



The Monte Cassino Society

Furthering an interest in the Italian Campaign 1943–1945

NA15141

Autumn 2016

Aim

To remember and further an interest in the experiences of all who took part in the Italian Campaign.

Welcome

Welcome to our Autumn 2016 newsletter. It may be chilly outside and some time before the Spring but I am warmed by the wonderful support we get from our Members.

Last month a group headed by Mike Anslow attended the Field of Remembrance in Westminster. We have a small, but loyal band who regularly attend. Likewise, a steadfast band, organized by Phil Soady, took part in the Cenotaph Service and Parade. All round the country Members are remembering the fallen at Cassino and laying wreaths at their local memorials. My thanks to everyone for their loyal support. Thanks too, to all who support us by attending events we organize and by donation and fund raising.



There is another group without whom this Society would not function. We are a small and hardworking group whose efforts keep the aims of the Society to the forefront. We share responsibility for everything from organizing the Memorial Service at the Arboretum, interesting and informative visits to Italy, organizing National Remembrance Services, the Monte Cassino Society Website, helping family members trace loved ones and on the rare occasion, putting old comrades in touch with one another.

This group of six people I wish particularly to thank and, in true popular TV competition parlance—in no particular order. My heartfelt thanks to Doreen, John, Mike, Paul, Phil and Stan who have been an amazing support over many years. They are generous with their time, resources and expertise and the Monte Cassino Society would be the poorer without them.

Finally, may I wish you a very happy Christmas and a happy and healthy 2017.

*Daughter of the late Gerald Soady,
91st LAA Royal Artillery, 4th British Infantry Division*

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News

Monte Cassino Memorial in the National Memorial Arboretum

It is a sad fact that the Battles for Cassino, indeed the entire Italian Campaign has never got the recognition it deserves. Our memorial ***'dedicated to those who fought for the capture of Monte Cassino during the Italian Campaign'*** honours all

those involved but there is little explanation of the significance of the cairn representing the mountain and the cross, the abbey. Additionally, and again a sad fact, the general public have little or no idea of the battles, the horrific conditions or casualties.

We have decided to erect information boards (or board, dependent on the Arboretum authorities)

News (continued)

Monte Cassino Memorial (cont)

It had been my intention to raise the matter in my welcome letter and ask for donations. That is no longer necessary as Garth Wright (our 97 year old esteemed bugler) has raised sufficient funds to cover the cost.

We will now start planning, getting the necessary permission from the Arboretum and working on design and wording. The wording will be particularly crucial and if anyone wishes to have an input, do please contact any of the Committee members (contact details on back page).

Memorial Service at the National Memorial Arboretum—May 2017

We will be holding our annual Memorial Service at the Arboretum in Alrewas, Staffordshire on Saturday 20th May in the afternoon. After a short service at the memorial we will, as usual, meet for tea and a chat. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet with friends old and new. We will also have a very short AGM.

Please make a note in your diary

SATURDAY 20TH MAY 2017

Funding for Veterans to return to Cassino

I have been successful in getting funding for veterans who wish to travel to Italy next May. It is specifically for this trip and not available for any other tour. Each veteran, with a carer, is entitled to £1,450 for two people. We keep our costs down to a minimum but the insurance bumps it up considerably. I do hope some of our veterans will be able to take advantage of this funding. We will make one application on behalf of all.

Visit to Cassino 2017

In our last newsletter we mentioned that if there was sufficient support we would again run our popular visit to Italy. From replies received we can now confirm that we will be taking a party to Cassino in May 2017.

As most will be aware, our trips to Italy are self funded. We use an ABTA travel agent to book flights and to secure the cost of flights which make up the majority of the cost. The fluctuating and considerable drop in the pound against the euro has meant that the cost for the next trip is higher than previous years. Unfortunately this is not only reflected in the exchange rate but also in the fact that many companies are taking advantage of the situation and increasing their rates for next year. We are forecasting to the best of our ability and, of course, should the financial situation improve, there will be a refund to reflect the actual cost.

DATES: Wed 24th to Tues 30th May 2017

(This goes over the Spring Bank Holiday)

ACCOMMODATION: Half board at the Edra Palace Hotel, Cassino. The Edra Palace is set in a large Mediterranean garden with pool. It has a free fitness centre and offers free wifi. All rooms have air conditioning, TV, fridge (and was highly recommended by one of our veterans who visited with us last year).

FLIGHTS : Wednesday 24th May, British Airways from London Heathrow to Rome departing 12.45 and arriving 16.15 returning Tuesday 30th May, British Airways from Rome to London Heathrow departing 11.45 and arriving 13.35

ITINERARY: Order not yet confirmed but will include -

Service at Cassino War Cemetery followed by lunch (included) at Settimo Cielo (half way up Monte Cassino)

Visit Monte Cassino Abbey/Point 593

Tour of the Liri Valley and river crossing followed by a visit to Rocca Janula, Castle Hill

Visit Mignano cemetery (Italian Cemetery)

St Pietro Infine (ruined village left exactly as it was when the fighting ceased). Opportunity for lunch.

Mountain village of Picinisco as guests of the townspeople who provide a buffet lunch. We have a dual memorial service to remember our servicemen and people from the village who were lost at sea on route to Canada aboard the Andora Star

Visit Sangro River War Cemetery

COST: Double/twin room £730 per person : : Single room £830

MR WALTER PRITCHARD, 100 YEARS !!

Walter, who served in the Royal Corps of Signals, celebrated his 100th birthday on 14th September. We sent a birthday card from All Monte Cassino Society Members and posted notice of the event on our webpage.

Dear Judith

I have such fond memories of my time in Italy when I accompanied my father to Monte Cassino. What a wonderful group of people. I feel blessed to have met you all.

