

Gordon Dobson

4th British Infantry Division

In September 1943 Gordon Dobson was posted to the 4th British Infantry Division as clerk to the Divisional Provost Marshal (DAPM). On Boxing Day he sailed from Algiers to Egypt for Landing Training. He landed in Naples on March 22 1944.

We were loaded into lorries and driven through the town, up into the hills until we arrived at Sessa Aurunca, a small town 35 miles away. We were billeted in a large room, maybe part of the police station, for one night. Crikey, it was cold. We each had one blanket and we slept on a stone floor. Reg and I slept together to share blankets, fully dressed with greatcoats on. We could hear gunfire, a taste of things to come. Next day we moved up onto a hillside facing the Garigliano River, where the front line was situated, about 4 miles away. Further up the coast, 30 miles south of Rome was the Anzio bridgehead. Our Divisional HQ took over the site vacated by the 56 Division which had been withdrawn to the rest area. For two or three nights I slept in a one man bivvy tent (about 3 feet high and 4 feet wide, getting boots on and off was a problem!) waking up in the morning freezing cold with snow all around. I was so very fortunate in that we were an independent trio —the Major, Batman/Driver Reg Woodland and self as clerk, frequently attached to the Provost Company for rations, or even when with the Advance Division HQ we were a law unto ourselves, as long as we kept low key. I cannot remember going on any parades, not even pay parades, whilst in Italy — that suited me. We, the trio, eventually got a 160 lb ridge tent with fly sheet, an office lorry, in which the Major slept, and a jeep. The tent was my office and both Reg and I slept there — we were now issued with the regulation 4 blankets, nowhere near comfortable, but a great improvement. My address was now 4th Division provost Company, 4th British Infantry Division, CMF (which stood for Central Mediterranean Forces). To the east was the sea and to the north west could be seen the Cassino Monastery, a high building perched right on top of Monastery Hill. From my vantage point I saw the bombing of this fine building, which although did not demolish it, did prevent the Germans from using it, especially as an observation post. Much severe criticism has since been voiced over this 'wanton destruction', but in a letter home after the fall of Cassino, when we were allowed to say that we had taken part in the battle, I wrote 'I only wish that the people at home in their arm chairs who argue about the saving of historical buildings, instead of lives, could have been here and seen the havoc the Monastery could have caused, had it been left alone'.

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The words, 'prepare to move' were called so often now I will not repeat them. We moved to Venafro, 15 miles south of Cassino, where the front line was now, where I rejoined the Div. HQ. Whilst there, Phil Beckley called in to have a chat. He was with the 8th Army Signals. Four days later we moved north to near a hillside village of Acquafondata; the Provost Company were sited in a hillside, just off the road. I was located just off the hair pin bend of the road, just us three, plus tent, lorry and jeep. I was about 150 foot up from a large plain, enclosed by hills. In this plain were petrol and ammo dumps. The Major had to report back to Div. HQ, leaving me to get on with my work. There was gun fire going on continuously, which was ignored until a German 15 in railway gun opened fire with extreme accuracy, hitting two petrol and one ammo dump, plus one shell in the Provost Company lines, killing one and injuring 6 MP. Amongst all the gun fire noise this gun could be heard with its deep-throated 'boom'. I had fifteen seconds to get out of the tent and take cover behind rocks. I watched, like in a film, lorry loads of French troops debussing below me. When the shelling started, the drivers drove away so fast some of the

soldiers just fell out of the back of the lorries. Orders came for us to move back a couple of miles, a strategic withdrawal, I think it is called. I had never driven a 3 ton lorry, so one MP came up and moved it. The Major hearing of the shelling, got hold of Reg, told him of the shelling and said "I don't like Dob being up there all alone, lets go back and keep him company." Although he was not due back until the following day, they drove the fifteen miles in the dark, without lights, over the treacherous mountain roads, just to keep me company. Now that is what I call a man. I had the highest respect for him, not because of the star on his shoulder, but because of the man within.