

James Morgan, Royal Corps of Signals, 4th Indian Division

Chapter 1

As a wireless operator with the 4th Indian Divisional Signals Section I had been despatched with three other signal men early in February 1944 to set up a small Signal Office in a house at the extreme end of the village of San Michele.

This office which occupied one room at the front of the little house took the form of a simple telephone exchange with one line coming in from Divisional H.Q. and two going out to 5 & 7 Brigade H.Q.s. Wireless was no longer practicable because of its limited range in the mountainous terrain and because of its propensity for interception. Our purpose was to shorten the lines of communication between Main Div H.Q. at Cervaro and the forward units. In the adjoining house we had a party of Indian Linesmen whose task was to maintain and repair the lines which were laid mostly on the open ground.

The personnel manning the Signal Office were two Scots, Bill (Wullie) Main, Joe Yates, Don (Sunshine) Parker from Northampton and myself (from Wales). In charge was Sgt. A. A. Davies from somewhere in Middlesex, a mature unflappable pipe smoking steadying influence on us youngsters.

Although we had experienced some action at the end of the North African campaign this was something altogether different. The very situation and the incessant noise of battle was frightening, but we soon settled down to our daily routine.

It was not necessary to sit at the exchange at all times but simply to be on hand to answer the buzzer announcing any incoming calls and to connect the caller to his requested unit. We slept in the wine cellar below the house. Its heavy wooden doors faced directly on to the plain stretching away to the Rapido River and the monastery so our movement was very restricted. To get to the cellar we had to use the track from the rear of the house to the front in full view of the monastery so we only went below after dark, which at that time of year was fairly early in the evening.

The Indian linesmen were out at all hours and in all weathers searching for and repairing breaks in the cable resulting from the constant shellfire. Often having repaired a break, the line would be severed again by the time they had returned. Like all troops serving in the shadow of the monastery we felt that we were perpetually under observation. We grew to hate the massive building which appeared and disappeared as the low clouds descended and lifted.

We had taken over this venue from the Americans who had kindly left us a number of iron camp beds in the cellar; not very comfortable but at least we were off the stone floor. The cellar had no lighting so we improvised lamps using cigarette tins, engine oil and string for wicks. Sadly there was no wine. I think the Germans had also occupied this house which was a little disquieting because they would have known well of its exact location and its value as a shelter.

Every few days we would receive a visit by an officer from Div. H.Q. to enquire after our welfare. He would approach San Michele from a road which ran along behind a ridge at the back of the village where his driver would park his jeep some distance away. These were more or less social calls. But they never seemed to stay long before they were off back to the comparative safety of Div. H.Q.

The one major advantage of our situation was that we had a complete picture of what was going on on the whole front, because we were the main line of communication in both directions. We felt compelled to eavesdrop on all calls and we kept each other informed. We knew of the proposed bombing of the monastery long before it took place whereas the poor lads pinned down on the bare slopes of the mountain were only aware of the here and now of their immediate surroundings.

At the end of each day we passed the daily Sitrep (Situation Report) in Morse code from all forward units to Div. H.Q. and then passed the combined summary of these reports back to the Brigades. For this purpose we used an instrument called a Fullerphone which operated by using the same lines as the telephone. This particular duty could sometimes take several hours late at night especially if we were dealing with an Indian Operator at the other end of the line who probably had only a rudimentary knowledge of the language he was using, let alone the ability to interpret it into Morse code. The most disturbing aspect of this routine was that always at the end of the Sitrep there would be appended the names and numbers of those killed during the day, some of them recognisable as fellow signalmen.

Occasionally an officer from another unit would call in to use our telephone to get in touch with his unit. In a way we were the public telephone. We welcomed all visitors because they broke up the monotony of the day, but the most welcome were our own despatch riders. They had the unenviable task of carrying messages and supplies to the forward troops but only as far as a jeep could be driven. They had long since given up their beloved motorcycles. After that everything was handed over to the muleteers who completed the rest of the perilous mission. These D.R.s brought us news of the lads back at H.Q. and sometimes they would bed down with us if it was too dangerous to make the journey back along muddy tracks late at night. But also they would often bring us American canned rations salvaged from dead mules and very occasionally the odd bottle of wine. Most of what they "rescued" would rightly be taken back to their comrades at Div. H.Q.