Although my father is now registered blind he still looks forward to the magazine even though he can no longer read it. It goes on my "pile" in his desk for me to read when I visit him. He often proudly wears his Monte Cassino tie.

I just wanted to inform you he will be 100 years old on September 14th, 2016. Still doing great and still living alone in his own home.

I visit him much more frequently now and stay with him for a month but of course, it's never enough!

With love, Susan Kane (nee Pritchard)



New Members

Mr Denis Curry, Royal Engineers (Veteran)

Miss Karen Czernik, daughter of Martin Czernik,
2 Carpathian Field Ambulance

Mr Jim Goldsmith, son of William Goldsmith (aka Jack) ,
Royal Artillery, 31st Field Regiment and nephew of John
Heptonstall

Mr Antony Pittaccio, 23rd New Zealand Infantry Battalion
(Veteran)

Subscriptions

A reminder that subscriptions for 2017 are now due. Cheques made payable to Monte Cassino Society and sent to Judith Coote or if preferred can be sent direct to our bank. Please contact either Stan Pearson or Judith Coote for bank details.

Thank you.

BEST AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHER AWARD FOR OUR TREASURER

Many congratulations to Stan Pearson! Stan has been our Treasurer since our humble beginnings twelve years ago.

THE Lake District has come out on top again in our annual hunt for Lancashire's best amateur photographer. In the last two years shots of the Lakes have taken our top prize and this year the judges have selected a top three entirely made up of Lake District scenes.

This beautiful wintry picture of Skiddaw, taken by Stan Pearson of Preston has won the top prize, with shots of Derwent Water and Ullswater in second and third places.

Stan, a 75-year-old former service manager for British Aerospace, has won a Fuji Film X100T camera worth £796 provided by competition sponsors Wilkinson Cameras.

His picture was chosen from the hundreds uploaded to the Lancashire Life website since the competition was launched in the spring.

Stan, who is originally from Chorley, said: 'I am absolutely thrilled. My children bought me a compact camera for my 70th birthday and I have enjoyed taking pictures. I joined Garstang Camera Club and have been reasonably successful in competitions there, but this is marvellous.'

His winning picture is now on the wall of Stan and Margaret's living room at home in Woodplumpton and he added: 'My wife, Margaret, and I holiday in two places – Llandudno and Keswick – and this shot was taken in the Lakes in March this year. I was up early one morning and walking near the river Derwent, it was all so still and peaceful



and the reflection in the river was lovely. I normally use a tripod but I didn't on this occasion, but it worked well all the same.'

The second prize of a Wilkinson Cameras voucher worth £150, went to Jon Clare from Southport for his shot of dawn over Derwent Water. Culcheth-based Tommy Beattie's picture of Ullswater won him the £100 Wilkinson Cameras voucher third prize. ♦

Remembrance 2016



As usual, the Remembrance weekend starts with the Opening of the Field of Remembrance, this year with the Duke of Edinburgh and HRH Prince Harry in attendance. Representing the Society were Mike and Lyn Anslow, Tony Cullin, and as they do every year, Jim Knox, Diane Preston, Maureen Stringer and Susan Deadman.

The Cenotaph Service and March past.

This year due to increased security, the Royal British Legion required details of all those intending to march. As these were required in August, it is not surprising that several who anticipated being there, three months later were unable to do so. So, while we were fewer than anticipated, we are grateful to those hardy souls who spent such a long time standing in Horse Guards Parade



At other Memorials Services around the Country



Every year on the day nearest to the 11th, Veryan C of E Primary School in Cornwall hold a Service by the War Memorial outside the church. This year it was John & Barbara Leach's grandson Dominic who read out the name of his Great Grandad killed at Cassino and also his Great Great Great Uncle who was killed on a torpedo boat off Berry Head in Devon in 1914



Theo Davies in Swansea



Helen Prescott and Family,
Douglas, Isle of Man



Judith Coote in Looe, Cornwall

Dave Mann was part of the group of 150 members of the Meridian Chapter who joined with the British Legion and community groups to take part in the annual Remembrance Parade in Chisslehurst. As in previous years wreaths were laid on behalf of the Meridian Chapter and the Monte Cassino Society



SOMME 100

19,240 men died on July 1, 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. The fighting continued for 141 days, ending on November 18, 1916. The Allies had advanced just a few miles. Casualties on the British, French and German sides amounted to more than a million soldiers dead or wounded.

The Somme,
Etched in blood, veiled by grief,
Bathed in the mists of time,
The river, the land, the memories,
Countryside, battlefield, graveyard.
Crosses of war, sombre, stark,
Losses unimaginable.

Ghosts inhabit the air,
Shadows everywhere.
Look, there, behind you, beside you,
Reaching through the years,
Calling softly on the wind,
Whispering in the fields.
Lost lives, lost hopes, lost dreams.

The river, swathed in sacrifice,
Flowing sadly to the sea,
Tears and sorrow,
For Eternity.

Patricia Rigg

Letters

From Dr Stephen Ankier

Does anyone remember Jonas Ankier?

Jonas ANKIER was born in Warsaw during 1906. His brother's name was Daniel and their father's name was Josef (son of Josek). Jonas left Poland in 1929 and fought as a bombardier at Monte Casino with 1st Light Artillery Regiment, 3rd Carpathian Infantry Regiment, II Polish Corps – army number 1906/I/III. Jonas was awarded the Medal Wojska/Army Medal for service in the Italian campaign {ref: Personal Order number I65, II Corps, 16th April 1946}. Jonas survived the war and we were then in correspondence for a short while.

