

This extract is from a book of his experiences written for his family by Jim Aston, beginning with his arrival in Taranto, through to arriving in Rome. Following this passage, as the Germans were pushed north, Jim also moved on maintaining communications .....

We docked in Taranto, Southern Italy, and met our advance party who had already been in Italy a week. After our equipment and trucks were unloaded, we moved to the outskirts of Taranto for two days. Then we set off in convoy north. I was in the last truck in the convoy and Corporal Earl, who was riding a motorcycle, asked me to put a can containing some oil behind my seat. This was so that if he had a leak on his motorcycle, he could stop me for the oil if he needed it and I would easily catch up with the convoy.

We had gone a long way and had passed through a town called Foggia when shortly afterwards we came to a railway level-crossing. This level-crossing was not manned and did not have a barrier, also it was on a double bend in the road. I was driving the last truck to go over the crossing and about 200 yards behind me were Corporal Earl and a Sergeant on motorcycles. Shortly after I crossed over the railway the sergeant rode past shouting "Stop!" We all stopped and the lead truck went back towards the railway crossing. We all got out of our trucks and I said to my mate who was travelling with me, "I hope Corporal Earl does not need the oil because the can has tipped over and the oil has all run out." About ten minutes later the lead truck returned and word went along the convoy that Corporal Earl had been killed by a train.

The convoy carried on north and eventually we went through a town called Benevento. In a few more miles we arrived in a village called Pontilandro. Here all but two of us took over two empty houses, while myself and Harry Wright stopped in a disused railway yard with our trucks. We slept in one of the trucks during the night. We had about 10 to 12 inches of snow. We did not stay here very long – about three or four weeks. To get to the village we had to drive our trucks through a small river, because the bridge had been destroyed by the German Army.

Our next stop was not far from Cassino at a place called Venafrò. Here we had to use our two-man tents for the first time. One night a German plane dropped single bomb and then strafed the area with machine-gun fire. One airman was killed, but that was in an airfield about two miles away. One day during our stay here, Lieutenant Stanton said to me, "Tomorrow we will be going to Naples."

Next day we set off, and when we were going down the hill to Naples we could see that the volcano Mount Vesuvius was erupting. As I drove towards Vesuvius it was raining just a little and the ash from the volcano was making driving very difficult so Lieutenant Stanton gave the order "Turn around. We will go back to Venafrò." This I did.

It was early April and we were on the move again towards Cassino. Our camp was just south of Cassino on a hill with olive trees everywhere. The war seemed to be at a standstill. Cassino was still in German hands and the second front had not started. We were asked if any of us would wish to volunteer for the Palestinian police. Six of us said yes we would and put our names forward. Then we had to wait quite a long time for the documents to come through for us to sign. By this time Cassino was in Allied hands, also the second front had started, so we were nearer to going home. As things looked better, only one of us actually signed up for the Palestinian police, a chap named Brady who came from Yorkshire and he was transferred to Palestine.

On one occasion at the camp in the olive grove, I had to go to collect water for the cook. One of the men went with me to a river where the water was pumped into large canvas containers and then a purification solution was added. After a time we were able to fill our containers with water fit to drink. We started back to our camp but before we reached camp it got dark and driving was difficult. However, we did get back eventually. Driving along the road was bad but as we approached the camp, trying to drive between the olive trees was a lot worse. I switched my small sidelights on and off so the cook could see me and some troops at the bottom of the hill shouted, "Put those bloody lights out!" I had to leave the truck and we carried the water to the spot that the cook would use as a cooking area.

At about 11 pm I had to go out, along with another truck. We had to replace phone wires to an observation post. Fortunately the moon was showing a little ray of light through the clouds. As I was about to go to my truck I shouted to my mate to get in the truck, but then a shot was fired towards us. Our officer shouted down to the troops who had fired, said who he was, and warned them, "Any more shots and we will return fire." No more shots were fired. We went by truck out to the area we had to reach as far as we dared to drive, and then walked the rest of the way. We got the replacement of the cables done and returned to our camp. By now it was getting light and the cook got some food ready for us, also a welcome cup of tea.

