a night, you could hear the enemy talking, or maybe an odd cough, on the other side of the wall. When the Gurkhas heard this, they would slide off into the night. The talking would stop and the section would return and give the thumbs-up sign: another job done.

Gerry had been craftily building up his ground forces. There was that many enemy machine guns on the ground, that it was proving almost impossible to move around. The top brass had decided to let the R.A.F. boys have a go at getting rid of a few. We had pulled back to prearranged positions and we hoped the bombers got the markers right. We could hear them coming a long time before we saw them. There seemed to be dozens of them, there was no antiaircraft fire and no enemy fighters. It must have been like a practice run for the fly boys. We could see the bombs falling and then the noise started. It was one continuous roar and crump; the funny sound a bomb makes when it explodes in a building. It was just murderous bombing, scientific, the sound waves moved away and all that was left was great clouds of dust and flames rising up into the air. The word came out we were going in to mop up any remains. As we advanced, Gerries popped up from every rock and brick, some crawling out holes in the rubble, still firing their guns. They were trying to counter attack, but the bombing had shook them up and they were not organised. However, they could certainly put up a scrap. One by one the pockets were cleaned out. There were no prisoners. This lot fought to the last man. There was one Gerry, no weapons left, just stood there waiting to die. One of the Gurkhas said to him "Get the hell out of here fast!" The Gerry faced us and shouted "SIEG HEIL, SIEG HEIL!" Not another word did he say. Then from behind came the rattle of a machine gun, and the German collapsed among his comrades. One burst was enough. Another good German.

One night we were on a recce patrol when we heard a scream and a man’s voice coming out of the dark. We went round a corner and found a Sikh of the 4th Indian Division, struggling with a girl. With the looks of her clothing you could see he was trying to rape her. The men dragged him off and were all for punishing him there and then, but we decided to take him back to his own mob and let them deal with it in their own way. At the time I had no idea what his punishment would be, but we heard the next day that he had been executed. That was their law. Between patrols, feeding and trying to keep dry and warm was just about impossible. The rain never seemed to stop and our living conditions had got worse. The whole of our little front line was overlooked by the enemy held heights on three sides and in the presence of over 100 unburied and unreachable corpses scattered about the area it was the one place we wanted to get away from.

I think the thing we all feared most were the wounds received from mines. The teller mines were not so bad, they were large mines designed to blow up tanks and vehicles. They would kill you outright. It was the smaller mines we feared. The "S"mine was sat in the ground with three bits of steel wire sticking up if you stood on one of the bits of steel wire, it would set off the detonator. The one second fuse would pop, then explode and the mine would jump three to five feet in the air and then explode again. These mines were filled with ball bearings which could strip the flesh from the bones. If you were lucky and heard it pop as you stood on it, you could drop flat, face down, and the thing would explode above your back, all being well.

I left the 1st/2nd Gurkhas as they received their reinforcements and I went back to my own unit. We had not been made up yet to full force, but were kept busy in a supporting role. We attended lectures on mines. Gerry had brought out a new one called the Shoe mine. This was because it was in a black box like a shoe box, made of wood. They were very hard to find. I had developed a bad cough and the R.S.M. told me to put myself on a sick report as I could not go on patrol with a cough like that. So, the next morning saw me travelling with the wounded down the supply line beyond the Troccio Mountains to Battalion Head Quarters. I saw the doctor who examined me who asked me a stupid question. "How long have you had wet clothes on?" I said "About the same as everyone else at Cassino; about three weeks.." I guess he must have been fresh out or he had never looked outside, as it was raining cats and dogs.