From Angela Marriage

I wonder if anyone has any information about my uncle J.W. Gray who was taken as a POW at Monte Cassino.

Uncle Jimmy was a private, army no. 5436008 in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. POW no. 5770, Camp Oflag No. V11-B in Eichstatt, Bavaria. Record Office: Infantry Record Office, Exeter, Record Office No. 22

I know nothing about his war in Italy/Bavaria. He was a very quiet man and refused to speak about the war.

(Anyone able to help, please contact Judith (details on page 16)

From Fjolla Iberhysaj

I'm writing for help with a TV documentary we are making on policing in Palestine from 1945 to 1948. We're interested in exploring the untold stories of ex-Palestine police officers and army personnel who served during this period. The central question the programme will address is this: how do you effectively fight terrorism while upholding the rule of law and the values of a liberal democracy like Britain? As you can imagine, the question is of great interest today.

As a starting point, I was hoping to meet or speak to you about the challenges you faced in Palestine and to gain a wider first-hand perspective of what it was like to serve in such an environment.

The programme is being made by Townton Productions, a recently formed company whose brief is to make historical documentaries. Charlie Smith, the director of this programme, was part of the team that made the award-winning series ***The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs*** and ***The Iraq War: Regime Change***, both broadcast on BBC2. These programmes included interviews with President George Bush (Senior), King Hussein, Shimon Peres, Colin Powell, Yitzhak Shamir, Tony Blair, President Jaia Talabani of Iraq and many others.

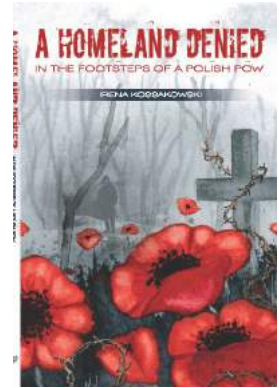
If you'd like the opportunity to get involved and share your experiences of your time in Palestine, please feel free to contact me on 07512006467, via e.mail at Fjollai@outlook.com or alternatively you can write to me here: 19 Goodstone Court, 205 Headstone Drive, Harrow, London HA1 4FL. I should add that this doesn't involve any commitment from you to appear on camera; in the first instance, I'd like an off-the-record, informal chat, please.

I look very much forward to hearing from you. Many thanks,

Fjolla Iberhysaj (Researcher, Townton Productions)

Books

Written by Irena Kossakowski and published by Whittles Publishing this follows the story of a young Warsaw University student whose peaceful life was changed dramatically on September 1, 1939. This extract is from **MONTE CASSINO, MAY 1944**



On the night of 11 May, British and Polish fighter bomber squadrons continuously dumped explosives onto their targets below; 1,400 tons of bombs were dropped on the town of Cassino. Thousands of guns blasted the darkness like thunder, shaking the earth and lighting up the sky like a terrible firework display. The Allied artillery bombarded the German positions with over 2,000 shells in the first forty minutes, in preparation for the advance of the Polish Infantry, and the Second Polish Corps artillery barrage continued until 1 am on 12 May.

The Polish infantry advanced with the field guns, facing a hail of machine-gun fire that scythed them down like cornstalks. Shells screamed overhead, the ground trembled and the air quivered, such was the power of the onslaught. The infantry could not always keep up with the artillery, confused by the rocky terrain and poor visibility from gunfire and smoke; tripwires set off smoke canisters, blinding, choking, and automatic machinegun fire. The men crawled forward, lying flat, searching for cover—but the boulders had been blown to pieces by their own artillery and there was little protection for them. Desperately fighting for every foot of ground, often in hand-to-hand combat, there were heavy losses as the Poles were pushed back by the Germans from their bunkers at the base of the monastery. It was a massacre and the Allies gained no ground.

Radio and telephone communications were intermittent at best, as the shelling had damaged radio stations and telephone lines were cut almost as soon as they were laid. So communication depended on couriers.

From his vantage point on the craggy hillside, Vadek could see the horror unfolding in front of him as he continuously fired and loaded the heavy guns, blasting the enemy below. It took mathematics and pinpoint precision to hit the targets, and he was always conscious of Andrzej at the front line, perhaps in his line of fire—tanks were pushing forward, firing their cannon into the bunkers, trying to break through the German line.

The German artillery were directing their fire at the Polish artillery, just as the Polish units were directing theirs at the Germans. It was a perilous situation to be in. Shells rained down on the gunners; flying debris exploded mines, showering the men with shrapnel. The noise was deafening. Vadek was covered in debris; his helmet and face grimy, and coated with dust and myriad fragments of rock. The air, thick and heavy with smoke from the non-stop shelling, made his eyes feel like sand paper, and he coughed harshly, choking on the hot, acrid dust.

A shell exploded nearby. Rocks, earth and shrapnel flew into the air, showering men and guns, cutting skin, severing arteries, overturning guns. Vadek was blown off his feet. Reeling, dizzy and a little disorientated, he shook his head fiercely, trying to regain his senses as he picked himself up, with no thought other than to keep firing. Frightened? There was no time to be frightened; no time to think. Perhaps if he stopped, but he did not stop.

Copies available from all good bookshops and the usual online retailers.

Also available from the publishers, Whittles Publishing—tel 01593 731 33 or their website www.whittlespublishing.com



Written by Geoffrey Winter, 1st Battalion The York and Lancashire Regiment, he wrote **WINTER'S WAR Sicily to the Baltic** as – "I have never yet found a book which describes a significant period of the campaign in Sicily and Italy during the Second World War written from the perspective of an infantry platoon commander".

It charts his life from early days in his home town of Bradford through to the present day.

Copies can be obtained from Geoffrey Winter, 10 Knowle Croft, Sheffield, S11 9SR

tel 0114 236 5302—Price £6.50 to include post and packing.

