

John Snowden, Bde REME, 4 Br Infantry Division February

John Edward Williams

January 8, 1919 – January 2 2006

Readers of the first issue of the newsletter of the Monte Cassino Society will recall the stirring account of the part John Williams played in the battles for Cassino in the Spring of 1944 and not failed to be moved by it.

I didn't know John in those far-off days, only coming into contact with him firstly when making arrangements for attending the 60th anniversary proceedings at Cassino in May 2004. Since we both lived within a few miles of one another in South London the official travel agent for the Monte Cassino Veterans Association (MCVA) put us in touch with one another as likely travelling companions. When John telephoned me to inquire whether he might visit my home to introduce himself, which suggestion was deemed eminently sensible, I was struck by the stentorian timbre of his voice which led me to imagine an individual of large physical proportions. He turned out to be a man of smallish stature albeit concealing a larger than life personality and we hit it off immediately. My wife was also suitably impressed by John's good manners.

During John's visit I learned something of his life in World War Two and the seven years and four days he had spent in the armed forces, noting later that he was always very precise about most things. He began his army life as a private soldier in the East Surrey Regiment and within four months he was promoted to acting Drill Corporal exercising new recruits; I guess his strong voice would have carried clear and unambiguous orders to all quarters of the barracks square and far beyond. He went to France in the 2nd/6th Battalion East Surreys as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1939 and was evacuated from St Nazaire in June 1940 when France fell to the victorious German Army. On returning to England he was recommended for officer trainings and in December 1940 he was commissioned into the 14th Battalion Royal Queen's Regiment, which became an arm of the Royal Artillery in November 1941. Promoted to full Lieutenant shortly afterwards John saw active service in Iraq, the Desert War, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. He was part of the American 5th Army force that landed at Salerno in Italy in September 1943, after which he was promoted to Captain, and the rest of his service in Italy, including Cassino actions, is given in his account "Beauty in Hell".

When John was at the 60th anniversary celebrations at Cassino in May 2004 he took a lively part in all veterans' activities, formal and social, and he could invariably be found helping a disabled member of the MCVA party, or regaling dependants about the wartime actions in the area. He had been at Cassino in recent years as an adviser to film companies making TV programmes on the battles there in May 1944, and was regarded as someone who spoke with good authority.

John's death on 2nd January this year came as no surprise as I knew he had been a sick man suffering from a very debilitating medical condition for many years. At the religious service on 24th January to celebrate his life the church was filled to capacity and the format of proceedings was followed as specified by John a few months before he died. He had actually designed the Order of Service himself, laid down the prayers to be said and hymns to be sung, arranged for a bugler from his old regiment to play Last Post and Reveille, and a Royal British Legion officer to recite their Exhortation; from Laurence Binyon's poem For the Fallen – "They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old, Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn, At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them." A Union Flag covered John's coffin.

There was also a memorial corner near it with a photograph of John in his captain's uniform, and his campaign medals and other decorations, and I placed a poppy wreath beside these on behalf of the MCVA and the Monte Cassino Society. It was very interesting to listen to the eulogies spoken by seven or eight friends listing various aspects of John's life, including the surprising revelation, to me anyway, that he had been the official coach of Britain's national ten-pin bowling team! He seemed also to have been a highly respected member of his church for over fifty years for the part he played in its varied activities. The cover of the Order of Service he designed had a picture of him with his array of medals and decorations at his right shoulder and in his hands he is holding a large copy of the Holy Bible, surely depicting an image of a Christian Soldier? In the weeks before John died he had personally addressed and stamped over 250 envelopes in readiness for informing people about his death and church service, leaving a friend to only enter the dates on the information card before posting, such was his punctilious preparation for what lay ahead.

So passed on a gallant officer and gentleman. Many people will feel better for having known him.

Mr. Snowden wrote this article for the newsletter of his branch of the Royal British Legion.

#### 60th Anniversary Commemoration Visit to Cassino – May 2004

The services to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the four battles fought at Monte Cassino in Italy in the Spring of 1944 were held in the Cassino British War Cemetery on Monday 17th May. I travelled there as a member of the Monte Cassino Veterans Association (MCVA). The services were attended by many thousands of old soldiers that had taken part in the battles, including myself, and many in their number were accompanied by wives and family members. I found the occasion a very sobering one, especially when walking between the rows of over 4,000 graves there and reading the names of some Black Watch men I had known.

