

John Williams

99th Light AA, Royal Artillery

John Williams was Captain in 328 Battery, 99th Light AA, Royal Artillery. This is an excerpt from "The Cassino Front" from his account, *Beauty in Hell*.

Whilst the Regiment was settling in on arrival at Vairano, I and the other Battery Troop Commanders went on a reconnaissance of Field Guns areas on the Cassino Front. All Fools Day, April 1st. I had to do another recce very early as I had to visit an area which was under enemy observation so had therefore to take advantage of the early morning mist so I would not be observed.

During the afternoon I had my Number One, Number Two and Number Three Detachments deployed at the New Zealand Division HQ situated at "Horse Bend" on Route 6. They were not very good positions owing to the difficult terrain and the higher hills around, but at least they were safe. That night I moved my other three gun detachments into the midst of a huge artillery area. These detachments, Number Four, Five and Six, were then the nearest Bofors positions on the front and I must say it seemed a far from healthy position. It was a very tricky job getting those guns in, firstly from off the main road known as the "Mad Mile", and then quite some distance along a sunken lane and then up onto a hill. Fortunately, we had the moon to help us with some light as, of course, we couldn't possibly use any light of our own. The three sites which were just off the sunken lane, which ran up to Cevaro, were heavily protected from view with camouflage netting as, by daylight, they could be seen easily from the Cassino Mountains and, in particular, from the Monastery on top of Monte Cassino. I established my Tac Troop HQ in an isolated house on a rear slope, just above Sgt. Butler's detachment. We were deployed slap bang in the middle of the biggest Artillery Area I had ever seen: there were 25 pdrs, 4.5's and 5.5's, 3.7's and 9.2's, 155 mm and 210 mm guns. The Yanks, I must say, were some of the very best American troops that I had ever encountered in the War.

Our first night there was greeted by thirty airbursts. These are timed to explode above ground to give maximum effect with the shrapnel. I thought I had experienced all there was to be experienced in the way of barrages, but I had known nothing like the noise of battle on that Cassino Front: the barrage both day and night from our Artillery was almost unbelievable. Although the sun had been shining since our move in, it couldn't brighten the utter despair that was on either hand. For miles around utter destruction abounded; every village was completely destroyed; every tree had been shattered. We saw no civilians, no animals, and no sign of life. Only khaki forms lived in that hell: they living only from breath to breath.

We adopted a poor hungry frightened dog which we found hanging around our Tac HQ. It was going to have pups; what an atmosphere to be born in.

Approximately 130 shells landed in our area the second night — most disturbing — whilst the Mad Mile was plastered as well. Sleep became a luxury, and the safety of my Troops was a great worry.

Visiting my detachments early morning whilst the mist screened them from observation from the Monastery which overlooked the entire gun area from between 4000 to 5000 yards. Amongst all the bomb and shell craters the rubble of the once dwellings, fox holes and slit trenches

empty and full ammunition boxes, shell cases, fuse caps and the paraphernalia of war, I stood in wonderment on coming across a cluster of Narcissus; such beauty amongst such horror.

E Troops guns were deployed on the hill behind my Troop. It was possible to visit them by daylight by crossing a stream at the bottom of our valley on a fallen tree trunk —not very wide so good balance was needed —followed by an energetic climb up the hillside. Vic had his Tac HQ up with his guns, they had the satisfaction — if it could be called that — of sitting up there watching us poor bastards below taking the stick. During the hours of daylight, the Monastery slopes were kept under continuous smoke shellfire in an effort to neutralize their Ops (Observation Posts).

The centuries old Benedictine Monastery, which stood at the top of the mountain, overlooked not only Cassino town itself, but also the complete Liri Valley. It was known that the Germans were using the Monastery as a vast OP and, in fact, had Troops in emplacements around the entire monastery as well.

The 3rd April. Kitty American Bombers flew over every forty minutes, bombing Cassino and Monte Cassino. How could anyone live through it, we thought? Jerry sent over a number of shells into our area.