(Geoffrey was one of the first members of the Monte Cassino Society when it was founded in 2004)

EXTRACT FROM THE NOVEMBER ISSUE OF THE HISTORY OF WAR MAGAZINE

featuring an extensive interview with Theo Davies, 6th Battalion The Queens Own Royal West Kents

WWII'S MOUNTAIN APOCALYPSE

MONTE CASSINO

In 1944, Allied soldiers from across the world assembled to take part in a brutal battle to open the road to Rome and push the Germans out of Italy – among them was Private Theo Davies

WORDS TOM GARNER



MONTE CASSINO

Central Italy, 1944, and in the dead of night a Welsh infantryman called Theo Davies and his British comrades head for a location that is ominously called 'Hangman's Hill'. It is part of an attempt to rescue a dozen trapped soldiers, but out of nowhere explosions roar all around the Tommies. They have accidentally walked into a minefield and Davies is wounded across the face by flying debris. The order is given to retreat and the British hurry back to their own position at Castle Hill. This desperate situation is but one of many incidents fought in and around promontories south of Rome, but always looming above is a striking mound of rock that is crowned by a once beautiful monastery: Monte Cassino.

The battles in this area were some of the most intense and bloody of World War II. Between January and May 1944, Allied armies of many nationalities desperately fought to

dislodge the German forces that were based in and around the monastery. If Monte Cassino could be taken, the road to Rome would be open and the push north could continue. Private Theo Davies was just one of 240,000 Allied soldiers who fought at Monte Cassino and saw significant action. Now, at 92 years old, he recalls his violent experiences fighting at the heart of the struggle to defeat the Axis in Italy.

A bad start

The Italian Campaign of 1943-45 is mired in debate and controversy, from Allied disagreements about strategy and objectives to its usefulness to the war as a whole. What is undisputed though, are the grim fighting conditions that the Allied soldiers had to endure once they landed, first in Sicily and then on the Italian mainland itself. Although Winston Churchill described Italy as the "soft underbelly

of Europe" it would prove to be the complete opposite, particularly at Monte Cassino.

For Theo Davies, his own road to Monte Cassino was short. Aged only 18, he found himself conscripted into the British Army, "I was called up in early 1943 and did my initial training at Brecon. I was sent to Shrewsbury for my infantry training where they put me in the Shropshire Light Infantry. I did advanced training in Norfolk and the next thing I knew I was going abroad. At the start of September, we went on a convoy into the Mediterranean. About halfway across, six Welsh boys, including myself, were picked out and told that we were no longer in the Shropshires but were now in the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment. We had been transferred as reinforcements. The whole idea was that you had to be placed in regiments, but then you were sent to wherever you were needed. In some cases you stayed, but it wasn't to be for us."

**"ALLIED ARMIES OF MANY NATIONALITIES
DESPERATELY FOUGHT TO DISLODGE THE
GERMAN FORCES THAT WERE BASED IN
AND AROUND THE MONASTERY"**

New Zealand soldiers search a demolished house for snipers during the first battle in January 1944

Theo Davies, now aged 92, was only 19 years old when he fought at Monte Cassino and was wounded three times during the Italian Campaign

WWII'S MOUNTAIN APOCALYPSE

In the final months of 1943, the Allies had managed to land successfully at Salerno and were pushing their way northwards towards Rome. General Harold Alexander's 15th Army Group and the US Fifth Army were attacking up the west side of the peninsula, while the British Eighth Army attacked in parallel along the Adriatic coast. The advance was terrible on both sides of the peninsula. The German commander in Italy, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, was greatly aided by geography and decided to make the Allies fight all the way. The advance was hindered by an endless succession of deep, fast-flowing rivers, muddy valleys and high, rugged hills that ran east and west of the Apennine Mountains. This was ideal defensive terrain for the Germans and conditions worsened with the onset of winter.

Davies's regiment was part of Eighth Army and he remembers the winter of 1943-44, "We landed in the southern part of Italy and went up the east coast on the Adriatic side. We were as far as the River Sangro by December 1943, but things were getting worse from September. We had a terrific amount of rain; people don't believe how much mud there was. The conditions were horrible." Among the quagmire, Davies was wounded for the first time, "I was wounded with a load of metal in my arm, it wasn't a good start." Once he had recovered, Davies spent January-February 1944 in snowy conditions in the mountains above the River Sangro but then fell ill, "I went down with malaria. The medics reckoned it was because we were sleeping in barns that had beetles in the hay. Luckily, I didn't have it seriously and recovered pretty quickly."

Despite being wounded and contracting malaria, Davies still had to fight and he took a pragmatic approach to combat, "You just had to get on with it. That's your duty, you've got to do it and you became accustomed to it. It's 'work' effectively." Davies needed to hang on to this resilience as his biggest battle was still to come, "In March, they started to prepare us and towards the end of the month they took us in a big convoy one night. We didn't know where we were going, nobody told us our destination. We ended up at Cassino."

The murderous monastery

By March 1944, the Italian Campaign was not going well for the Allies. The Allied commanders struggled to co-ordinate their forces during the battles in the push north and their ground and air forces often could not work together effectively. To compound their misery, the formidable Gustav Line blocked their road to Rome. The line was a German defensive position constructed in late 1943 across Italy from Gaeta in the west, through Cassino, across the Apennine Mountains and onto the Sangro estuary on the eastern coast. It would take four Allied offensives to break through these positions, many of which were fortified hilltops, towns and villages. The optimal Allied

route to Rome was through the Liri Valley but Gustav defences blocked this route around the small town of Cassino, which was located near the confluences of the Rivers Garl (known as 'Rapido') and Liri. The line was particularly strong on the Monte Cassino heights, which was topped by its famous monastery. Founded by the Benedictine Order, the Medieval monastery was an Italian national monument and famous for its architecture, library and irreplaceable manuscripts.

