



# The Monte Cassino Society

Furthering an interest in the Italian Campaign 1943—1945

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## Aim

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

## Welcome to our Summer 2021 newsletter

I hope you are all keeping well. As we slowly emerge from what we hope will be the last of a series of lockdowns, and hesitantly look forward to things returning to some sort of normality, we can be grateful to the NHS for the successful Covid 19 vaccination programme, and that most of us should by now have had at least one of our two vaccinations.



Unfortunately, all this came a little too late for our planned annual Society remembrance meeting at the National Memorial Arboretum on May 15th, which Lesley unavoidably had to cancel for the second year running, due to the pandemic and restrictions. We can only hope that by next year all this will be behind us, and I won't have to mention Covid 19 ever again. Fingers crossed on that one.

But some clouds do have silver linings, and a few weeks before the Arboretum meeting should have taken place, we were introduced to Rev. Fergus Cook of Blackhall St Columba's Church in Edinburgh, and his poignant story of the Monte Cassino cross, which we print in this newsletter. It so happened that Fergus was intending to conduct a memorial service for Monte Cassino on May 15<sup>th</sup>, with the cross as the centrepiece, and when he heard of the society he invited our members to join online. We are immensely grateful to Fergus for the uplifting service, which a limited number of people were also able to attend in person. In Fergus the Society has found a committed and enthusiastic ally, and we look forward to more collaboration with him and those members of his congregation who are members and supporters of the Monte Cassino Society.

Enclosed in this edition you will also find the application form for the Annual Service of Remembrance at the Cenotaph in London on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> November 2021. As before, we are hoping that this year the event will go ahead. It is a tragic reflection on the pandemic, that some of our sadly missed veterans and members who might have been able to attend last year are no longer with us, but we hope to see as many members as possible there (including new members, who we are delighted to welcome to the society). Please send the form in to Liz Longman if you wish to attend.

We have a few more veterans' stories, which I always love to read and hope you do too. Please keep sending in those personal accounts. There are so many individual experiences of the Italian campaign, from so many different perspectives, and it seems to me important to record as many as possible before they are lost forever.

Helen James, Editor

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## **November Ceremonies 2021**

### **Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph – Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> November 2021.**

Notwithstanding the extraordinary events we've all been through over the year or so, once again the Royal British Legion continue to plan on the basis that the November Ceremonies will still take place (although in what form it remains to be seen). To that end, can everyone who wishes to be on Horse Guards Parade in November (if we are able) once again fill in the enclosed form please and send it to Liz Longman so that it arrives by the 31<sup>st</sup> July. She will then update all those who've expressed an interest as and when further information is forthcoming.

### **Westminster Abbey Fields of Remembrance – Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2021.**

As for Remembrance Sunday, planning for the Poppy Fields is also continuing, so can anyone who would like to be involved in this please let Lesley Teasdale know by 31<sup>st</sup> July. It should be understood that, even before COVID, tickets for this event were extremely limited, but should it go ahead then we would all want the Society to be fully represented.

### **Westminster Abbey Fields of Remembrance – Dedications.**

If anyone would like a dedication placed on one of the Crosses which the Society place in the Monte Cassino plot at the Field of Remembrance, then if they send the details to Lesley Teasdale she will collate them ready for November. Even if the more formal elements of the weekend are unable to take place, there is a strong possibility that we will still be able to place the crosses and conduct our own individual acts of Remembrance.

For Lesley's contact details please see contacts at the end of the newsletter.

For Liz's contact details please see the enclosed form

Thank you,  
Lesley & Liz

## **Battle of Monte Cassino Memorial Service**

I first heard about the Monte Cassino Cross when Michael Wilson (a family friend of Veteran Albert Darlington) joined the Society. He wrote and told me;

“My father was in the 78th Division at Cassino so it is very much in my mind. Recently I have discovered that a church in Edinburgh has a cross from Monte Cassino made by British troops. It was brought back by a Chaplain who served there (who) then became a minister in this Edinburgh church. The current Minister, Fergus Cook, is keen to start a memorial service in May with all the advantages currently of Live streaming services.”

As well as telling me about the Cross and the proposed service, Michael also made contact with the Chairman of the Polish Ex Combatants Association and the Italian Consulate in Edinburgh to let them know that the Service was going to take place.

