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Monte Cassino and the Inferno Track

In Italy on 2nd May 1944, the first combatants of the South African Army were gathered at a point near the top of the Inferno Track, which lead down to the Rapido River. The leading element was the 1st Royal Natal Carbineers, one of the Regiments that formed the Infantry Brigade of the 6th S.A. Armoured Division. Apart from the visit Lieutenant Arthur Newey and myself made to the front line in the village of Cassino in April, B Company, of which I was a part, must have been the first South African troops to go into action in Italy.

This was part of the build up of an attack in the finale of what must have been one of the bloodiest battles fought in the Second World War. It was also the build-up of one of the greatest artillery barrages the world had yet to witness—the battle of Monte Cassino. We were to take over a salient across the Rapido River, held by the Canadians of the Cape Breton Highlanders. On our left flank the position was held by the New Zealanders, in front and above the forbidding monastery being defended by very experienced units of the German Wehrmacht.

At midnight a line of Jeeps with trailers arrived and we loaded our rifles and Tommy guns (all wrapped in cloth to deaden the noise) and climbed aboard with our kit. The 'Jeep Train' moved off down the valley to where—we did not really know. Apart from the complete darkness the entire valley was covered in a thick cloud of smoke. Smoke was being artificially generated to completely blanket the area, more for the daylight hours, to prevent the Germans being able to see what movements were taking place.

The Inferno Track quickly deteriorated into a rough sunken road, with high hedgerows on either side. At length the Jeeps came to a halt, rather noisily I thought, and out of the dark, harsh loud whispers, in what turned out to be a Canadian accent, telling us to keep quiet otherwise we would have the Germans trying to blow our heads off.

This was Jeep-head. The vehicles were unable to traverse the exposed area we were about to enter. Our rifles and Tommy guns (still wrapped in cloth to deaden the noise) were loaded onto felt-shod pack-mules, and we followed with full gear wearing brown sandshoes, having removed our boots and strung them around our necks to ensure that we moved ahead as quietly as possible. Moving out onto the road we set off towards the overpowering mass ahead of us that was Monte Cassino. From behind the mountain shells whooped and sobbed overhead and fell behind on the road we had just come down. We all seemed to edge towards the ditch at the edge of the road believing that this could afford us some protection.

One felt very exposed on that road in spite of the smoke cover. With shells passing overhead with regular brief bursts of machine-gun fire, using tracer bullets, one felt extremely vulnerable. However we were very relieved to reach our destination without real mishap. This was a large house seriously altered from the original architect's design—this was to be Company Headquarters.

After a brief rest we were lead off by our section Corporal Claude Mitchell. We followed him up the fairly steep hill in front of us, along a small stream in a deep ravine with thick bush on either side. We came out of the shrubbery to a shelled out casa on the side of the steep hill. Parts of the roof remained and there was a cellar, this was to be our home for the weeks that followed (although it felt like months).

We relieved the Canadians who were French speaking. Claude Mitchell, our Corporal, and Bruce Airey, our Lance Corporal, set about getting the lie of the land. Claude had obviously been well briefed by the Canadians in charge as he immediately set about posting two look-outs in a pair of slit-trenches that the Canadians had used, right in front of the house in the thickly treed area that surrounded the house. This was to act as an early warning if the Germans should make a move. We were lead to understand that the Germans were only about a hundred yards further up the hill. We could hear them speak from time to time and I had the feeling that they were much closer than that.

We settled in for the night, a night that was to prove to be my true initiation to the war. At midnight I was assigned the task of taking over in the lookout position together with David Knox. After we had been in position for about half an hour Claude Mitchell and Bruce Airey crept up the hill to where we were and whispered that they were going forward to set up some trip wire connected to grenades. This was to be done by tying some very fine wire from tree to tree at about knee height and connecting it to the safety pin of the grenades also tied to the trees. Claude and Bruce went forward asking David to go forward with them to assist. They had been gone for what seemed an age when suddenly there was a loud explosion. Claude Mitchell and David Knox came scrambling back into the trenches. Both were severely wounded.

I set about trying to stop the severe bleeding from Claude's right hand and arm. Having temporarily stopped the bleeding he said that his back was very painful. I set off with him down to the casa to get help and some light to see what needed to be done. Leaving Claude at the casa I returned to attend to David Knox who was lying in the other trench. Two other men came with me and we were able to get David back to the casa. There was no sign of Bruce Airey. Claude said that he thought that Bruce had been killed and I could not go forward to look for him, as I would not see the trip wires and all the grenades had been pinned. I was instructed to wait for the first signs of daylight and assistance.

In the early morning we found Bruce, who had clearly died instantly from one of our own grenades. He had been caught up in one of the trip wires when returning back to our post.

That morning there were six of us, the remains of Seven Section, Seven Platoon, B. Company. During our first night in action we had lost both our Section Corporal and Lance Corporal, men who had been through three years of battle fighting in North Africa. Claude and David were badly injured and were sent back to Egypt and then back to South Africa. To us, the six young recruits, we had lost the two men we admired most and who had trained us and cared for us during our period of training in Egypt. We had also lost one of our rank and file.

We received three replacements the following day and were to occupy our position until four days after the Poles had captured the Monastery Hill and the Germans had withdrawn. We moved out on the 21/22 May 1944 to move up the Liri Valley.

Footnote:

The regiment went into the line at Monte Cassino with a full complement of 760 men. During the Italian Campaign 127 were to loose their lives and another 369 were wounded. I was in the fortunate 33% that survived without injury.

I have only returned to Italy once and that was in 1995—fifty years after hostilities. I went with my wife and two friends and we visited most of the cemeteries along the line we had progressed, starting in Florence and ending at Monte Cassino. I was determined to find Bruce

Airey's final resting place, to pay my respects to a wonderful friend who I had lost on my first day in action.

We went first to the Polish cemetery on the north side of the monastery to say thanks to those gallant men who made the final assault on that mountain and took the monastery that had dominated the Allies for so long and cost so many lives. We then went to the Allied cemetery on the lower southern slopes and decided to start at the front row on the left (or I suppose the western end). I could not believe what I saw—the first grave that we looked at, the one in the corner, was engraved “Lance Corporal Bruce Airey, 1st Royal Natal Carbineers”.