Nevertheless, such historical treasures were of little importance to the Allied commanders who were facing stiff German resistance. Before March 1944, there had already been two battles at Monte Cassino, the first, which occurred between 17 January and 11 February, saw British, American and French troops make a series of attacks on the Gustav Line defences around the town of Cassino, but these only made limited gains.

The second battle, between 15-18 February, saw Indian and New Zealand troops from Eighth Army assist beleaguered Allied forces that had landed to the north at Anzio. It was during this battle that General Alexander controversially ordered the monastery to be bombed; he wrongly thought the Germans were using it as an observation post. Astonishingly, it was a whole day before the initial air strike was followed by ground attacks and high casualties were incurred. The German defenders built even stronger fortifications in the rubble left by the bombing and these new defences proved too much for the Allies to break.

In the front line

Davies was driven forward to Monte Cassino during the third battle, which took place in March, but ended up staying in the battle zone for six weeks. It was an immediate baptism of fire for the young Welshman and from unexpected quarters, "We were initially held in reserve. They pulled everybody back because they started the bombing the place, but they bombed us as well. Our unit wasn't hit particularly hard but a lot of other units had bombs dropped on them. American planes mostly did this, but there were British planes in there too."

After being given marching orders Davies's regiment began to head towards the battle area, "We had to walk across a big valley that was a few miles away to get to Cassino. We marched up and you've got to go in the dark because the Germans had all the co-ordinates and they could shell and bomb you." Davies's objective was a smaller promontory below Monte Cassino called Castle Hill, which was named after the remains of a Medieval fort that was located on top. It had recently been taken by the Essex Regiment when Davies arrived, "We relieved the Essexes. We had to climb up this hill and take as much ammunition as we could. We had porters to carry it up for us to get up there. It took about two hours to get up this rocky hill and

"A WHITE LINE WAS PUT DOWN ALL THE WAY TO SHOW US THE PATH WHERE THERE WEREN'T ANY MINES. IF YOU STEPPED OFF AWAY FROM THAT LINE, YOU RISKED BEING BLOWN UP"

WWII'S MOUNTAIN APOCALYPSE

of course, we were under the observation of the Germans, so we had to keep in the dark and in the shadows. A white line was put down all the way to show us the path where there weren't any mines. If you stepped off away from that line, you risked being blown up."

The Royal West Kents were now in the front line and their next task would be a rescue mission, "During the battle, the castle only had one bit of wall standing. Two walls were down and one part was standing at the back. Once we were inside, we were shown our positions but we were told we were going in to attack that night. We were going because as far as we knew, there were 11 or 12 Ghurkha soldiers cut off up on Hangman's Hill and we were going up to try and get them out."

Davies and his comrades would have to perform this mission under complete darkness,

"We went down the rocks and got to a road. We couldn't see anything; it was pitch black. Once we got on the road, there were explosions going off left, right and centre. We were in the middle of a minefield. The road was heavily mined so eventually, the attack was called off. We couldn't get all of our wounded out, so we had to get back up into the castle, which was a climb up. We were told to retreat up there."

Davies himself became a casualty of this attack, "I was wounded myself. It wasn't anything specific but I had cuts everywhere on my face. What you've got to remember is there was so much rock at Cassino that it wasn't so much the shrapnel we were receiving from the shells, it was what they were sending up from the stone rock. In the end, I didn't have a bit of shrapnel in me, but I was cut to bits by pieces of rock."

"WE WERE GOING IN TO ATTACK BECAUSE AS FAR AS WE KNEW THERE WERE 11 OR 12 GHURKHA SOLDIERS CUT OFF UP ON HANGMAN'S HILL AND WE WERE GOING UP TO TRY AND GET THEM OUT"



Right: Allied soldiers make their way through the battlefield ruins

As well as his own injuries, Davies's friend, a fellow Welshman who had been transferred to the West Kents called Cliff Lloyd, was also wounded, "We got back into the castle and then of course we had to watch then for a counterattack. The wounded were evacuated the next morning and we went down under the flag of the Red Cross and all the firing stopped. I was parted from my friend, Cliff, who was sent to Naples because he was critically wounded." In a reflection of how desperate the battle

CHURCHILL'S BUTCHERS

DAVIES'S REGIMENT WAS PART OF THE BRITISH 78TH INFANTRY DIVISION, A DISTINGUISHED FORCE THAT FOUGHT ALL THE WAY FROM NORTH AFRICA TO AUSTRIA

Davies fought in the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment during WWII as part of 78th Division. He recalls of his time in the division, "We used to be called 'Churchill's Butchers'. That was name 'Lord Haw-Haw' used to give us because that was part of his propaganda (real name William Joyce, Lord Haw-Haw was a British fascist and Nazi broadcaster). He'd say things like, 'How are Churchill's butchers today?' and things like that. The 78th Division had quite a good record in Italy."

The reason Davies's division had come to the attention of Nazi propagandists was because its infantry were highly effective. 78th Division was formed in Scotland on 35 May 1942, and within four months of its establishment, it took part in Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of north-west

Africa. The landings were highly successful and set the pattern for similar landings in Sicily, Italy and ultimately Normandy. 78th's part in Torch's success was made possible because many of its constituent units trained together and were brought under a single command. The division specialised in amphibious assaults and therefore was particularly well prepared for the operation, although in the event, the landings at Algiers were unopposed between 8-9 November 1942.