Rev Fergus Cook then contacted me and I was able to introduce the Society and to learn more about both the Cross and the Service. Having spoken to him, I was able to e-mail and write to the society membership to let them know about the service and subsequently let them have the details of how they could view it live 'on-line'. In addition, the Society sent a wreath which was placed beneath the cross during the service and then moved out to the War memorial in the Church grounds afterwards.



The service itself was very moving and a lovely tribute to all who fought at Cassino, with Rev Cook and his entire congregation welcoming us all into their Sanctuary (albeit virtually). If you have not yet had a chance to view it, it can be found at:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0NV5u4XD9kCq6STiFndyJg?view\\_as=subscriber](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0NV5u4XD9kCq6STiFndyJg?view_as=subscriber)

where it will be available until November.

Having had to cancel our own service at the National Memorial Arboretum for a second year, to have the service with the Monte Cassino Cross in Edinburgh was a wonderful opportunity for the Society to remember both the battle and the wider Italian campaign. Potentially, both services may be held next year, which would give our members who are unable to travel the opportunity to join the service in Edinburgh by live stream. For this I am extremely grateful to Rev Cook and his team.

At the same time, another of our members, Karen Czernik, who is a volunteer at the National Memorial Arboretum was able to place wreaths on both the Monte Cassino and Italy Star memorials.

The 16<sup>th</sup> May was the NMA's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and you can learn more about what happens there at <https://fb.watch/5x3of7yL9B/>.

Lesley Teasdale, Hon Secretary



Monte Cassino Memorial at the National Arboretum  
with the wreath laid by Karen Czernik

## **The Monte Cassino Cross.**

*Rev. Fergus Cook sent the following article from the "Blackhall Bulletin", the parish magazine of Blackhall St Columba's Church in Edinburgh, dated March 1981. Written by the Rev. R J Watson Mathewson, it tells the story of the Monte Cassino Cross. Thanks also to Barbara Wilson, the present editor of the Blackhall Bulletin, for locating the original article and copying it for us.*

### **From Monte Cassino to The Royal Victoria Hospital**

During the war in Italy a C.R.U. (Corps Reinforcement Unit) was established behind the lines at the battle for Monte Cassino. Here men newly out from home, or returning from hospital, received their final training before being committed to battle, most of them for the first time. It had therefore, as you may imagine, a spiritual as well as a military importance.

I was posted to this C.R.U. as Chaplain. I had with me Tom Lambert, an Army Scripture Reader, a man of simple but profound faith. His organisation dates back for centuries to the days when ex-soldiers who could read were appointed to read the bible to serving soldiers who could not.

We found the C.R.U. to be a sizeable, tented town situated in a saucer-like depression in the hills. At its centre, still unoccupied, was a large mound carpeted with purple clover. On this we decided to build a church; with the help of a group of men who came to our 'manse' every night at 9pm for fellowship, and any other volunteers we, and they, could recruit; there proved to be no lack of these.

First we erected a large marquee, which we borrowed from the Quartermaster. It had three tall centre supporting poles, and if I remember correctly, 22 side poles. We painted them all light blue. We cut out 22 identical cardboard shields and cajoled the various regiments represented in the camp to paint their regimental crests on them. Nine larger shields with divisional emblems were used as capitals for the centre poles. All sorts of substances were employed as substitutes for paint. We discovered for instance, the aesthetic qualities of boot polish and blanco, and the glowing colours of HP. and tomato sauces. From the many bombed buildings in the locality we collected enough bricks for the aisle and a platform at the top of the church. On the platform we put an ordinary trestle table, and over it I draped a dark blue rug, one of the effects of a Scots Guards officer who had been killed. Behind the table we erected a simple reredos, and covered it with a dark grey blanket. Down the centre of the reredos, and extending over the table we laid a length of light blue silk which I had purchased in Naples. Where it hung over the table, the mother of an Italian family in the vicinity embroidered a white Celtic cross which she copied from my service book. Two shell cases were polished and packed with clover, and so the table began to appear properly dressed, except for one essential; it had no cross.

The cross that arrived in a matter of days was a labour of love by one of the Pioneers. It was of white wood, beautifully bevelled and jointed, collapsible so that it could be packed easily. Yet, when I first saw it I was disappointed; the cross-bar seemed too long and out of proportion. Then I realised that this was the only kind of cross the Pioneers were accustomed to make; one to set over the grave of a soldier; the cross-bar had to be long enough to accommodate his name, rank, number and unit. So I left it as it was, a perfect symbol of the comprehensive love of God in Christ for the individual. That cross stood, and may still be standing on the font cover in St Columba's. At the same time, the Pioneers made a lectern for one side of the table. In this enterprise their enthusiasm had to be curbed, otherwise we would have had a lectern big enough to grace St. Peter's in Rome.