The 4th April brought lovely weather, which stayed with us for a few days. There was more shelling last night, including air bursts over Number Five site with 30 shells landing in Number Six Detachment area. Thank God we had no casualties. My sites are well built into the ground and heavily sandbagged around the perimeter. The house in which I had my Tac HQ was constructed of very heavy large rocks and stones. In consequence, the walls were very thick which afforded very good protection, although a direct hit would be a different matter. R Troop had three casualties and one of their tractors hit. There is no doubt that it is grim here: War at it's worst. We, firing hundreds of shells every day and every night targeting known German positions; German shellings seeking us out in return.

Cassino is in ruins, hardly a wall standing; Castle Hill shattered beyond recognition. Monte Cassino Abbey destroyed by massive USA flying fortresses attacks and followed by the Kitty Bombers. The ruins give even better protection to the German Troops offering 10 to 20 feet thickness of stone and masonry protection. With all our sites being under direct vision of the Germans in and around the Monastery, all our maintenance has to be carried out at night. If rations and water are not delivered during the hours of darkness, we have to go without for another 24 hours.

I had three guns up with me and a further three guns further back at Horseshoe Bend, so I had to make trips sometimes in daylight; not funny coping with the 'Mad Mile'. Actually, the distance is two miles and two furlongs and almost completely straight with the 'Double Dodgy', 500 yards of lane leading up to my sites, both of which are regularly shelled day and night. A prayer every time before I embark along this route. I knew that I would be targeted, as any vehicle negotiating the 'Mad Mile' became a cat and mouse condition: the Germans, estimating where we would arrive when their shells arrived; we in turn estimating their minds and either increasing the speed or slowing down or even going into reverse etc. zigzagging whenever possible, hoping to get in front of a shell or delay ourselves sufficiently so that the arriving shells were in front of us. Engineers were out every night filling in the shell holes etc. Because my Tac HQ and area was in direct observation to the Germans I was not troubled with visits from Battery HQ as they couldn't come by daylight and it was too dangerous for social calls at night. Therefore, I had to

visit Battery twice a day. These runs I would try to make at both dawn and dusk. Everyday one of my signalers took it in turns to accompany me on these nerve-wracking drives. I thought it wasn't fair that the same chap should have to go through the ordeal everyday. It was essential that there were two of us in case I caught a packet on the run.

April 7th. Still plenty of activity by both sides, but, if anything, a slight ease up on the shelling in my area. Weather, still magnificent. Hot enough to go into Khaki Drill. This morning George and I took a trip up to the Kiwi OP on Mount Trocchio, the summit of which was 400 metres high where the OP was located, having an uninterrupted view of the Liri Valley and Cassino. After an exhausting 45 minutes climb from the rear, we followed the Field Telephone wires through thickly sewn enemy minefields. We reached the OP, situated in the ruins of a small fort. At first, a thick mist obscured our vision and it was quite incredible when it lifted. There, stretched out before us, was the Cassino Plain. The town itself was utterly and completely devastated. Never in my life before or since have I seen such raising to the ground. I could pick out what remained of the Hotel Continental, the Hotel des Roses and the Railway Station, all such familiar names in the earlier onslaughts to take Cassino and the Monastery, all of which were repulsed by the German's with heavy losses on either side.

There was the stadium, just a mass of rubble, known to be the German HQ; the cellars to this and other buildings were the only place where soldiers could exist. I guess they had been reinforced and most had been very strong to withstand the huge amount of shelling, mortaring and bombing.

Through the 'Donkeys Ears', standing binoculars, as they are called, I could easily pick out both Jerry's and our own FDL's (Forward Defence Localities) with their Infantry positions, machine guns and mortar positions. There was a German soldier in Field Grey running from position to position, another climbing leisurely out of his trench happily in the thought that he couldn't be seen, reaching the nearest shattered tree and relieving himself against it before returning again to below ground. Knocked out American Sherman Tanks alongside the Continental Hotel and Railway Station spoke only too clearly of the heavy cost of earlier attacks. A Bailey Bridge, constructed by the Engineers, which spanned the Liri River where Route 6 ended, was only momentarily visible as it was continually kept under a heavy smoke screen. A rattle of machine guns spasmodically firing mortars, whining and cracking, and then there was a 'Stonk' (a stonk is an area covered completely by shells, like a griddle) from our 25 pdrs., which split the very earth. War as far as the eye could see, but somehow up there looking down, I felt oblivious to it all, as if I was not evenly materially connected.