The division's first significant opposition was at Tebourba in December 1942. From then on, it saw hard fighting on the Algerian-Tunisian border in the winter of 1942-43, but the Tunisian campaign was successful. After landing in Sicily on 25-26 July 1943, the division fought in the Island campaign and then landed in Italy on 22

Right: The cap badge of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment would later find fame as the platoon badge in Dad's Army



September. From this point, Davies became a member of the division and it fought with Eighth Army through Italy, including at Monte Cassino. The division was known as 'Churchill's Butchers' by some because of the destruction they inflicted on German troops. After a brief withdrawal to Egypt to re-equip and rest, 78th Division fought in the Apennines and then in the final advance through the Argenta Gap into northern Italy and Austria. The division ended its war as part of the occupation forces in Austria and was disbanded in August 1946.

Davies's specific unit, the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment did not serve with 78th Division for all of the latter's existence. Initially formed in 1881, the regiment was the result of British Army reforms that gave Kent two county regiments, one of which was the Queen's Own. When war broke out, the 1st Battalion was deployed straight to France in September 1939, but was evacuated from Dunkirk in June 1940.

The 2nd Battalion was sent to Malta and garrisoned the island throughout the siege but both battalions went on to serve in North Africa in 1943. The 2nd Battalion was captured on the Greek island of Laros but the 1st spent 1944 fighting up Italy. After the war, the regiment saw active service during the Malayan Emergency between 1951-54, the Suez Crisis of 1956 and against EOKA guerrillas in Cyprus from 1957-58. In 1961, it was amalgamated with the Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment) to form the Queen's Own Buffs, Royal Kent Regiment.

The regimental cap badge later became famous as the one used by the Home Guard platoon in the BBC comedy series *Dad's Army*, although as Davies jokingly remarks, "Our cap badge was the same, but we were the younger version and better commanded."



Infantrymen of the 78th division hurl grenades at a German strong point in Italy, March 1945

was, Davies's wounds were not considered as serious as his friend's, "I was patched up and was back once all the cuts had healed up after about ten days."

The Royal West Kents had not moved in the ten days that Davies had been away, and were still on Castle Hill, "The day after I had left with the wounded, there was a German counterattack, but all our boys were waiting in a square for them and they were repulsed. They never counterattacked us again all the time we were there, which was about six weeks. We'd be there off-and-on for about four to eight days depending on the conditions and how good the relieving troops were. We were there until about the end of April."

Life for Davies now consisted of rotating between shifts on the hill and conditions were difficult, "It was so bad on Castle Hill that you couldn't move in daylight. You were looking at that monastery all the time but you couldn't see any movement in it and our sight was obscured by a back wall. Our officers did the observing and they were the only ones who could see what was happening on the hill." For protection, the British would construct temporary fortifications called 'sangars' out of stones but their use at Monte Cassino bordered on trench warfare, "Sangars is the name we gave to our slit trenches, but we couldn't really dig them because it was all rock. We would build up a kind of shelter instead and we'd put up any old props that we could on the top that would give us protection."

Although he was trained as an infantryman, Davies did not have much opportunity to get to grips in close-quarter fighting, "On a day-to-day basis, you had to be there to observe all the time and Jerry would be mortaring you constantly. You had to make sure that if he came, you were ready to repulse him. We didn't do so much actual fighting because there was nothing to shoot at, but the mortars were going all the time."

The German bombardment was so intense that relief from the mortaring was measured in minutes, "It was always a relief to see the spotter plane on a fine day coming up to locate German artillery positions because it stopped all the enemy mortars and guns firing on us. If they kept firing, the artillery officer and the spotter plane would see them, so it was a relief to see the aircraft coming up as it gave us a quiet period of about 20 minutes. It was a little old biplane that used to fly high overhead, but it was a good relief."

Davies managed to escape the German mortars and even survived an encounter with

shrapnel that was not just dangerous, but also potentially embarrassing, "There were two other fellows in the sangars and myself. In the daytime, you would rotate duty, one-on and one-off, and I was having one of these men to come out and relieve me. I was bending down to go into this sangar and there was a massive explosion behind me and felt a terrific bang in my backside. I let out a yelp and thought I'd been hit. I had actually been struck by a big bit of shrapnel, but thankfully it hadn't cut me at all. It didn't even go through my trousers. I think this happened mainly because I had been bent down to get into the slit trench."

Friends and enemies

Although Monte Cassino has since become known for the multinational makeup of the Allied armies, Davies stresses that day-to-day he wasn't always in contact with other International units, "You must remember that there were hundreds of thousands of troops there, across all those divisions. I was in the 78th 'Battleaxe' Division and each division was made up of about 10,000 men, so you can imagine the large numbers of the other divisions too."

Nonetheless, Davies did appreciate the fighting abilities of other Allied units, if not always their individual methods. "You could admire them all because you knew very well what they were doing. I very much admired the

Indian divisions, while the French colonial troops were more tribal and used to have horses with them and even their wives sometimes. The Americans were good fighters but the only thing was that they were a bit undisciplined. When it came to being relieved, they'd leave a couple of troops as guards and they'd be gone in no time, whereas we'd stay and follow our opposition until someone else came to take over."

Interestingly, despite the fact that Italy had been a fascist ally of the Germans, Davies and other British troops were not coldly received by the local population, "The Italian people were very good; in fact they were very nice to us. I found that if you treat people right they would do the same to you. They were kind."