The D.R. Section was very small and very close-knit. I can clearly recall four of them: Tiny Thomson, a small roly-poly character, Jimmy Dennett (from Warrington, tall and gangly with a high pitched voice) and the Bonar twins (Lou and Laurie) from Liverpool. The latter were as unlike one another as twins could possibly be. Laurie was stocky with fair hair, very quiet but at home had been a very useful boxer. Lou had long been an extrovert and had a typical Liverpool sense of humour. They really were a grand bunch.

So our days went by. We played endless games of cards. Joe made tea and heated up whatever needed heating on a small paraffin stove. We filled our Jerry-can daily with water from a trickling tap at the roadside to the rear of the house. We washed and shaved each morning but we didn't have sufficient water to wash clothes and certainly nowhere to dry them. We wore only what we had arrived in and did so for almost eight weeks. We couldn't have smelled too fresh but who was there to care? We talked about anything and everything but despite the tension of the situation I cannot recall any serious disagreement.

Shells frequently exploded on the sloping ground in front of the house and others roared overhead to targets behind us. The noise of small arms fire and mortars never seemed to abate for long.

The one sound that any soldier on the ground below the hill will never forget was that of the Nebelwerfer (Fog Thrower), a six barrelled mortar designed to lay down smoke screens but here

used as a devastating artillery piece firing high explosive. The mortar bombs could be fired in any rotation of ones and twos from their emplacements close to the monastery and as they fell the 1700 ft they created a low harmonious growl followed by earth quaking explosions. Because of their noise they were known to the lads as "Moaning Minnies". One could only pity the lads on the receiving end below.

At the water tap we would sometimes wait in a queue for about half an hour where the handful of civilians who had inadvisably returned to the village to reclaim their homes patiently joined us. There were sometimes also a few French Moroccan "Goumiers" who were manning the front to our right. They looked ferocious and did not appear to understand the principle of queuing, but they did not seem the sort of people to argue with.

We were now aware that the February attack had failed and that the Indian, Gurkha and British troops were pinned down in exposed positions on the hillside. Supplies were dropped to them by parachute but they dared not even move to pick them up. I can recall the brightly coloured parachutes clinging to the bare rock of the hillside. It seems strange to me today that in all the accounts that I have read of that period I have never heard any mention of these parachutes and yet to me it is one of the clearest features of the scene in my memory. The bright colours contrasted so vividly with the drabness of the hillside.

We eventually learned that as it had become obvious that no further progress by these troops was going to be possible they would be withdrawn. Even that would be an exercise fraught with danger, but first of all the order would have to be conveyed to the forward-most platoons. This was proving most difficult as they had run out of dry batteries for their back-pack radio sets so the order could neither be sent nor received.

Our own Signals Adjutant volunteered to take up a supply of batteries. So the monocled Capt. Peter Desmond Vaincourt Strallen accompanied by Sgt. Barnes made the perilous journey on foot. The delivery was made and the order to withdraw was passed to the units concerned. So this planned attack by 4th Indian Division had been unsuccessful and we felt a great sense of failure but not because of any lack of courage or endeavour by our forward troops. The combination of the weather, the terrain and the superb management of the German defences had proved as insurmountable as they had to the Americans in the first two attacks. So we remained at our post awaiting the next development.

This was decided for us on the 25th February (my 21st birthday), when during the night we received delivery of an indeterminate small number of shells which could only have been fired from one of the mobile guns which we knew the Germans brought up along the road to the rear of the Monastery each night. From their dominating observation position (the Monastery) they had no shortage of targets to choose from. It was just a matter of priority. It seems that now we merited some attention.

Thankfully our house did not take a direct hit but the salvo landed right on the track which ran along the front of the house and very close to it. A Havildar (Indian Sergeant) with our line party was wounded by shrapnel which penetrated the thick wooden door of the cellar. He was loaded on to the line laying truck and taken away to a field hospital. We never heard any more of him.

In retrospect I think that perhaps after the bombing of the monastery we had become less cautious about our movements during daylight. It was a lesson to be borne in mind. A few days later because of our vulnerability we were ordered to pack up and prepare to move which we did with some feeling of relief until we discovered that we were being moved to a farmhouse

(without a cellar) on the plain much closer to and in full view of the monastery. This must have been either late in February or early March.

Here again movement was very restricted but there was an unsighted approach from a sunken water course (hardly a river) to the rear of the house. We set up the switchboard again in a much bigger room which again was equipped with beds. We retained the code word "Wadi" and performed exactly the same function as at San Michele. Our personnel remained the same. It was from here that we were to witness the second bombing and subsequent attack but I feel that that is the subject of another account, so I will close at this point.