Known faces among my fellow veterans were few and far between. I had taken two British Legion poppy wreaths with me and I laid these on the graves of two former acquaintances from my hometown Crieff in Scotland who were killed in action in May 1944. Their graves are still beautifully maintained by Italian gardeners employed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and the inscriptions on their headstones are still clear after standing for so many years. There was a remarkable shortage of Canadian veterans this year. Ten years ago at the 50th anniversary commemoration there was a very large number of them honouring the 855 men from Canada buried there. There was a very heavy presence of New Zealand veterans and their families this year; there are 464 NZ dead buried in Cassino war cemetery.

Veterans from other Allied nations that took part in the battles, the Poles, the French and the Americans held their commemoration services at their own war cemeteries, and the German veterans also held services at theirs.

At the close of the commemoration service I found myself in the front rank of the veterans to be presented to HRH the Duke of Kent in his capacity as President of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and received the newly issued HM Armed Forces Veteran badge from him. Most other veterans got theirs from Ivor Caplin MP, Under-Secretary of State for Defence.

I enjoyed the good companionship of fellow veterans, although I believe I heard many of the same whizz-bang stories that I'd listened to on the 50th anniversary trip in 1994. I felt a bit disappointed with Cassino town this time. It had a sort of seedy appearance, due to being

rebuilt too quickly after World War Two without sound ideas being given to character and style, but it had a beautiful public park with water features here and there, and shady trees to sit beneath. Cassino's main square is a mess. It is surrounded on three sides by blocks of public housing, with washing and bedding hanging from balconies, and its main feature is an American Sherman tank on a plinth alongside an old field gun, not British. There was a row of flagpoles along one side of the square flying different national standards, including German, but with no Union flag amongst them. I heard it said that the British have never been forgiven for destroying their town and the monastery. However, it didn't inhibit the shopkeepers from selling their goods, for cash in Euros, although one veteran who tended his Barclaycard for an expensive jacket had it declined without a moment's hesitation!

Interestingly, there was a shop selling ashtrays allegedly made from shrapnel found on the Cassino battlefields, and supposedly had been doing it for fifty years. There was a lot of it being hurled about by both sides in the conflict as I remember!

I went with other MCVA veterans on a visit to an enchanting mountain village named Picinisco. The MCVA has had a long term association with it. All the school children were given time off to welcome us and they amazed us by singing God Save the Queen in English, all the verses, twice over! We took loads of sweets and candy bars for them. The village was plastered with "Welcome to the Monte Cassino Veterans" banners. After an emotional service of Remembrance and Thanksgiving at the village's war memorial during which one of our ancient members played Last Post and Reveille, we presented a cheque for 1500 Euros (£1,000) to the village school.

Afterwards we were treated to a magnificent meal in the new village hall. I think every inhabitant must have contributed food and drink, for all the tables were creaking under the weight of all kinds of meat and other delicacies, and, of course, lashings of vino to wash it down. We had spent a lovely day in the village and as it is highly unlikely that a MCVA group will return there again many tears were shed by villagers and veterans at parting. However, at the end of our visit our coach driver put the wind up us by driving quite fast down the twisting mountain road, sometimes steering with one hand while he spoke on his mobile phone. A lot of us sobered up very rapidly! Mind you, the village was over 2000 feet above sea level.

The Cassino trip eventually had to end, with the veterans going their different ways homewards and there were quite a few sad farewells made, usually over many drinks in the hotel bar. Since returning home I have received a letter from the MCVA secretary saying it is proposed to wind up the Association at Christmas this year, half the Association's assets and finances being split 50/50 between charitable Homes in the North of England and in the South. I have already bid for the half for the South to be allocated to the Royal Star & Garter Home at Richmond.

I had composed a rough poem of sorts titled the "MCVA's Farewell to Cassino 2004" for the occasion and strange to say, it went down quite well with our veterans, and the hotel reception desk was kept very busy making photocopies. Perhaps space in the branch newsletter can be found for it, but please, no nominations for Poet Laureate!

(Mr. Snowden's poem "MCVA's Farewell to Cassino 2004" appears in the Winter 2005 Supplement and also elsewhere in the Recollections.)