As for the Germans, Davies is unequivocal about their ability to fight, "The Germans we encountered at Monte Cassino were all paratroopers. They were strong fighters without a doubt. Not only that, but they were seasoned fighters who had been brought from the Russian front. In a similar way to our units, I expect they'd been reinforced as well because

“THE TERRAIN OF ITALY MAKES IT AN EASY PLACE TO DEFEND: EVERY PLACE YOU GO IS A HILL. IT WAS A MARVELLOUS PLACE FOR THE GERMANS AND WE FOUGHT THEM TOOTH AND NAIL ALL THE WAY UP IT”

they were losing men the same as us. They kept on ramming reinforcements.” Davies and his comrades felt the brunt of Kesselring’s strategy to fight the Allies all the way up through Italy, “it was easier for them because they kept going back to prepared positions. They knew what they were doing the moment they were withdrawn from Salerno, they were preparing their positions all the way back and still prepared them after it. The Germans knew exactly where we were going. They were ruthless people and would force the Italians into preparing their positions for them.”

The topography was also in the Germans’ favour, “The terrain of Italy makes it an easy place to defend: every place you go is a hill. It was a marvellous place for the Germans and we fought them tooth and nail all the way up it. They were sat there waiting for us. It was very difficult for us because we had to get them off every hill. We saw all these beautiful villages in Italy on the top of hills but they all had to be cleared. Many an infantryman has said since ‘I know



Left:
A British soldier armed with a Bren gun in the ruins of Monte Cassino, May 1944

Operation Diadem

By May 1944, the Allies had suffered a successive string of failures at Monte Cassino. The previous three battles had failed to break the deadlock and tens of thousands of men were dead, with thousands more being wounded. They were fighting in conditions that were eerily similar to the Western Front in WWI, with trenches, wet conditions, stalemate and constant artillery bombardments.

The Allied leaders now came together and drew up a new plan. For the first time during the campaign, they used their full resources and not just part of their various armies. The bulk

of Eighth Army would attack near the western coast and the troops at Anzio would cut communications between the Gustav Line and Rome.

This offensive was codenamed ‘Operation Diadem’ and was to be launched in late-spring 1944. Davies’s training for Diadem began in late April, “They pulled us out of the line and we went to train with Canadian tanks. They then brought us back up again because the weather was improving. The rain was still coming and it was very wet and boggy but it was getting a bit warmer, although the Rapido River was still flooding. When we came back to Cassino, we were out towards the Liri Valley, we weren’t in the town anymore. We were ready to go in with the Canadians when they broke through with the tanks.”

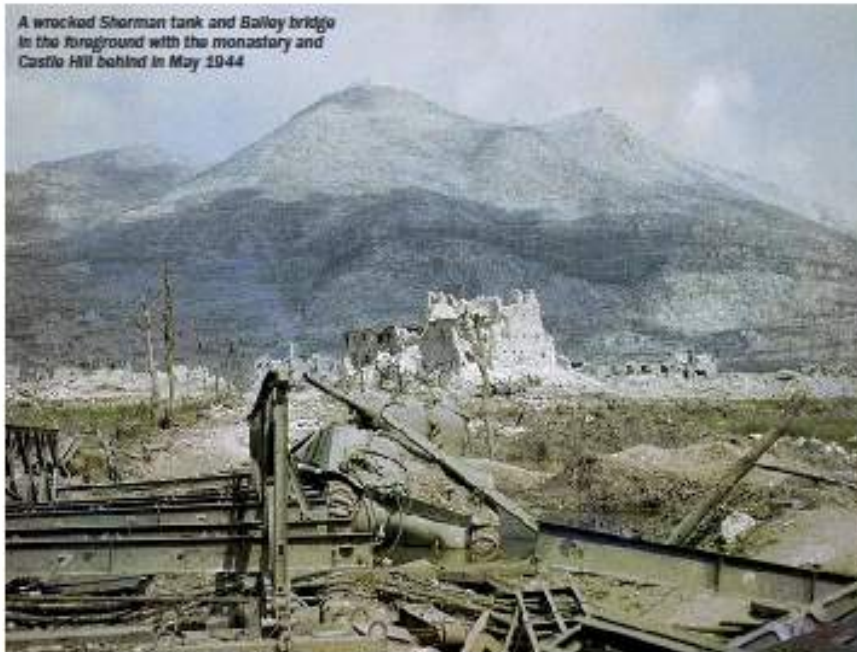
Diadem was launched on the night of 10-11 May, and French troops of the Fifth Army finally unlocked the Gustav Line, breaking through some 20 kilometres south of Cassino. The Royal West Kents’ task was to advance up the Liri Valley near Cassino with Canadian tanks, as Davies recalls, “We were going in behind the Canadians, mopping up and breaking through the resistance. It was normal infantry training and fighting. The resistance we encountered was the usual thing of machine guns and infantry fire. You just had to keep on going.

you had to keep your head down but then you’d fire and drive them back. The only way you knew you’d been successful was when you were passing dead Germans.”

This time the offensive was successful, and the monastery was finally captured by Polish

Below: Men of Theo Davies’s regiment the Queen’s Own Royal West Kents in a dugout at Monte Cassino, 26 March 1944





A wrecked Sherman tank and Bailey bridge in the foreground with the monastery and Castle Hill behind in May 1944



Master Corporal Emil Czech of the Polish II Corps plays the bugle in the ruins of the monastery on 18 May 1944 announcing victory

troops of II Corps on 18 May, who raised the flag of Poland among its ruins. For a country that had been occupied and then brutally ripped apart between Nazi Germany and the USSR since 1939, this was a symbolic moment.