It turned out I had pneumonia, so he sent me to base hospital up the road. I had a shower, a bowl of hot soup and was put into bed. They told me I slept for the next two days. They just woke me up for my medication and then I was off again. It had been a long time since I had eaten off a plate and had a dry bed with sheets. A few days later, when I was allowed out of bed, I went round other wards, which were all surgical wards, to see if there were other men of my old platoon still there. I found only two. The rest had gone to the main hospital further down the road. I found the R.S.M. sat out in the garden. He had some shrapnel taken out of his leg. He asked me how I was, and I said "I feel fine now." The rest and warmth had done me good. He agreed. He had seen the sister in charge who had told him I was fit enough to return to the unit as long as I had finished taking the course of medication. Next morning I put on my new vest, pants and shirt. My uniform had been washed and pressed and I felt like a new man. I travelled back to the unit with the R.S.M., who told me we were getting our reinforcements today. Some from the Cornwall Light Infantry some form the OXS and Bucks and some from our own regiment. Once again we had a full platoon. Rumour had it we were to have another bash at Cassino. The new men were shown where to put their kit and I took the three new corporals down into Cassino where I pointed out the main reference points and the layout of the forward line. The following morning, all senior N.C.O.s had to make their way down to and round the back of the convent. Here we were to be shown a new variation of a 75 grenade. We already used the grenade for demolition, but a civvy had come out from England to demonstrate a new type of crush ignition which could be placed under pressure plate which, when crushed, set off the grenade. He told us the idea was to wait in a ditch until the enemy tank was level. Then you pulled the grenade under the track of the tank, which would blow the track off, this putting the tank out of action. A C.S.M. of the Kiwis stood up and said "My lads won’t carry them in their pouches as when they dive to the ground, it sets them off." The Boffin said "What rubbish!" He got two ignitions and placed them in the grenade, put in on the ground and stood on it. "Look how safe they are, I can jump on it!" which he did and blew himself to pieces. This brought a round of applause from the Kiwis. The rest of the crowd dispersed, while those who were nearest to him had to scrape little bits of him off their clothing…

Then I got back to the platoon, the R.S.M. came up and introduced a new officer; our new platoon commander. He said "Sergeant Carr will show you around. Heed what he says and you’ll be alright. Not like the last two before you, Lieutenant Young, I leave you in good hands." He shook the officer by the hand and left us. I sat with him for a while, we had a cup of tea and then I took him and his batman into the bit of Cassino we controlled. I pointed out the abbey, Hangman’s Hill, Castle Hill and one or two reference points we used, just to give him a general picture of what was happening. I advised him not to wear a tie (he had said that he noticed that the R.S.M. wasn’t wearing one), leave this map case in his gear, and to put his binocs in the radio his batman carried (the reason being the Gerry snipers were very good and those were the points they looked for). He seemed a nice enough bloke, and came from Durham. We would see how long this one stayed. I told him about some of the bods we had in the platoon. There was John Dollingford, whose father Lord Dollingford had wanted him to go in the navy because of the family tradition. But he had joined the army, had been promoted twice, been demoted twice, been wounded twice and had the military medal but had never worn it. I rounded the gossip off by telling him about a major in the company, Major The Lord Derby, a real snob.

On getting back to my platoon I called a weapon inspection. To my disgust I found one Bren gun and three rifles that were not clean enough. I got the culprits in front of the platoon and told them in no uncertain words "You are not in England now. The enemy is within shooting distance of you. If he attacks now and your weapon is not up to scratch, it’s your mates you are putting at risk, not just yourself!" I said to one of the new blokes "I always carry a Bren. It’s there behind me, pick it up, strip it and give it a good examination." When he had done that I asked "Did you find anything wrong?" He said "no, it was spotless". I rounded off my speech by saying "I have made two trips into Cassino today, and that’s how your weapons should be; ready for use. You will have a job to keep yourself dry, but you will learn to keep your weapon dry and clean at all times. You don’t go on jankers here for having a dirty weapon; you go out on a stretcher!" I never had many problems with weapons after that, at least with that lot.