Foot Note: I have included all the names to which I can still put a face and a voice clearly. I remember them so well but I only met up with one of them after the war. I have always thought that the policy of allowing siblings to serve in the same unit by the War Office was misguided. As one once remarked to me, "When we both went into action I always felt that my mother had all her eggs in one basket". This was proven to be true when later one of the Bonar twins would be wounded and that again is another story.

Chapter 2

Now in early March we four signalmen with Sgt A.A. Davies and the Indian Line Party had been re-located with our small telephone switchboard in a farmhouse in the centre of the plain in full view of the monastery. It hardly seemed a safer place than San Michele but to be truthful it was certainly more comfortable. Once again the Americans from whom we had taken over had left us some iron framed beds, (no mattresses) a luxury I was never to enjoy again during the rest of the Italian campaign. These beds were situated in the one big room which was to be our dormitory, dining room and workplace for at least another month.

At one end was a large open fire place where occasionally we lit a log fire. In view of our position this may seem to have been a foolhardy give-away of our occupation of the farm, but the fact that the Germans left us alone may have been due to the presence of the old man. He, presumably the owner or tenant of the farm, had either remained there all along, or had returned there after the Germans had passed through.

Despite the continuous noises of battle and the shells which roared overhead in both directions (our own Artillery 25 pounders were sited behind us), the old man would stand for hours at the front of the farmyard with his shoulders hunched, pruning hook in his hand, staring over his devastated vineyards at the ruins of the Monastery, which now stood like a crumbled, rotten tooth on top of the hill. He showed no emotion of any kind. At all times he would have been in full view of the Monastery and it is possible that his obvious presence might have given the impression to the Germans that he was the sole occupant of the farm. But in retrospect I think this unlikely. It is more probable that the Germans from their observation posts on top of the hill had so many potential targets that we were earmarked for the future, as we had been in San Michele. Whatever the reason, they chose to ignore us for the time being.

The old man lived in the barn adjoining the farmhouse and we fed him regularly from our basic rations and some of the American canned food rescued from the dead mules by our dispatch riders. He said nothing and showed no emotion of any kind. He kept his solitary thoughts to himself; not that we would have understood him anyway. For our part we did not need to show ourselves at all except when we scampered hurriedly round to the rear of the building to collect firewood or to answer a call of nature. This we would usually do when the Monastery was shrouded in cloud or smoke, or preferably at night. Compared to the lads up front this was

undoubtedly a “cushy billet”. It sounds tranquil enough but the perpetual racket of war kept us in a state of tension.

The farmhouse was sited with its gable-end facing the monastery so that by opening the door which faced westwards we could stand just inside and get a limited view of whatever might be going on behind us and in front, without our having to venture outside. Apart from the passage of shells echoing from one hill to another there were bursts of machine gun fire, the explosion of mortar shells and of course the chilling sound of the “Moaning Minnies” (Nebelwerfers). Again we did not need to sit at the switchboard during the day. Whoever was nearest at the time would answer any in-corning calls, but at night we maintained a watch in shifts.

The line party was, as ever, fully occupied day and night repairing the telephone cables cut by shellfire. It was during this period that one day we received the awful news of a “Premature” in one of the gun-pits to our rear. A “Premature” is a term used to describe the explosion of a shell either in the breech or in the barrel before it has left the gun. The effect is horrifying. Most of the crew would be killed immediately by the flying fragments of both the shell and the gun, and the remainder would be severely wounded. Gun crews were very closely knit teams. This would have a profound effect on the whole Artillery Regiment. Fortunately this was an infrequent occurrence, but with the volume of rounds being fired it was almost inevitable once in a while. To be killed by the enemy was one thing, but to die by this sort of mishap was particularly tragic.

It was now early March and we were getting the occasional sunny day when we could leave the door open. What a difference a little sunshine could make to our wellbeing. Having spent all my childhood holidays on my uncle's farm I had a nostalgic attachment to barnyards and farm buildings, and this one under any other circumstances, for me would have been a reflection of happier days.