The Poles had also managed to link up with Davies's 78th Division in the Liri Valley. Their contribution to the Allied victory at Monte Cassino became instantly famous, but in purely military terms, Davies believes there were other important factors in the final Allied victory. "In my opinion, it wasn't the breakthrough with the Poles running on the monastery. Instead, it was a breakthrough by French Moroccan Goumiers and the American Fifth Army on the other side of the valley. They went up where they didn't think they could go. However, they started taking positions and the Germans were then afraid of being cut off. I think that influenced their decision to pull out and that's why it was easier for the Poles to go from Hill 593 and across. Why the commanders didn't think of going round to that valley before instead of taking the bastion I don't know, but then again, I'm only a Tommy soldier."

A wrongly forgotten legacy

After the fall of Monte Cassino, the Germans began retreating to the Caesar Line between Rome and Anzio and the Allies began their advance on the capital city.

This coincided with a breakout from the Anzio beachhead and two days later this advance linked up with the main body of Fifth Army. The push north could continue, but for ordinary soldiers like Davies a rest was in order. "We went up the Liri Valley for a while and got up as far as Frosinone along with the Canadians and then we were pulled out. We were given a rest and we didn't go back into the action until the liberation of Rome. The Americans went in but we weren't given the honour."

Once Davies returned to the front, the bloodshed continued beyond the Italian capital, "I carried on past Rome and I was wounded

again on 19 June at Lake Trasimeno. That was the third time I was wounded and because of it, I was out for a long time in hospital. I rejoined my division but then left them in January 1945 up near Bologna because I went down with shell shock. Altogether, I was wounded three times in Italy but only once at Monte Cassino." Unfortunately for Davies and other soldiers fighting in the Italian Campaign, this was an all too common occurrence.

Monte Cassino was one of the worst operations of the entire campaign. In the four battles it took to take the monastery, the Allies had suffered about 55,000 casualties, while the Germans had lighter losses of about 35,000. The suffering had also been severe at the Anzio Landings, which happened at the same time, meaning the total Allied casualty rate between the two operations ended up reaching approximately 105,000.

To make matters worse, the final capture of Monte Cassino occurred only a few weeks before the D-Day Landings in Normandy on 6 June, and men who were serving in Italy were given the unfair nickname of 'D-Day Dodgers'. Davies explains, "After the battle we used to get so little write up in the press back home about Italy that there was a song written called D-Day Dodgers. It was supposed to have come

about because Lady Astor said something in the House of Commons about the men serving in Italy were nothing but 'D-Day Dodgers' because we 'didn't want to go' to D-Day. But we were out there because we were sent there. I don't think the story is true and I suspect it was probably sent out by German propaganda, but of course the morale of the boys out there was so low they were bound to believe it."

Monte Cassino is relatively forgotten compared to D-Day, but Davies has no doubt of its importance, "It's a battle that has been forgotten without doubt. My personal thoughts about Monte Cassino are that it was a terrible place. There was constant bombardment, you couldn't move and we were under observation all the time. The casualties were high. We were sitting ducks, but we had to hang on to every foothold that we had, it was essential that we hung on, it was definitely the worst battle in the Mediterranean in my opinion."

Davies's final thoughts perhaps speak for many Allied soldiers of the Italian Campaign who fought to take the monastery and open the road to Rome, "When you look at it, I was 19 and wounded three times before I was 20. However, every other battle that I was in I thought I'd survive, but I never thought I'd survive Monte Cassino."

THE MONTE CASSINO SOCIETY

The Monte Cassino Society is dedicated to furthering interest in the experiences of those from all Allied nations who participated in the Italian Campaign of WWII. Three daughters of Monte Cassino veterans founded the society and its aims are to collect, document and preserve information about veterans' experiences so that they are remembered by future generations. Veterans and relatives are welcome to contribute accounts, memoirs or recollections. Newsletters detailing events and news for members are released quarterly.

For more information visit www.montecassinossociety.co.uk/index.php and to contact the society, all enquiries can be sent to info@montecassinossociety.co.uk



Registered in the Italian Census on 0243-0345

With thanks to Tom Garner, Staff Writer, the History of War Magazine, an internally published British magazine. History of War Magazines are available from WH Smith.

And very many thanks to Theo Davies

In Memoriam

Mrs C Hall, widow of G Hall, Royal Artillery

Mr Robert Randall, London Irish Rifles

Mr Tom Smith, 5th Battalion, The Northamptonshire Regiment

Robert Randall was a stalwart member of the Society and will be sadly missed. His personal record is included with this newsletter.



Also enclosed Mr Ivor Cutler's account of his time in Italy with The Northamptonshire Regiment. Both accounts are on our website under the 'Recollections' section. We appreciate that not everyone has access to a computer so we also print them.

Stanislaw CHRZANOWSKI service at Monte Casino

Stanislaw CHRZANOWSKI (also known as Stasic CHRENOWSKI or KHRENOWSKI) was born in Bransk (Poland) the Monday, 1st August 1921. He is believed that he fought in the Battle of Bologna in April 1944 and then at Monte Casino in May 1944 after which he was decorated. In January 1945, Stanislaw CHRZANOWSKI was sent to Egypt for further training when he was a member of the 14th Wielkopolski Armoured Brigade (8th Lasznosci [Signals] Company; part of the 2nd Corps of the Polish Army). He was near Cairo on 10th April 1945. On the 2nd May 1945, Stanislaw CHRZANOWSKI was transferred to Italy as part of the base 2nd Corps of the Polish army. He is believed to be listed in the orders of the day on 26th May 1945 for the 14th Wielkopolskiej Brygady Panczernej [Armoured Brigade]. Does anyone remember this man or have any further information about his service during the Second World War?



We are asked if anyone can identify this man and if able to identify anyone in the photograph above taken in Egypt in 1945

If possible, please contact any of our committee on the next page. Thank you



British & Commonwealth War Cemetery, Cassino



THE MONTE CASSINO SOCIETY

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