The town had been fairly quiet of late, so I guess someone at Head Quarters had decided to liven things up a bit. Anyway, it was our lot to be picked to do the patrol, and with having three new corporals with no battle experience it was thought best that I should go with them. There had been a lot of activity around Castle Hill lately, so that was our target and were told to have a look around .We were on the outskirts of Cassino when the barrage started. It seemed every gun out there was pointed at us. Mortars and 88s, exploding, coming towards us, two lads in front of me were blown in the air and I was blown backwards with the blast into a big shell hole. From my knees down I was stood in water, a big brown rat ran in front of me and made me jump. I tried to stand up, but slipped in the mud. I started to crawl out on my hands and knees. As I got to the top and slowly looked over, I came face to face with a Gerry. We were both startled. I slid back a bit and the Gerry stood up. I couldn’t shoot him. The business end of my Bren was a solid block of mud. To have fired it, would have caused an explosion and blown the gun apart. Suddenly, the Gerry moved his grip on the rifle. I could see why; his rifle was twisted and broken. He was going to use his rifle to club me to death.

As he swung the rifle down at me, I somehow dodged it and made a grab for it and we had a tug of war. Suddenly he stopped pulling and I looked up at him. He only had half a face. Where his nose and chin should have been was one bloody mess with blood spurting out. There was a yell. "Are you stopping there all night Sarge? I want to get back for a cuppa!" said the voice. It was Dapper, one of the old hands that I had met at Clacton. He had seen what was going on and fired a few shots with his tommy gun and killed the Gerry and saved my life. It was never mentioned again, of the ten that set out on that patrol only five came back with us. Corporal Wyatt had picked up a few bits of shrapnel in his back and bottom, and all he did was moan that he couldn’t sit down. At least he was out of it for a few weeks. We all felt better after a good hot cuppa, and from somewhere, a sausage sandwich.

The next day we were having a spell at the station. We had taken over from the Hampshires. It gave you a funny feeling at the bottom of your stomach to hear tanks going by on the other side of the hill. Not knowing if they would suddenly appear. We could come to terms with the tanks. What we did not like were the flame throwers they had. Of all the things that scared me, it was the flame throwers that were the worst. They could spit out flames for 200 yards. The liquid that burned was like a thick jelly, and if you were hit even with a small amount it stuck and burned like hell. During a lull, the major paid us a visit and told us to bring in any wounded that we could. Before the lull, we had had a lot of mortar fire and a lot of blokes were out there wounded. The medics had been out, but had not yet returned, so we got the job. The lads dragged one wounded bloke back. He was in a bad state and as they put him on a stretcher he had died. His pockets were crammed with things he had taken off corpses; rings, watches, German medals and all sorts of things. At one time a person like that would have made your flesh creep, but we didn’t feel like that now. He was just a curiosity, he was dead. He hadn’t created the corpses; we all did.

It was a bad day for me. One of the wounded they brought in was Dapper, a man I had served with from my early days at Clacton-on-Sea, a soldier who had saved my life only two days ago. He was dying fast. He was crying for his mother and I held his hand to try and comfort him, but he slipped away from us. No more worries for him. Many years later when I went back to Cassino on a remembrance trip I saw his grave. It was only by chance I saw it, out of the many thousands of graves I saw Dapper's. He was an unusual man and one of those who, many years later I often think of. I remember the faces and some of the names, but I remember them all.

The third battle was already being planned as soon as the powers that be decided that the last attack on Cassino had failed. At this time the German onslaught against the bridgehead at Anzio had reached its climax and the attack had been halted. This time the New Zealanders would be attacking the bottle neck of the town and Monastery Hill, the 4th British and 4th Indian Divisions would storm the steep mountain side of Monastery Hill.

The attack was to be preceded by such a bombing as had never been attempted before in front line history. An obliteration of a small infantry objective was to be carried out by heavy bombers. Cassino was officially cleared of civilians (which it was not) and was now classified as a fortified town of approximately half a mile square. For four hours before the infantry and tanks moved in, it was to be pounded to dust. Why didn't the top brass realise it hadn't worked the last time with all the Germans still in it? General Alexander said it was an experiment and London and Washington would be studying the results with an eye to future operations in Europe. It was to be called 'Operation Dickens', with a code name of Bradman, after the cricketer.