One amusing recollection I have of the farm has stayed with me to this day. Four of the beds which the Americans had handed over to us were arranged along the long wall of the room. Between the two centre beds was a small recessed oven with an iron door which we left permanently open. We always slept with the window open. It had the customary shutters but there was probably no glass in the window. At dawn each morning a hen would enter through the open window, flutter across the sleeping figures in the beds and into the open oven. There it would lay an egg and depart the same way noisily proclaiming its achievement. This hen, like the old man, must have been a survivor. Its daily visit served as an appropriate reveille. Sgt. Davies would later present the egg to the old man whose property it really was. What a decent man our Sergeant was.

Our function here was exactly the same as at San Michele and by monitoring the calls going back and fore between H.Q. and the Brigades we learned in due course that there was soon to be another attack by 2nd N.Z. Corps, preceded once again by a concentrated air raid and artillery barrage, on both the monastery hill and the town below. This time the town was to receive particular attention. It was intended that immediately following the attack the N.Z. Armour would pass through the town and skirting the base of the massif would continue on into the Liri Valley to join up with the Anzio Bridgehead; and thence onward to Rome. Once again the Monastery and the hill were to be the objectives of our own Indian Division while the New Zealanders were to take the town itself. We understood that the code name for this operation was to be “Bradman”. If we were to hear that Bradman was going in to bat we could expect that the bombers would be overhead very soon afterwards. The date and time would depend entirely on the weather.

And so it was that on the morning of 15th March, a beautiful sunny day, having picked up the code-word "Bradman" that we stood just inside the open door of the farmhouse with our eyes turned expectantly north west towards the target and with our ears straining for the sound of the bombers. The raid was on.

Almost as soon as we heard the roar of the first wave of bombers we could see them caught in the sunlight as they approached. To us they always seemed to be flying too high. There was absolutely no air interception by German fighters. Thankfully they had diverted nearly all of the remnants of their air force to the Russian front. Then we heard the ominous first whistle of the bombs which should have been followed by the usual signs of destruction over the town. But no! Although we once again heard the thunder of the explosions and felt the tremor of the earth, almost unbelievably we saw the clouds of smoke and dust rising a long way to our rear; probably as much as two miles away.

With little or no discussion we quickly came to the conclusion that if the first wave of bombers could be this far off target so early on in the raid then what was about to follow was of serious importance to us. If they were about to plaster the whole of the valley floor from where the first bombs had fallen to the point where they should have fallen then we were sitting right in the middle of their flight path. The last place to be was in a building, however sturdy it might be. It was far better to be below ground level, and so it was, that as one, we took off rapidly across the farmyard to look for sanctuary.

During this, hurried exodus I can still recall catching a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of one of our Indian Linesmen overtaking us at speed with a long trail of Puggri (Turban) cloth streaming out behind him. He must have decided that this part of his dress could wait until later. Despite my anxiety I found myself laughing out loud. Apparently the Indians had appraised the situation as quickly as we had.

On the other side of the farmyard without ever having been there before, we found welcome sanctuary in a ditch about four feet deep. We piled in one after the other and from here we watched cautiously over the rim of the ditch to see several more waves of bombers drop their bombs to our rear. Then miraculously the next salvo sent up a tell tale cloud somewhere close to Cassino town to our front. We waited until we felt reasonably re-assured that the following waves of bombers had been redirected to this target. Then sheepishly we crawled out from our shelter and returned to the house.

Sgt. Davies had not moved and was still there quietly sucking on his pipe. He said nothing then nor ever did thereafter. We had probably been away for no more than fifteen minutes. Now we stood with him in the doorway and watched Bradman wreak his devastation with some satisfaction.

In this sort of situation one loses all concept of time, but from historical records I now know that the air bombardment lasted for some three and a half hours, and that more than 450 planes dropped 1,000 tons of bombs intended for what was a comparatively small target. Less than 50% of these landed within a mile of the target area. Perhaps those figures partly justify our actions. The noise was unbelievable as once again the whole region of town and hill disappeared in a cloud of smoke. The air attack was closely followed by an artillery barrage during which (history tells us) around 200,000 shells were fired. At least they would have been on target. Surely no-one could live through that!

We knew that no ground attack was to take place until tomorrow when the Engineers would bridge the river and the N.Z. Amour would move across and into the town. How simple it all sounded. For our part we had a comparatively quiet night. After such a day the normally accepted sounds of battle were almost like silence. Next day we learned from telephone intercepts that an Engineers Officer (Capt. Murray?) had been sent into the town to assess the situation and that he had done this with the conviction that he would not encounter a living soul. But he had shortly returned, visibly shaken to report that incredibly one of the first sights he had witnessed was that of a German soldier shaving himself in front of a mirror propped up on a heap of rubble. A testimony to the toughness of the enemy. He also reported that the streets of the town were so completely blocked with rubble that they would be impassable until the Engineers could clear a route; a task they would have to perform under constant attack from the Monastery ruins above.