The exterior of the church was also receiving our attention. For one thing the church had to have bells. So we explored the dumps of used shells in the area, selected eight empty cases that gave an octave when struck with a hammer; these when strung up on a goal post which we erected sounded the Westminster chimes through the camp each evening at 9pm; a large German howitzer shell provided the boom of Big Ben. The first time we rehearsed this carillon, the camp fire brigade turned out!

A church has also to have a cross on its highest point. So a large wooden cross was manufactured, painted in gold and mounted on the end main pole, where it emerged from the

canvas. To ward off malaria, every man had to take a daily Mepacrin tablet; we discovered that these tablets ground to powder and mixed with gum, made a serviceable gold paint. So a gold cross was seen all over the camp and proclaimed the presence of the church in its midst.

One day I found Tom hammering together a wooden platform on the grass on the other side of the Communion Table. "What is this for?" I asked. "For the organ of course". "What organ?" "Man", he replied in astonishment "where's your faith? The organ will come". And, of course, it did. I was invited to conduct the morning service in the nearby United States establishment. At dinner afterwards in their mess, I was asked if there was any way in which America could help us. I said we could do with an organ similar to the one used at the service. "It's yours", they said, "we have another one unused". So I returned to the C.R.U. with the organ; the platform that Tom had prepared for it was a perfect fit.

So the church was complete. A special hymn was composed, words by Private Leftly of the Buffs, music by Lance Corporal Mortimer, in civil life a saxophonist in a well-known London dance band. So many came to the opening service that we had to remove the canvas walls and most of the congregation sat in the clover outside.

When the C.R.U. was disbanded on the fall of Cassino, I took the organ with me to the 6<sup>th</sup> Gordons. Its greatest hour was in Palestine on V.E Day when it was used to lead the praise of the great Thanksgiving Service held that day for British troops stationed in Gaza. To increase its volume on that occasion, the microphones of several address systems were attached to it; it sounded like a Wurlitzer.

I am glad to think that it is still being used to the Glory of God in the Royal Victoria Hospital Ward Services.

Rev. R.J. Watson Mathewson



Rev. R.J. Watson Mathewson, who commissioned the Monte Cassino Cross

*Born on consecutive days in September 1923, and attending the same school in Ilfracombe, North Devon, Alan Bidgood and my father Jim Frape were called up at the same time, then trained and served together as signallers in C Troop, 102 Battery, 75<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment, Shropshire Yeomanry RA throughout the Italian campaign.*

*Alan was a great archivist, and drawing from his extensive collection of notes and letters, his daughter Alison Bicker tells the story of his time in Italy.*

## **A Signaller's Monte Cassino**

My father, Alan Bidgood, a veteran of the Italian Campaign, lived to the great age of 97 years but sadly passed away in December 2020. He has left us many memories from some of the most formative and memorable years of his life during World War 2. We have his medals. We have his army cutlery, imprinted with his number - the knife is missing because he left it in Italy, having been used to earth a telephone. Skilled with electrical cables; we have his precious pliers and jack knife, once used in Italy. We have his watch, sent from home, with which he synchronised the C Troop guns for the longest and loudest Cassino barrage. We have all my father's letters home, making light of conditions and always aware of the censor, but hidden in the text written in May 1944 he has written a coded word CASSINO.



The book "The War Comes to Woolacombe" was written in my father's retirement and it gives a fascinating account of his wartime experiences, including descriptions of the final battle for Monte Cassino. The book draws on his letters home to his family in North Devon and the collected memories of his comrades. We have, inside its covers, an amazing insight into the lives of a group of young conscripts who spent their war years as signallers in C Troop, 102 battery, 75<sup>th</sup> Medium

Regiment, Shropshire Yeomanry, Royal Artillery. The Shropshire Yeomanry operated 5.5-inch gun howitzers, 16 in all by the time it arrived at Cassino. C Troop had four of these guns with 60 men, officers, gunners, cooks and of course, the signallers. My father's account introduces the reader to the surviving signallers of C troop; Bailey J, Bidgood A, Bilsborough J, Frape J, Grinnell H, Horton A, Shead A, Tompkins R and Watson J.