While we all waited in the exposed valley, wet, frozen and on edge, the heavens opened up again. The day before the attack it poured all day and the next day, and the next day... It poured with rain every day for three weeks. Operation Dickens kept being postponed. Every morning the password would go out 'Bradman was not batting today', and we were waiting for 'Bradman will be batting', which meant that the attack was on. During the three weeks of waiting, the enemy continued with his shelling, which took its daily toll. In those three weeks the New Zealanders lost 363 men, the Indians and the British the same. It had now got into March, and a spot of dry weather was forecast. During the night, foremost infantry units filtered slowly back to what was supposed to be the safety line. A few suicide squads were left to keep firing the odd round to give the impression of business as usual in the temporarily empty posts.

On the stroke of 0830 hours the first flying fortress appeared over the town, spout after spout of black smoke leaped into the air from the town itself. Time and time again we watched the bombs explode. There was a little half-hearted ack ack at the first, and then it went quiet. One flight dropped its bombs on a village called Venafru, 15 miles away. We learned later it killed 140 civilians. One bomb hit the Moroccan hospital, killing another 40. There were another 40 casualties in the allied artillery lines and a string of bomb straddled the eight army Head Quarters. As luck would have it, all senior brass weren't there. The C.S.M. gave a quote from the Duke of Wellington's speech after reviewing his troops, saying "I don't know how they will impress the enemy, but they frighten me to death"; this summed up the raid OK.

While all the bombing was going on, the 7th Brigade of the Indian Division were still stuck on Snake's Head Ridge. They couldn't get down and no one had got up. The had had no supplies of food or ammunition and being sniped all the time they could not get out to remove their dead from the previous battle. This made the air around their positions almost unbearable. We all envied the British bombers that had flown out from England, drop their bombs then over the Med, on to North Africa to refuel and then back to their bases in England, if they didn't get shot down on the way they would be home for a late tea and a nice dry bed.

At noon the bombing stopped and the Kiwis led the way back into Cassino town, down the road; tanks in front, infantry following behind. In front of them a creeping barrage was being put down and this is what the Kiwis were following. By about 1300 hours it was so dark, the only way we could move forward was to hold the bayonet scabbard of the man in front. The rain, by now, was a torrential downpour, filling in the craters, creating small lakes and in between the rubble a muddy, stinky mess. Our boots and socks and our battledress were soaked. I had to keep going up and down the sections to make sure they were still there. For a good half of the men it was their first bit of action and being soaked to the skin they weren't very happy. We could do with a bit of dry weather to cheer us up a bit. The town, as we moved back, was an unbelievable mess. There were no roads or tracks left that you could pick out; just heaps of rubble with an odd wall sticking up and craters everywhere that needed the use of hands and feet to get in or out. If you slipped into one with all your equipment on, you even stood a chance of drowning. All the sketches we had made before the bombing were now useless.

The enemy were in the remains of the Continental Plaza Hotel, a plaza called 'the Baron's Place' and they were also in the ruins of a hotel called 'Des Roses'. We found our radios didn't work very well, with constantly having been dipped in and out of water. There was one bit of good news though. Earlier on, we could see figures moving and found it was the Ghurkha regiment which had kept going during the bombing and had walked through the German positions and had got through to aid the Indians isolated up there. Our objective, again, was the railway station. I had been in and out of there so often it was like an old friend. It was now Friday. The battle had started on Wednesday and today we were with the Essex Regiment on our right and the Kiwis on our left. As we picked our way across the rubble, a Gerry patrol appeared around a wall. Corporal Wright let fly at the same time as I did. Three dropped and the others dropped behind cover. Lieutenant Young shouted "Grenades! Over there!" and one or two lads lobbed some at the Gerry's direction. We were lucky. That put paid to what was left. We went over and had a good look at them. It was the first time some of the lads had seen a Gerry close up. It was generally 50 to 100 yards down the barrel of their rifles. On checking their insignia, we found they were men of the 1st Parachute Regiment; some of Hitler's crack troops. This cheered the lads to think they had come off best again some crack troops.