From this point on the signals that we were passing to and fro, twenty four hours a day were carrying accounts of incredibly hard close quarter fighting in the foothills, with occasional small successes followed by stiff German counter attacks. And, of course, the usual heavy casualties.

The Indians, Gurkhas, New Zealanders and in particular our own 1/4th Essex and 1st Royal Sussex Battalions could not have fought more tenaciously. But once again the attacks by the 2nd N.Z. Corps, including 4th Indian Division, ground to a halt. Once again the exhausted troops had reached an impasse. After a few days the forward units were ordered to concede the small territorial gains they had made and eventually to withdraw to safer ground. The messages we were now intercepting had an all familiar ring to them. We stayed put in our farmhouse awaiting further instructions.

During this spell the only attention we received from the Germans was from an air-burst shell directly above the farm, which showered us with some of our own propaganda leaflets. Who says the Germans have no sense of humour?

Some time toward the end of March we were ordered to pack up and hand over to a Signals Unit of the 78th British Division. We were transported back to Venafro, the place where our rear echelon was situated and where the first bombs had been dropped by the Americans.

Fortunately there were no casualties among our rear signals unit but other companies were not so lucky. More than 100 casualties had been sustained from the American bombing. However, it was here that we enjoyed a long overdue date with a Mobile Bath Unit and a clean change of clothes. A few days later the remnants of the division, including ourselves, made our way wearily back via the winding roads across the Appenines to the Adriatic coast from whence we had started some eight weeks ago. That was to be the end of our personal association with Cassino and its Monastery. A truly unforgettable experience. We were not to be involved in the ultimate breaching of the Gustav Line by a very much larger force and the fall of the Monastery on 15th May. Rome fell shortly afterwards and we were once again able to move forward, but only as fast as the Germans would allow.

Throughout the summer and into another winter we moved laboriously up the length of Italy as they contested every hill, river and village. There were to be no easy battles in Italy. Our small contingent continued to perform the same function as it had at Cassino and we had many a close call, but I must limit this account to our experiences at Monte Cassino and not be drawn into recounting tales of the later campaign.

The focus at home was now almost entirely taken up with "D-Day" and what followed. The title "D-Day Dodgers" was something that we accepted with a certain degree of self pity. From a news point of view the Italian front had become a side issue but men were still dying on a daily

basis. Eventually, we were withdrawn from the line and on our journey south we passed through the ruins of Cassino town. Even now, six months later in October, civilians were sitting among remains of their homes. This is what war leaves behind it. The innocent have to suffer the consequences. We had seen this pathetic scene in almost every village that we had passed through.

Long after the war, having read several books on the battles for Monte Cassino, I have tried to stick to my own personal experiences and not to supplement them from retrospective historical accounts, although these explain more fully what we soldiers on the ground did not know at the time. My story is of very ordinary young men doing the job for which we had been trained.

Sometimes doing it well and sometimes giving way to the more urgent matter of self-preservation. It is certainly not a story of heroism, but I am sure it will strike a chord with many a veteran. As I read this personal account I realise that it is in part somewhat somber, but what has always sustained the British soldier in adversity is his sense of humour and I can assure readers that there was plenty of that in Tac Div. How could it be otherwise with two Scots, one Welshman and an Englishman thrown together in adversity in a confined space?

I never learnt how our relief, the lads of 78th Div. Signals fared. I hope they survived. After the war I lost touch with my colleagues except for Don Parker with whom I renewed contact through the MCVA in 1988. Together with an old school mate Paddy Handy with whom I had joined up in 1941 and who served at Cassino with 13 Corps Signals we three returned together in 1989, with operation "Phoenix" organised by the MCVA. It was a very emotional experience. I kept in touch with Don Parker until his death in 2001. A lovely chap of whom I have the fondest memories. I returned again, probably for the last time, with my wife Margaret under the "Heroes Return" scheme in 2005. We met some wonderful veterans but sadly none from my old unit.

It still seems incredible that the Monastery whose destruction we had witnessed could be restored to such splendour. But buildings can be re-built unlike the lives of those thousands of young men of our generation who still lie in its shadow in the cemetery below.