During the next day I had to drive the officer towards Cassino. As I got to a point just south of Cassino I had to stop, lower my front windscreen, and cover it with some canvas. I also had to cover the truck with dust. This was to stop any tell-tale reflection of sunshine off the truck's surface. Also I had to wait for instructions before driving around the bends in these hills. I was told to drive slowly and not to stop, so that I did not kick up too much dust. On some of the exposed bends camouflage nets had been put up. When I got to the end of this restricted road, the officer said, "Turn your truck round and stay with it. I will walk the remainder of the way." After about 30 to 45 minutes, he came back, and when I had the okay to go back through the restricted area we returned to our camp. We did manage to get a few hours' sleep.

Next day I was out again and this time I had to park at an agreed spot to wait for our chaps who were walking up through the valley. As I waited, a Jeep stopped and an officer got out. He asked me why I was parked

there. When I told him why, he said, "Let's see if we can get you off the road a little more." I did manage to get off the road a little bit and the officer said, "That's much better." He asked me if I knew who he was. I said, "I am sorry sir but I do not." He said, "I am Major General Freyberg." I saluted him, and he returned the salute, saying, "Good luck soldier." Then he got into his Jeep and his driver drove away.

When I first stopped at the agreed spot I saw there was a lorry and a large gun parked in an area just off the road. Because we saw so many guns, tanks etc, I did not take much notice until the gun fired a shell towards the German position, followed by several more shots. Then the sergeant of the gun crew came up to me and asked how long I was going to stay there. I told him I did not know because I had to wait for the men to come up through the valley. But he warned me, "As you may know, we have fired six shots to the German position and when they get a fix on our position, they will definitely throw some back. You would do well to move away from here." He went back to the lorry and they took the gun away, so on his advice, I drove back down the hill for about a mile.

When the men I was waiting for saw me, they came and asked me why I had not stopped at the agreed place. I told them what the sergeant had said. Just at that point a shell exploded somewhere near where I had been parked. Then one of the men said, "Jim, you have done us a favour. We may have had to walk back to camp." Our work done, we returned to camp. The troops who were at the bottom of the olive grove had gone. That night we were awakened by the biggest shelling we had ever heard. It was impossible to sleep. The next morning my mate and I, also two more trucks, were told to go into what was left of Cassino. We were told to "put your foot down" and not to stop unless we were attacked by German planes, in which case we were to stop and get underneath our trucks for our own safety. My mate said "If we are attacked, I am getting into the ditch at the side of the road." I said, "So am I." In the event, we did not have any trouble. By looking through field glasses we saw a few Germans trying to get away. The town and the Monte Cassino Abbey were destroyed. The main reason why we went into Cassino that morning was to check on the telephone lines, because Cassino had at last been taken (it had in fact been taken on the 18th May 1944) and our troops were now on their way to Rome. We returned to our olive grove for a day or so and then moved to just outside Cassino.

One day I was driving around part of the mountain while the Germans were shelling our troop positions and our troops were doing the same towards the Germans. Each side was firing over our heads but we were not in any danger. Down to our left was a village where the church was still intact although some houses had been destroyed. Then as we were looking down at the village, we saw the church get a direct hit with a shell. Either on that same day, or perhaps the next day (I am not quite sure) we went through a village that had a cemetery where a lot of bodies were placed side by side as far as we could see while passing. They looked as if they were soldiers and it was a very distressing sight.

We were now working mainly on permanent telephone lines but our problem was mines planted near telephone poles. We had only one mine detector so this is what we had to do – five or six of us would get down on our hands and knees and prod the ground with our bayonets. When we found a mine we put a marker flag over it, so that it would be a warning to anyone in the vicinity.