What role did signallers play?

It was the signallers' duty to maintain communications at all times between the C Troop command post, their battery HQ, and the forward observation post, by using both wireless and telephones. When travelling, the young radio operators would transmit and receive messages from the back of a truck. On arrival, they would occupy the command post, camping in small two-man bivouacs nearby; they were close to the guns and firing orders were sent across by tannoy. The men would be on duty day and night, two hours on and four hours off. During lulls in the fighting, the 75-ampere accumulator wireless batteries would be recharged from the truck engine; this background engine noise was always an unwelcome distraction for those listening for incoming artillery. On a quiet night, a solitary signaller would be on duty in the command post, perching on an empty petrol or water container or an empty box. The light from a small paraffin oil lamp was used when writing any orders received, or when penning a letter home. In the cold winter months, the command post had the luxury of a small wood burning stove; made from a discarded barrel with a hidden chimney, fashioned from bent tins. Five minutes before the end of a night shift the signaller on duty would seek out his comrade asleep in his tent and ensure that he was fully awake to do the next two-hour turn.

During the day, three duty signallers would be based in the command post, operating the ground control radio and the telephone field switch board. On a listening watch, the duty signaller, wearing headphones, would have the radio set tuned to particular frequencies awaiting messages

from the portable, short-range radios or taking orders from headquarters. At certain times the operators struggled with interference across the airwaves, and on occasions they resorted to Morse code signalling to avoid confusion. When in action, it was important to maintain radio silence to avoid becoming a target for enemy guns, and essential messages were transmitted in code. Signallers were skilled at repairing common faults with the radios such as short circuits and broken valves. Telephone signals, whilst more secure from detection, were also problematic: the telephone signal would have to be checked regularly to ensure that the lengthy cables were functioning.



This image of Signallers on Monastery Hill illustrates some of the conditions and equipment that they had to deal with.

When the troop arrived at a new position, the first priority was to send out maintenance signallers to lay long reels of telephone cable wire beside the roads to battalion HQ, and across the exposed rocky mountainsides to the forward observation posts. Inevitably, the lines would be cut by incoming exploding shells and the line maintenance signallers risked their lives to re-establish the links. In my father's book we read that after some lines had been damaged, they found an unfortunate signaller and two mules lying dead in a shell crater. Passing transport, such as a tank or Bren gun carrier, munition lorry or other tracked vehicle might break the lines by driving into a roadside ditch, where so often the communication cables lay. We are told that on one occasion, men were positioned at various points along a ditch, in order to mend the predicted broken wires while they were under enemy gun fire. Signallers found ingenious ways to preserve the lines, sometimes by constructing an overhead cable arch to allow traffic to and from a gun site; occasionally this arch would get hooked on a radio aerial from a passing vehicle and bring about another break in vital communications.

Locating and repairing breaks in the cable was a very dangerous occupation for those out in the open and in sight of the enemy. Two signallers would walk the line, one from each end, to locate the break; each signaller would "tee in" at intervals using a portable phone and a safety pin to find where the continuity ceased. Having found the fault, they would then splice the ends of broken cable by tying them with a reef knot and then applying insulating tape to waterproof the mend. Their essential tools were an army jack knife and a pair of pliers. My father's well used pliers were sent out to Italy in a parcel from home, having been provided by an uncle who served in the Metropolitan Police. Such was the shortage of equipment that pliers were sometimes one pair between two signallers. If neither of the line men were in possession of pliers, we are told that it was difficult (though not impossible) to execute a good joint in field conditions.

The Shropshire Yeomanry joined the Allied multi-national forces, which were amassing around the town and ruined abbey of Monte Cassino, in April 1944. Battle hardened, by night C Troop established their four gun positions at Cervaro (6 miles to the east) on a rocky site which was within view of the enemy. In order to remain un-detected it was important to avoid using the radio, so the signallers were quick to lay telephone lines from the operations post to battery HQ and most significantly to the forward observation post. This lookout was established on the barren slopes of Monte Trocchio, several miles from the C Troop camp. Two-man portable radios and lengthy telephone lines relayed enemy positions and orders to the guns. The men worked around the clock to maintain communications between the lookouts and their guns.

