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Fifty Years Ago: The Fog of War

I was an infantry company commander of Sikhs, 'A' Company of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment, 8th Indian Division. We had landed in Italy in September 1943 and had fought our way North up the Adriatic coast during the winter 1943-44. In April we were relieved and underwent intensive river crossing training in assault boats, in preparation for an attack across the Gari River two miles south of the town of Cassino.

The Sikh company of about 100 men were to lead the assault. On the night of 10th May we moved up into positions in woods some 300 yards from the river Gari, and lay low during the whole of the 11th. No movement was possible in daylight because the whole area was overlooked by the Germans from the ruins of the Benedictine monastery on Monte Cassino towering above us.

The battle began at 11pm when 600 18 guns began pounding the German positions on the far side of the river. The noise was terrific and the gun flashes behind us so bright that we could read a newspaper. We advanced according to plan carrying our assault boats to the river which we found to be narrow, only about 30 yards wide, but deep and very fast flowing. However, expert crews manned the first boats which got across to the far bank without much difficulty. Two ropes had been attached to the bow of each boat so that they could be pulled backwards and forwards across the river. We had little interference from the Germans as they could not see us and there was only some desultory mortar bombs falling on the far bank.

'A' Company, having got across successfully, formed up for the advance on the German positions. Then the unplanned and unexpected occurred. The night had started with reasonably clear weather with just a mild mist at ground level. Suddenly a pea soup fog came down and visibility was reduced to two feet. The explosions from the bursting shells from our own artillery had combined with mist to form this impenetrable fog.

We had no alternative but to march towards the Germans on a compass bearing in single file, each man grasping the butt of the weapon held by the man in front of him. Progress was inevitably slow and was impeded by a series of irrigation ditches about two feet deep into which men stumbled in the darkness and fog. Eventually we came across the German defensive wire at the foot of the bank which was their forward defensive position. We spread out along the wire in silence to try and find a gap. The Germans a few yards beyond and above us still did not know that we were there. Suddenly the right platoon shouted to me that they had found a gap caused by our intense artillery fire. I gave orders for the whole Company to rush through the enemy defences to the far side of the bank. The Germans began firing with their Spandau machine guns but they could see nothing and fired mainly over our heads. We passed right through over their trenches and quickly dug ourselves in on the far side of the bank, leaving the Germans behind us.

We could hear the enemy shouting and giving orders and the next move came from them. Apparently thinking they were surrounded they decided to retreat. They started by throwing grenades in our direction one of which fell in the trench I was sharing with my orderly who was severely wounded. Three very frightened German youths ran into the middle of us and

were taken prisoner. They were clearly petrified at the sight of the Sikhs who were appearing very wild in somewhat dishevelled beards and turbans.

Word then reached me that 'D' Company Commander who had led his Company to the rear of us had been killed and I was told to take over command of both companies.

Our artillery had ceased firing and things quietened down; there was no further sign of the Germans who had apparently retreated; the fog however persisted. I was able to report over our somewhat unreliable radio that we had secured our first objective. We were told to stay put and prepare ourselves for a possible enemy counterattack. The time was about 4am on the 12th May. At about 8am the fog lifted almost as suddenly as it had fallen and it became broad daylight. Our relief was immense when we looked towards the river and saw a completed bridge and Canadian tanks crossing over and coming towards us. I contacted the leading tank commander and suggested positions he might take up to support and protect us. He replied "You have done your stuff during the night, now it is our turn and we are going to advance to capture the next ridge in front" and off they went.

Now that the battle had quietened and a German counter attack seemed unlikely, I decided to try and find out what was happening on our right where the Royal Fusiliers had attacked the village of San Angelo. I broke all the rules and set off along without any form of escort. Standing on some open ground to the right of our positions, I looked up from studying my map to see 30 yards ahead a pink face under an unmistakable German helmet with a rifle aimed right at me. I turned round and ran like stink for cover and felt a sharp pain in my left arm. He was fortunately a rotten shot as he should have got me in the middle of the back. As it was I was able to get to my Company, hand over to someone else and was evacuated as wounded.

Thirty six hours later I was in a hospital ward south of Naples near Vesuvius. My arm had gone septic and was swollen like a balloon. The surgeon warned me that I might lose it but he would try treatment with a new drug called penicillin. A week later the swelling had gone down, and the surgeon announced a miracle cure.