It was at this time that Gerry decided to make an attack on this own. They broke cover and came down Monastery Hill. From the first hairpin bend where there was plenty of cover, about a battalion came running down the hill, tanks on the road above them giving covering fire. Before they could reach the station, the attack petered out as there was a tremendous fire from all three units on our side, which had the support of the Kiwi tanks. The remainder fell back to their positions on the hairpin bend, leaving a lot of dead. They tried again later, but were driven back again. A wounded Gerry said they had lost about 200 men in the first attack. They did not know we were so strong on the ground. The Kiwis took over the station and we worked our way back to the area of the Continental Hotel (I don't know why we called it the Continental; it's real name was Excelsior). We holed up there. Someone brought us tea and bully sandwiches. We already held a large part of the town; Castle Hill and at the moment the railway station.

The next morning, a company came under fire from an old building that was supposed to be in our hands. The R.S.M. said "Give me some cover, I'll go and have a look!" Working his way right up to the building and using his best parade ground voice, he directed fire at the position. A bit later a handful of Gerries came out and surrendered to him. He talked to the prisoners as R.S.M.s do and he threatened them and they shouted to their comrades and all those listening and watching. We were amazed to see about another 40 come out with their hands raised and surrendered to the R.S.M.. Some were Italians; even though the Italians had officially surrendered to the allies, there were still some units still fighting with the Gerries. The men in the towns were better off than those on the mountains, who had to wait for gaps in the shelling and weather before anyone could get food or ammunition up to them.

In the end, the Gurkhas and Indians had to be withdrawn from Hangman's Hill as they could not be supplied and their numbers were becoming less. This was accomplished with the support of the Kiwis. Just after 2000 hours 8 officers and 177 other ranks (out of the 400 that went up there 7 days ago) came down the mountain between two walls of artillery fire. After they passed, the Kiwis followed them down. I have never seen men who looked so worn out. Those who saw them passed remarks on their cheerfulness. The following must be said about the Gurkhas, who had been 7 or 8 nights on Hangman's Hill, an exposed shoulder of the mountain, an area about 200 yards square. They lived in shallow trenches scooped out of the craters or in unsatisfactory stone breastworks the Indians called 'Sangers'. They had been travelling light, ammunition had to come first, greatcoats had been left behind… Icy winds and rainstorms, the temperature at night well below zero and the only source of water they had was a rain filled crater. When that was used up they found a well in a ruined house which kept them going for a while, but when the level dropped to about four feet they found a dead mule on the bottom.

Food was the worst problem. They existed on American K rations. This is a small emergency pack of dried food designed to provide one meal for one man to tide him over for a day or so. The best the Gurkhas managed was two rations between four men for 24 hours. To me, the most touching sight on these corpse-littered mountains was a Ghurkhan cemetery. The graves seemed too small, as the Gurkhas were only small. The boots placed at one end and always a tin hat at the other. The rows of little boots always gave me the impression that this was a burial ground for children. Sunday afternoon was the end of the third phase of the battle; the turning point. The German 1st Parachute Division and the Monastery had won again.

One of the biggest problems in the battle for Cassino was the handling of casualties. Normally, the practice in battle is rapid evacuation. The wounded are picked up by stretcher bearers and taken back to the unit medical officer, who, after giving them the minimum of attention, passes them back to an advanced dressing station. From there, they go back to a casualty clearing station, which is like an emergency hospital. At this stage, surgery can be carried out. From there they would go by ambulance, train or even plane if the case was bad enough, to a general hospital in some base area.