Signallers from C Troop played their part in the fourth and final battle of Cassino. My father and two others remained in the command post at Cervaro, manning the ground radio and telephones. It was my father who had synchronised his watch, who was listening to headquarters on his headphones and who gave the final orders to the guns to begin firing at 23:00 on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1944. Four signallers from C Troop and two officers were ordered to accompany the forward infantry assault sent to cross the Rapido river in small boats. They had two portable radios, the 18 and 22,

each of which was netted together with the command post to give greater range. Attempting by night to cross the fast-flowing river and enemy defences on the valley slopes led to heavy casualties, and eventually this operation was postponed. The troop were on duty for more than twenty-four hours that night and the following day, and those who had been closest to the action were particularly glad to have survived. When eventually the Gustav line was severed and the enemy had surrendered on the Monte Cassino front, it was the signallers who relayed the messages from headquarters to the exhausted gun crews. The heaviest and loudest gun barrage of the war in Italy would not be forgotten by any of those who were there.

Cassino was not the end of the war, there were many more months of fierce fighting as they chased the enemy northwards. However, when peace came the conscripts returned home, and gradually resumed their civilian lives. My father had learned so much in his army days, he returned home to North Devon with greater understanding of the world and appreciation of peacetime. As a soldier and signaller he had learned to be resourceful, he was well organised, and he used his war time experiences for good; for example he was a very practical camper, our family's tents were always well pitched, he tightly packed suitcases and boxes as if they were going to be roped onto the back of a mule, and the well packed camping trailer followed the car just like a gun howitzer pulled by a truck! He took us to visit Italy several times and he was able to show his family the beauty of the Italian countryside, the splendour of cities like Florence, Venice and Rome and the resilience of the Italian people, whose lives had been so disrupted by war.

After more than forty years had elapsed, much to his delight my father was able to renew his wartime friendships. A small group of signallers from C Troop, 75<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment, Shropshire Yeomanry met annually on Remembrance Sunday at Shrewsbury for more than ten years. In old age, many of them had become very deaf, possibly caused by the concussion of the guns at places such as Monte Cassino. They reminisced about their days as signallers and the cold, the mud and the noise which they had once endured. Gradually their numbers dwindled until my father was the last surviving member of the group. He wrote in his book "Having met some of the finest men with whom I could wish to have been associated and enduring some very difficult situations, which I would not have missed for the world, I would not like to think of future generations having to face the same dangers and deprivations".

We are so proud of them all.

Alan's book "The War Comes to Woolacombe" is available via the following link:

<https://www.blurb.co.uk/b/1057403-the-war-comes-to-woolacombe>



C Troop Reunion, Shrewsbury 1991

Bidgood A, Watson J, Bilsborough J, Grinnell H,  
Shead A, Frape J.



The Shropshire Yeomanry Memorial at the  
National Memorial Arboretum



*David Mills sent in some of his late father, Frank's writings about his time at Cassino. The full text can be viewed in "Recollections" on the MCS website, but here is an extract describing Frank's memories of crossing Amazon Bridge with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lothians and Border Horse:*

### **Well Dressed at Cassino**



The attack by the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corps began on the 11<sup>th</sup> May by the British 4<sup>th</sup> Division and the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, who crossed the Rapido river on a front just south of the town of Cassino to San Angelo, and managed despite strong resistance to maintain small bridgeheads which they held on to during the whole of the 12<sup>th</sup> May. In order to reinforce the small number of troops holding the bridgeheads and to launch an attack on the German defences, there was now an urgent need to get strong forces across the river. To do this a bridge was required, and fast – sappers worked all night under heavy fire, but despite all efforts by the Germans to prevent its completion and thanks to the outstanding courage of sappers, the bridge was ready in the very early hours of the 13<sup>th</sup> May. This was the Amazon bridge.

Our regiment the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lothians and Border Horse, forming part of the British 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, was the first armour to cross the bridge. We had moved up to an assembly area quite close to the Rapido. Our 'A' and 'C' squadrons crossed the bridge first, accompanied by the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion The Black Watch and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers.

Time passed, then our squadron received orders to move and cross the bridge. The area round the bridge and across the river was subjected to heavy shelling, and the smoke put down to protect the movements by our forces crossing the bridge hung around in clouds; to our front the Germans had used local smoke also to hide movement and their positions. Some mist from the river and the nearby marshes added to the difficulty in trying to see our immediate objectives.

