

Major Geoffrey Piper served with the 5th Battalion, The Buffs.

On the south side of the westernmost column in the South Nave Aisle of the Priory Church there is a memorial to Sir Donald Bailey, the inventor of the Bailey Bridge about which Arthur Burcham was something of an expert. The engraving on the memorial shows the bridge over the Rapido River below Cassino being launched on 13th May 1944 a few days before Cassino Monastery was captured by the Polish Division of the 8th Army. Arthur was too modest to say that he was heavily involved himself in the building of that bridge, so I now tender my thanks for his work by admitting that I passed over it on, I think, the 16th May in the great break-out towards Rome.

Arthur and I, it appears, had somewhat similar introductions to army life, though I started out before the war as a stretcher bearer in the Civil Defence Service (ARP). After war broke out there was little to do and I thought I had better get something more active to do. So I volunteered for the Air Force. At 26 they said I was too old to be a pilot and too young to be an air-gunner. So, frustrated, I joined the Army. I had to wait some while for embodiment but early in 1940 I was posted to the Royal Sussex Regiment at Chichester. After the usual 16 weeks of preliminary training (and with only a dozen rifles available to each company!) we had our rifles or sticks poked over the cliffs at Seaford awaiting the massed might of the German Army. It never came. I then decided to apply for a commission and so, late in September that year I was at OCTU in the Isle of Man. Three months later I received my commission and returned to London to be greeted by heavy bombing and with difficulty found my way to my home in Richmond, Surrey.

After a short leave, my first since I joined the army, I was posted back to Sussex and then via Reading, Bexhill and similar places I spent my time as an instructor and training officer of a Young Soldiers' Battalion. When this was disbanded I followed Arthur to North Africa, did more training and instructing and finally found myself on a troopship to Italy and eventually to Foggia (Arthur again!). From there I found myself going up the east coast to join 5th Battalion, The Buffs.

My first major engagement was the Battle for the River Sangro where Montgomery laid on a barrage of 1000 guns firing for 24 hours, which must have done the trick as we were over the river the next night and in that area for some time to come until things got bogged down in Cassino and we travelled by 3 ton truck across Italy and landed up in Mignano, a small village a little south of Cassino. This was 27 February 1944. We were to remain in the area until 16 May. In that time I spent ten days in the much battered station where we lived in smoke most of the time to prevent being shelled by heavy weapons. We could not dig slit trenches and had to build sangars of rocks and rubble around. One shell landed on my sangar. Fortunately it was a dud, and all I lost was the cup of tea I had just brewed and the side of my sangar!

Another time I crawled up the side of a promontory we christened Castle Hill in the pouring rain and got about a third of the way up to the monastery. Further progress was impossible. And so it went on week after week until the Poles launched the final assault and we were able to progress on to Rome.

Rome we reached on 13 June and progress was then pretty rapid until we got to Lake Trasimeno, where Hannibal defeated the Roman Army. This lake is shielded by a large bluff at its northern end, so we could bathe in the warm water while German shells dropped into the water at the southern end. Here we learned that the whole division (the 78th) was to go to Egypt for a rest. Much rejoicing. But we were back in eight weeks to prop up the Italian campaign which

was suffering from lack of manpower and materials due to requirement for the northern Europe D-Day.

So off we went northwards again past Rome, Florence, Arezzo etc until we finally reached the River Po after many skirmishes on the way, including a time in the mountains above Bologna over New Year 1945 in thick snow and static warfare during which my HQ was shelled and I lost a whole platoon who were sheltering there from the blizzard. Sad.

It was at our encampment near the River Po that we learnt on 2nd May that the war in Italy was over. There was much firing of Very lights but when the troops got to using live ammunition I had to call it a day. Reveille was early the next day as I had orders to go and sort out a collection of surrendered Germans who had had no food or water for several days. So off we went past Padua, Venice, Treviso until we got to these poor fellows who were exhausted. It took me all night to organise it but by the next day we had fed and watered 11,669 Germans from a General to a ordinary soldat.

On again ever northward to the San Croce Pass over the Alps where, on the summit, I listened on my 18 set to Winston Churchill giving his Victory speech In London.

We passed over the frontier into Austria and my first task after arrival was to disarm a Caucasian Division who had been fighting for the Germans. This passed off successfully for me but the poor Caucasians had to be sent back to Russia and they were either killed or sent to slave labour. All the result of the Yalta Agreement.

After a tour of duty in Vienna as Army of Occupation we returned to Carinthia in Austria where I ended up as commander of a large area bordered by the frontier with Italy and Austria and a road some twenty miles back. It was fairly inaccessible and even the padre thought it too far and exhausting to lay on a service for my company. My words to him are not printable! My orders were to seek for SS men and to prevent smuggling of salt into Italy.

It was the nearest I am going to get to being king. I loved every minute of it and the local people I was called upon to administer.

Like Arthur I wondered if I should stay on in the Army, but decided against it. Or rather, Helen did!