This system could not be used at Cassino for two reasons. One, the length of time required for the first stage of the evacuation, and two, the severe wounds sustained in mountain sectors from shells and motors falling an exploding on flint rock. Men wounded up in the mountains had to be carried down terrible paths for two miles. The only way it could be done was to establish a chain of stretcher bearer posts every two hundred yards down to the valley. The long carry took several hours; this was because of the sheer difficulty of the descent and the delays caused by the constant harassing by German artillery and mortars. This stage was followed by transportation by mules for another five hours to a field dressing station. The stretchers were constantly put down or tilted as either stretcher bearers or mules stumbled or slipped. The night temperatures were generally well below zero and the task frequently took place in rain, sleet and snow. On top of this, the stretcher bearers and mules were often hit by enemy fire.

A lot of wounded did not survive these trips, so they set up field surgical units right up to the front. They were provided either under canvas or in equipped trucks with full surgical facilities including blood transfusion services. Thus, because of the time it was taking to get the men to hospital, they brought the hospital to the men. We never heard who thought of this idea or who put it into operation, but it saved a lot of lives. Because of the high number of head- and eye injuries they also established a forward head and eye injury unit with a higher than usual number of specialists.

There developed something similar to what I had heard my dad talk about in the First World War. The battle for Cassino had in many ways a similarity to the type of fighting that went on in the trenches in 1914/18; the closeness of the combatants. The restrictions imposed on daylight movement led gradually to the practice of openly evacuating men in daylight under the Red Cross flag. Nothing was arranged officially, but it was done. Both sides respected the Red Cross. At times, we were only 100 yards from the enemy in the mountains, the stretcher bearers of both sides made the occasional trips into no man's land in day time to collect the wounded and sometimes they exchanged words. This was Cassino. A battlefield on which for weeks the dead could not be moved or buried. One occasion I watched a Gurkha stretcher bearer go out nine or ten times on his own and carry back or tend to a wounded man. I later saw the same man laid next to a British officer. They were both dead. One had stepped on a mine that had killed them both. During the time the Gurkhas were isolated on Hangman's Hill, their medical officer made three daylight trips up the face of Monte Cassino with a party of orderlies to bring down wounded men to his aid post in the valley. Each time he was stopped by a German post, taken to the nearest Head Quarters and then given permission to continue.

On Snake's Head Ridge the Royal Sussex rescued many of their wounded under the Red Cross flag. They also began a systematic clearance of the large number of corpses which by this time littered the area. They sent a few down every night on the backs of the mules that brought up their food and water and ammunition. In the town where the combatants were almost on top of each other the Red Cross was also well respected.

Another attack was on the way. We didn't know at the time this was the fourth and last battle for Monte Cassino. There had been a lot of planning gone into this attack, more than in previous attacks. There had been a lot of movement going on, but it had only been done at night. If an armoured unit moved it left behind dummy tanks and vehicles. Artillery was moved up hidden and not brought into use. To assist with the projected crossing of the Rapido River, many tracks had been repaired or improved and many new ones laid. All this work was done at night, and before the area was vacated at first light, the new tracks would be carefully hidden with brushwood or some other camouflage materials.

An extra four divisions of the French Expeditionary Force had packed into a small bridgehead at Garigliano and two Canadian divisions hidden in the Liri valley. The word came up that general Alexander was going to give it all he had; he was going to give the Germans a taste of Blitzkrieg that they had so often handed out.

It had been sunny for many days. The valleys were turning green, but all around Cassino and the Monastery there were no trees, just hundreds of stumps. Up and down the line, tension was building up. While you laid there (we worked all night) you got some rest, but a lot of the time you wondered how you would do in the coming scrap. Would your luck hold out? I had been lucky up to now. Apart from Bill Wrightson in my platoon there was only Harry Abba who was now a sergeant in "A" Company that had set off with me from Taranto. The rest had either been wounded and finished up somewhere else or had been killed and would finish up in a cemetery out here.