Our tank followed others in 'B' Squadron round a bend to the immediate approach to the bridge. A motley crowd of troops of all arms appeared to our right as we came to a halt. Here the Royal West Kent Regiment was waiting in small groups, shells and bullets banged and whizzed by, our guns firing in reply from our rear, a glimpse of the Monastery, further smoke on the slopes of Monte Cassino fired from our artillery to blot out the splendid observation posts of the enemy.

Then forward in line ahead, clattering across the bridge, some sappers waving to us, some of the infantry riding on the back of the tank, across the river and straight ahead. The infantry were in a very dangerous situation since tanks attract shelling, and from time to time they were unable to support us. We had some American Honey tanks in our No.5 Troop without turrets, the idea being that they could act as scouts with their low profile and relatively fast speed. In my opinion they were death traps for the troops who manned them, since they were easy targets for mortars, machine guns and grenades, not forgetting the shelling.

The smoke, ditches, marshes, orchards, trees, mist and other obstacles made observation nigh impossible, and my vision was restricted to the immediate front. Bullets, shells, and bombs whistled and banged all around, with German infantry hiding in and emerging from deep dugouts, one of which I discovered some days later, not far from the bridge we had crossed.

Fire fights involving enemy infantry attempting to infiltrate between the tanks, enemy tanks, self-propelled guns and anti-tank guns flared up at regular intervals. I felt frustrated in not being able to see the enemy, who was using well sited defences and who could 'see' us, since he had plans

of his defences, knew where we were, and his guns had all the ranges. The day passed with some casualties.

During the night we assembled to the rear of our positions during the day and loaded up with fuel and ammunition. The German forces kept up mortar attacks on our assembly area and the bridge, plus the usual shelling.

We moved out early in the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup>, with heavy mist adding to the informal smoke. Our regiment had a fairly wide front to cover, and the squadrons fought their own way forward more or less independent of each other. Indeed, I had no idea where the tanks of 'A' and 'C' squadrons were and they did not know our exact position, and I am positive we got lost for some small period from time to time.

In a tank you put a great deal of trust in the driver – you have to, since he virtually controls all movement. There he sits on the left in the forward section of the hull, straining his eyes through the limited vision of the periscope and constantly trying to anticipate the ground conditions. On a clear day this is a daunting task, and at Cassino it was nigh impossible to drive the tank with any certainty of what lay in front, except for those infuriating periods of the day when quite out of the blue there were clear patches suddenly to be obscured by the drifting smoke. Some of our tanks got trapped for a short time in the marshy ground. Inching forward there was no let-up in the shelling, and we had reports of added danger in the shape of German infantry with bazookas and 'sticky' bombs.

Our tank swept through a small orchard, the fog and smoke thinned out, and quickly we saw facing us a small farmhouse building on to the right, with a rise in the ground stretching from the building and going in an easterly direction. The rise was topped by a few trees, and near them on



In action in Italy, Frank Mills and his mate with their camouflaged tank

the nearside slope were a number of our tanks firing away at enemy infantry in the tall grass beyond the rise.

We slewed to our left over newly tilled ground, to take up a position on the left of the building, when the heavy-duty batteries beneath the turret began to discharge lethal doses of gas. There was no alternative but to jump out of the tank – we let the rest of the squadron know our intention and told them on the wireless that we were being gassed, but forgot to say that this was due to the batteries and not a shell. This caused some consternation. Literally we hit the deck, trying to hide in the furrows since spandau and rifle fire was directed on us. We looked at each other. One member was not with us. Looking up we saw him dancing about bolt upright; bawling produced the information that he was wearing a new greatcoat and did not want to get it dirty.

He certainly was well dressed at Cassino!

### **Amazon Bridge Memorial.**

We reported two years ago on the plans for the Amazon Bridge memorial, which by now should have been completed and dedicated. Plans had been made to complete the work in April this year, but unfortunately, the project was delayed yet again, another casualty of the pandemic. George Cowie recently sent me the following update:

“We were unable to get to Cassino in April due to our government’s travel restrictions. Anyway, we are, hopefully, going out on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 2021 to do the construction. At the same time, we’re going to erect a small memorial to the 1/6th East Surreys. The Princess Wales Royal Regiment HQ have funded the project. It would be a conspicuous absence having two memorials on the site they took and there being no mention of them, so that is good news.

The plan was to start the construction in April 2021 and have it completed by 25 April in time for the opening of another project being run by Linea Gustav, which is headed by Giovanna Lano and Pino Valente. It is an organised trek up Cavendish Road and has information boards placed on the “Cassino War walk”. I am not sure if this was opened on the date scheduled”.

