

Harold Brand, 6 Platoon H Coy 1/4 Batt Essex Regt

The following is an extract from the diary of Harold Brand, submitted by his son Sidney Brand.

MONTE CASSINO

18th March In Cassino

Alf woke us up as usual with a cup of tea. About half way through the morning, Jerry started sending shells over onto the road. Ted and I got down in our Sanger (a shelter built of rocks). One crashed down very close and I thought I heard someone shout out, I heard it again and looking out I saw it was Alf. My first thought was that three of them had been hit; when I got to him, I saw that he and Johnny were trying to clear the stones from where their Sanger had been. It was in a bad state, the wall it had been built against had been hit and about four square foot of it had fallen down on top of the Sanger. Alf said it was Ginger underneath, I then heard him groan. We three worked as hard as we could to get the timber and rock off him while someone else went for S.B. The Sanger was built in such a place that only three of us could work at once, the other lads and a Kiwi who was passing by tried to help but there was no room. We first uncovered his leg and we tried to uncover his head, some of the rocks took two of us to lift clear and the rest of the wall was in danger of covering him deeper. Finally, when we got most of it clear the coy command was able to get in and give us a hand. When we did get Ginger out, he was dead. All of us were cut up, as he was a grand chap. We dug a grave and buried him; we put a cross over the grave.

19th March

At midnight, a party under Johnny Cross arrived by the ammo dump, the six men were Swede Chapell, Smudge Smith, Rob Robinson, George Woodstock, Ted Kenwood and myself. On arriving there, we found that Mr Beech was taking us up and that we were to guard the coys stores in the castle while the company attacked the Monastery. Before we started it was discussed that a party of R.As that were on baggage had tried getting up into the castle but had run into a sniper. When we got started it was found that Swede was the only one that had been up there, and he wasn't sure of the way. We walked down the road in single file, straight into Cassino. It was a pitch-black night, and when we moved through the ruins all you could see was the man in front of you. We stopped a couple of times and then climbed over what I think must have been a high bank. We found ourselves on what must have been the start of the track. The party formed and we moved off up the track, we passed through more ruined houses. We soon got mixed up with a strange party of Indians, who were also going up to the castle. They were going slow so we thought we would pass them. After we had gone a short way, we came across a chap with a Tommy gun, as I drew along side he said, "Are you the lads that are browned off with life? You want to keep your heads down; there is a sniper about 25 yards over there". I think that he must have told the officer, as we then turned right onto the track with the Indians. As the Indians rested, we passed them and went on up the hill only once taking the wrong track and having to come back about forty yards. The last 100 yards up into the castle were the worst, the track was loose stones and when I slipped a couple of times I could see myself hitting the ruins in Cassino.

It was about 3.30am when we arrived and we were told to get up on the steps that led from the courtyard and sit on the company stores until the Indians had taken over the coy positions,

when the coy had left then we would be shown our positions. While the change over was taking place Jerry swept the courtyard and archway that leads up the stairs with Spando fire. As the chips of stone etc. started flying around us, I felt darn sorry for the wounded lads that were on the stairs. Things were quiet for a bit, then a few lads came back into the castle and said they had run into a strong force of Jerry who were heading for here. I loaded my rifle and looked out of an opening in the wall down onto the courtyard. I saw a couple of our lads moving about and the next instant the yard was black with bursting grenades. Swede took my place and I moved round the other side of the tower, behind where Major Beckett was shouting for grenades. I then got on with priming grenades, a load of them and things got pretty hot for a time. I found myself with a Tommy gun and then my rifle again on the left side of Mr Beeches Sanger. A short time afterwards, I saw a helmet moving behind a wall about 70 yards away; it was gone before I had time to do anything about it. When it eased off you would hear somebody sling a grenade or give a burst on a Bren gun, mostly from the lads in the tower.

Major Kettley

Later Major Kettley came over and he was in high spirits. When he came over to where I was kneeling, he said "we haven't done so badly with casualties" then he asked me if I could see anything. I said I had seen this Jerry double up behind the wall, I pointed to a body down the slope and I asked, "is it one of our lads?" He said, "No, it had been there for some days". I remember hearing a ping ... Then I heard somebody behind me say, "well I'll be xxxxx". When I looked around Major Kettley was on the ground with blood running from the top of his head down onto his face. I put my arm around him and tried to hold his head up, within a few seconds the M.O. was around to him with a hypo syringe, he then told us to let him lie down. After being in the open, I did not feel very safe; I wondered where the sniper could have been? Some time after this, I saw a Jerry helmet going down the hill against the same ruined wall. This time I took aim, my shot must have passed just over the wall as I saw the dust fly up. The helmet had passed from view. I hoped my shot would at least stop him trying to come up again. I could not understand why it was that those in the tower had not seen him; they were higher up and should have seen more of him than I did at the foot of the tower. Someone said, "Did you get him?" As I turned to reply, I saw the Abbey in clear view up on the hill to my right. When we had taken up position there was heavy haze and smoke shells, I could not even see the town below and it put the Monastery out of sight. I then knew how it was that Major Kettley had been shot in the top of his helmet. I moved back by the tower, out of view.

Sometime later, I took up position by the Sanger in the corner and lay there with a Tommy gun. Every now and then, a sniper would send a round pinging, we could not tell from where Johnny kept moving from his place then going back, kept bringing fire down on any movement he could see, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Our section shared out what K.S. rations we had brought, GSM Cox kept saying, "Keep a good look out", maybe he did not think we knew our lives were at risk. After an hour or two, I asked Ted to take my place to give me a break. While I was sitting back at the wall, the MO had Major Kettley's body removed on a stretcher. Next Johnny went around the other side of the tower and when he came back, he asked me and George to go and see A coy CSM and get grub for the men around our side. We went around and for the first time I saw the number of casualties we had, the stairs were solid with wounded men, we could not get by, we went back and told Johnny. When we did get grub Patsey and another bloke brought it.

Later Smudger told Johnny that the sergeant wanted Brand (me) to go down with stretcher cases. It seemed that the Jerrys had called an armistice to collect the wounded. Johnny said OK you can go, next thing he was back and said two men were needed. Swede had been hit and Smudger was going back that left four with Johnny so Ted and Rob drew matchsticks, Rob drew the short stick so that meant Ted and I go. We made our way to the courtyard and saw the MO and the Sgt and we two with two Anti tk lads took the first stretcher with a tank tk on it through a hole in the wall on the side over looking the wadi. Tanker Morley was in charge of us with the Sgt choosing the best route in front. The slope was so steep that we had only just started when I slipped, I had to let go of the stretcher in case it came with. I slipped about ten foot then caught hold of a scrub ...

(Dad and Ted were not sent up to the Castle again.)