At 2300 hours the artillery tore the quiet of the night to bits. I learned afterwards that there were 1600 guns. As you looked back, there was a flickering line of hills. Ahead, the valleys and ravines echoed and re-echoed to the crash of the shells with the continuous sound of thunder and the scream of the shells as the passed overhead. We were glad we were not at the receiving end of that lot. Smoke was everywhere. Different commanders had ordered smoke screens to be laid without consulting each other. This ended up with that much smoke that no one could see anything. We crossed the river with the Indians and established a bridgehead of sorts. We were pinned down, hanging on by the skin of our teeth. The enemy were constantly attacking. We needed some support. To the astonishment of the troops on the ground, a tank moved up slowly to the river bank behind us, carrying a baily bridge on its hull. This was followed by a second tank with its front coupled to the end of the bridge. The first tank dipped into the river and slowly drove to the middle and sank whilst the crew was abandoning ship. The second tank then slowly pushed the bridge across to our bank where it was quickly secured. The Canadian tank men and engineers had done a tremendous job; within minutes tanks were coming across and were blasting at enemy positions. The bridgehead was now secure.

While this was going on, the Polish had begun to pick their way through the boulders and thickets and the gruesome debris of the previous battles. Through the corpses that still littered the ground and the machine guns that seemed to have grown out of the rocks; they were being mown down like nine pins. Just as the Yanks, Brits, and Indians, they just kept going. Fighting hand to hand and finally reaching their objective. When daybreak came only a handful of men were left and as the sun came up the enemy picked them off one by one as there was little cover. They could not be reinforced or supplied. They were on their own and didn't get the order to withdraw until late in the afternoon. They had done an outstanding job at a big loss, but they had given the British, Indians and French that bit of extra time to do their job. The bridgehead across the Rapido was slowly increasing. The idea was to keep going and encircle Cassino, to keep attacking day and night, accepting heavier casualties than the enemy until there wasn't enough enemy to hold on any longer.

At 1030 hours on May 18th, a Polish detachment marched across the slope from point 593 and occupied what was left of the abbey of Monte Cassino. The Germans had pulled out the night before and escaped in the darkness leaving behind a few badly wounded men and two Hitler Youths whom the SS had nailed to the great doors which still stood. This was a lesson from the SS for not fighting hard enough. They were about 14 or 15 years of age and both very dead.

All of a sudden it didn't matter anymore. Cassino was just a name on a map. Down in the valley the entire might of the 5th and 8th Armies were streaming across the bridge (which were now actually bridges) over the Rapido River in a constant stream of traffic which lasted for days. The leaders had by now reached the next line of defence called the "Adolf Hitler Line", but were being held up by extensive mine fields and chains of pill boxes in areas fortified up to a depth of 1,000 yards. In the meantime, the main body of the army was held up getting through Cassino and over bridges; 2,000 tanks and 20,000 vehicles and a lot of men. Let someone else sort it out!

The Polish army had put up a memorial on the hill point called 593, now the Polish cemetery. I read it when I revisited the place in 2007. The memorial reads as follows:

We, the Polish soldiers, for our freedom

And yours, have given our souls to God, our bodies

To the soil of Italy and our hearts to Poland

The words above describe the gallantry of the Polish armies in Italy.

On June 6th the Allies landed in Normandy and Italy was no longer front page news. While we were collecting our dead comrades and generally taking stock of ourselves, I had a trip down to battalion Head Quarters. Colonel Hunt, our commanding officer, had requested my presence. In due course I was ushered into his presence by the R.S.M. The commanding officer asked me if I was interested in attending O.C.T.U., Officer Command Training Unit, as I had been recommended. He said he thought I had officer qualifications, "whatever they were". I politely refused and said, "I would rather stay in the ranks, and remain with my platoon." As I was ushered out, the R.S.M. said "I put your name forward, but I didn't think you would take it..." As I was walking away to find my transport, I met the war correspondent I had met before. I remember his name was Christopher Buckley. This time I asked him who he sent his reports to, and he said it was Reuter. We were having a cup of tea when an American shouted to him "We are having a concert tonight! Come and bring your friend with you!" I put it to the R.S.M. if I could go and he said that he would come with me. As I talked to the war correspondent a bit more, I learned our R.S.M. had been one of those people who had dropped into occupied Europe three times and had returned each time. What a guy!