During repairs the officer said to me, "We will go along the road a short distance to see what kind of problems we may have." We drove several miles along Route 6, which is the road to Rome, and realised it was very quiet. No one could be seen anywhere. So he said, "Turn round. We will go back." Shortly after I started going back, he said, "Stop! I am sure I have seen some troops. Stay here. I will go and have a look." He started to walk down the road, then put his arms up in the air and carried on walking for maybe 200 yards. Then he stopped, put his arms down and some soldiers got up from the ground. At this point I said to myself "Jim, it is okay. They are our troops," but the thought did pass through my mind that if they had not been, at best we could have been prisoners for the duration of the war. The officer then turned towards me and waved his hands to call me over. When I got to him he saluted the troops, and got back in the truck to return to our working party. He told me that they had asked him how far down the road we had been, and he had told them it was about two miles. They said, "You are very lucky. No troops have been down that far yet." When we got back to our chaps, who by now had completed as much as they could, we all returned to our camp just outside Cassino.

One day in the mountains around Cassino, I was with one of my mates driving our trucks when we got caught in a convoy of six tank transporters, each pulling a trailer with a tank and tank crew on board. I passed two of the transporters going up the mountain but I could not pass the next one. By now we were going down the mountain but I did manage to pass the third. The driver of the one I had just passed was trying to let me know he had a problem by sounding his horn. My mate sitting with me leaned out of the truck to find out what was the problem. The tank crew were sitting on the large front mudguards of the transporter and the driver was telling them to warn me to get out of the space between his truck and the one in front of me because he was having trouble holding the trailer and tank back. I did manage to get out. We were almost at the bottom of this part of the mountain and when we did get to the level ground we all had to stop. When I got out of my truck, the transporter driver who had warned me to get out had gone right into the back of the transporter which was now behind me. I remember the driver saying he was glad when I did move out. I said, "So am I now. We could have been just a lump of metal."

Another thing that happened was on the same road a day or so afterwards. Little Eric Bonner went a little too close to the edge of the road, due to the amount of traffic, and his truck slipped and rolled over to its side, having been saved by a tree. Eric was okay. He said that when he felt the truck slip, he lay down on the bench

seat. His truck was pulled back onto the road later with very little damage. One more incident I recall was Jack Berry driving through a very shallow river during a storm, when a wall of water rushed down and his truck stalled and got stuck in almost the middle of the river. One of our chaps threw him a rope. He climbed out of the cab and managed to fasten the rope to his truck, then he was pulled out. Jack was a little bit wet but otherwise he was okay.

As the Germans retreated and our troops pushed forward, we also moved on. We always camped in a field next to some trees so that when we dug out the holes to put our two-man tents on, we had a fair amount of camouflage. The problem was that the advancing troops moved each day and we had to follow. It often meant that when we returned to camp we found that the cook and the few men left behind had moved again a few miles nearer to Rome, so we had to find where they had gone, then dig holes again for our tents in the new location. This was the case at least until we got to Rome. As a matter of interest, the holes we dug out to put our tents on were about six feet long, four feet wide and twelve inches deep, with a trench in the middle so we could sit with our feet in the trench. The idea was that when we lay down we would be just below ground level. Anyway, we did feel much safer.

Eventually Rome fell on 4th June 1944. (It took our troops about 18 days to reach Rome from Cassino.) On 6th June Lieutenant Stanton said to me, "Would you like to go into Rome?" "Yes sir I would". So off we went, only to be stopped just outside the city by a military police sergeant who said, "I'm sorry sir, only essential personnel are allowed to pass this point." My officer told him that we had to check telephone communication. However, we still had a refusal, so the officer asked the sergeant's name and said this would be reported to the Chief Signal Officer. Then the sergeant twirled the handle on a field telephone and whoever he spoke to must have said, "Let them through." We did see parts of Rome, such as the Colosseum and a bit more before we returned to our camp.....