Leaving the OP, the descent mostly on our bottoms, returning to my Troop brought me back to earth. There was a strange feeling in the air, perhaps because there had been no aircraft in the sky for some days. Also, there was a thickening up of Field Guns, hundreds of 25 pdrs, 8 inch Howitzers, 4.5's, 5.5's, 7.2's and 9.2's. Also, 3.7's and 155 mm, 210 mm and even some 240 mm guns. We had a very unpleasant twelve hours from 13.30 on April 8th to 02.45 hours on the 9th. Our area was shelled continuously except for a few ten-minute intervals. My three Sites and Tac HQ had some very close calls and during the night Stonk after Stonk kept me awake and on edge. I was bloody scared, but I must never show it. It is an awful feeling laying in the dark listening to the whine of approaching shells, each one seemingly heading for you, and then a sudden thud of a dud, or an ear splitting explosion. One whole Stonk were duds.

April 9th, Easter Sunday. A dull close day. I am feeling very tired after the continuing shelling, thankful that only a few shells came over this morning. Of course, not only during the night, but also during the day, I had to continually make physical contact with my three Sites. Lt. Howard Simcocks, my Junior Officer, who was with me at Tac HQ was taken ill and had to take to his bed. He had developed jaundice, which necessitated him being evacuated to a Base Hospital. Some rain in the afternoon and evening but a quieter day; however, my Troops' spirits were pretty low after the twelve-hour drubbing. A proposed Regimental Ground Shoot on Cassino was called off because an unimaginative Brigadier had been hit by a bit of shrapnel when visiting the area.

The 12th April was a most unpleasant day. I was late returning from Battery HQ in the morning. I was in my Jeep approaching 'Windy Corner', the start of the Mad Mile, when a Stonk came down on the nearby cross-roads. It lasted for five minutes. Another 150 yards and it would have been 'Goodbye John.' There was spasmodic shelling in our area during the afternoon and at 16.30 hours Jerry put down a Stonk right on my Tac HQ. Christ, it was pretty ghastly, lasting about two minutes; about 80 88 mm shells, both ground and air bursts. Once again, we miraculously escaped injuries except Gunner Jones, whose cheek was severely cut; two vehicles were badly damaged and part of our house wrecked. Shrapnel everywhere with a number of bits whistling past much too close for my liking. One piece hit me on the shoulder, but there was no real force behind it; it only gave me a bruise and a long lasting ache.

A special visit to my Tac HQ that night after dark by my Battery Commander, the Lord Ebury. This was the first time he had ventured into our area but he had heard about the bombardment and felt it his duty to put in an appearance. By candlelight we supped red wine and discussed the War, always everyone's prime conversation. At a fairly late hour the Lord decided it was time for him to leave. Warning him of the very narrow shell damaged stone steps winding down to the entrance, I led the way, brushing aside the blankets strategically hung to prevent candlelight from breaking the darkness. Halfway down there was an uttered oath and a crashing noise behind me. The Lord had stumbled, fallen heavily from fracturing his arm, and accusing me of pushing him! I guess it was not the moment to enquire of him as to how I could push him from behind when I was actually in front. Indeed, needless to say he did not again visit my Tac HQ. My Colonel, however, frequently visited. He was never happier than when he was in the midst of danger. He thrived on it: he was so very brave, a brilliant example to any soldier. We always said that if you walked or stood almost touching him then you would surely never be hit but if you were only one yard away then you would surely become a casualty.

April 15th. Captain Vic Mellor and I took off for Naples. We much needed to see Robbie before he was evacuated back to England where he was to be medically discharged or perhaps if he could be placed in a sedentary post. We were both so glad we went; cheered him up no end. Any soldier will tell you that there is unbelievable bonding between the members of the same unit. Nobody, unless they have experienced it, can begin to understand. That is why we made the long trip there and back, having perhaps no more than twenty minutes with him.