We went down the road to a large open area. It was now pouring with rain again. There were hundreds of Yanks, sitting on their tin hats and facing the back end of two trucks that had their tailboards down to make a stage. There was also a cover rigged over the top. There was music, but I didn't know if it was live or recorded. There was three female singers called 'the Andrew Sisters', followed by a comedian, but it was a different kind of humour to ours. Then came the star of the show, Al Jolson. I had heard my dad talk about him; he made the first talking picture. After he had sung two songs, he said "you are sitting in the rain to hear me sing, so I'll join you in your rain!" He came out from the cover and stood with the rain falling on him and asked "what do you want me to sing?" So he sang about an hour and everybody stood up and cheered him. It was the first and only show I saw in Italy.

When I returned to my unit, it was with another new officer. Our platoon commander lieutenant Young had got a bit of brass in his eye and had gone to get it out. The new officer's name was Strang, and he was from Malta. He got the nickname 'the Maltese Falcon', but not to his face. We were pulled out of the line and given a new job. This was the army's way of giving us a rest. The area around Cassino and the Liri valley was a strong fascist part of Italy. The job was to get rid of all the fascist books out of the public libraries and to pile them into the town square or similar place. Someone speaking Italian would tell the locals gathered there that the rule of Mussolini would never come back again. They would have a democratic way of life, elect their own governments and so on. When the speech was over, one of the lands would step forward with a flamethrower and set fire to the lot. The local mayor would thank us, and that was that.

It went down very well, and we had done more than 25 different places when we came to a place called Caserta. It had been Allied Head Quarters, but just south of the town there had been a prisoner of war camp, holding British and Polish prisoners, taken prison in North Africa and transported to Italy. The Italians had badly treated the Poles and Brits, making them work long hours and feeding them on potato peelings and scraps of food, only fit to be thrown away. This had altered as the Italians changed sides, but it hadn't been forgotten. One or two people in charge there were eventually sent away for war crimes.

We did the usual routine of piling up the books, the speeches were made and the guy with the flamethrower made his shot. However, this time it didn't ignite, so he gave it another burst. This one ignited OK, but bounced off the top of the pile and landed among the Italian dignitaries. We were accused by the locals of doing this on purpose, but it was truly an accident. When I revisited the town in 2007, it was the only war grave cemetery that had its gates locked, because of the damage done to the graves. Looking back at records, when the Hampshire regiment came across the camp, some of the officers that had run the camp were placed under arrest and made to work as our lads had done and on the same kind of food. But when the top brass came to town they made them all prisoners of war and were treated under the Geneva Convention Code of Practice.

Now, the second front was established in Europe, the top brass decided they needed to withdraw most of the ground forces from Italy. The 5th Army had to withdraw seven of its best divisions; three American and four French divisions. Again the troops in Italy were being robbed of total victory. It was a poor reward to the troops in Italy. After the long winter heartbreak of Monte Cassino and the Great Offensive that General Alexander had so brilliantly brought to an end, Washington had decided to draw the teeth of the pursuit in Italy. Once more the campaign in Italy was to come secondary. Cassino so costly in human life and suffering was to be deprived of the full victory that would have made it worth wile in the end. Now it was little more than a victory of human spirit for the common soldier, and a memorial to the horrors of war. As for our battalion, we were moved across to the west of route six and proceeded northwards in general, mopping up operation. Most of the hard fighting was going on to the east in twenty-four days of fighting. Impregnable Cassino had fallen, two German armies had been thoroughly defeated, 20,000 prisoners were taken, three defence lines were smashed, vast quantities of tanks and guns had been destroyed and two Allied armies had advanced eighty miles. We continued on our way and ended up in Milan, where we got new orders to leave Italy.