### **Where is the Cavendish Road?**

By Des James

No, not the swish London NW6 one, but the one which wound up the back of Monte Cassino hill from Caira. The name came from an officer of the 4th (Indian) Division, Lt-Col E.E. Stenhouse DSO, who named Cavendish Road after the street in Bournemouth where his father lived. In 1944 there existed a mule track from Caira up to Monte Cassino, but the objective was to widen it, to supply 7th Indian Brigade up on Snakeshead Ridge and to extract the wounded. The mule track was initially widened into a jeep track and then, between 1-11 March 1944, under the Germans’ noses, three Companies of Indian Engineers and a Platoon of New Zealand Engineers widened it still further to take tanks. It shows the intensity of the bombardment that the noise of heavy equipment and explosives were not able to be detected by the enemy. The achievement of building this road should never be underestimated, as it was constructed in record time and in almost impossible circumstances.

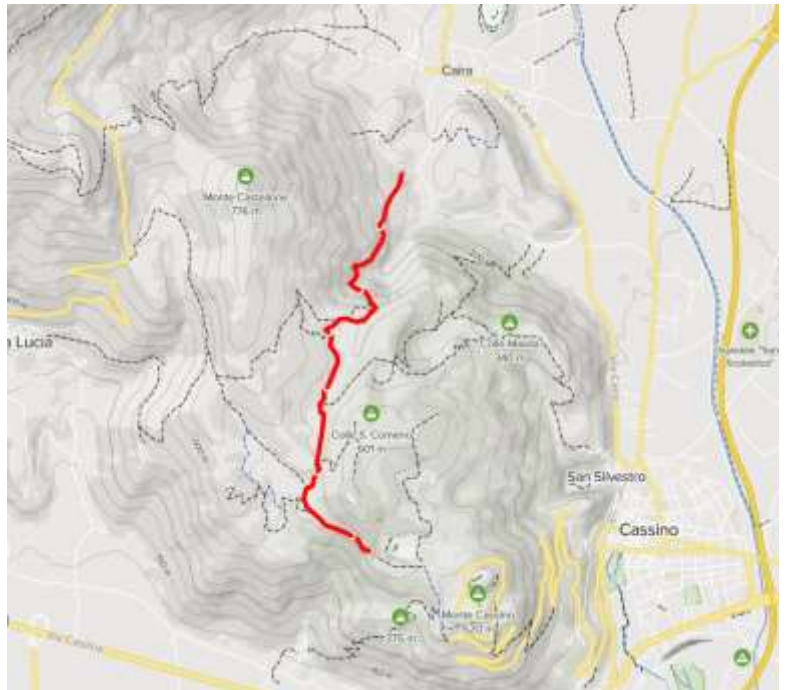
The route along the Cavendish Road starts near Caira village, and immediately there is quite a steep slope, and the path enters a narrow gorge with Colle Maiola, the start of Snakeshead Ridge on the left-hand side, and the lower slopes of Monte Castellone on the right. Soon the route narrows, with Wild Cat Hill on the right-hand side, and after some distance there is a plateau area,

which was known as Madras Circus. This is where the tanks formed up in advance of the assault of 19th March 1944.

The attack, named Operation Revenge, was carried out by the 12-ton, light Stuart tanks of 7th Indian Brigade Recce Squadron, C Squadron 20th Armoured Regiment (NZ), Coy D 760th Tank Bn (US), and troops of M7s of Combat Command B. They were assembled at Madras Circus, from where they would be able to sweep around to the rear of the monastery. The intention was to launch the attack in support of the infantry assault on the monastery itself by elements of 1<sup>st</sup> Btn 9th Gurkha Rifles and 1<sup>st</sup> Btn 4th Essex from Hangman's Hill. However, when that infantry attack failed to materialise because the Germans launched an attack of their own and caused the proposed attack to stall, the armoured attack went ahead anyway. Instead of being a

distraction to the infantry attack, the armoured assault became the only attack. The force pushed on to reach Albaneta Farm, but without infantry in support the tanks were unable to hold any ground, and once their fuel and ammunition ran low they were compelled to withdraw. In May 1944, the Cavendish Road was used again by the 4<sup>th</sup> Polish Armoured Regiment in support of their ground troops, after it was restored by Polish Sappers who renamed it Droga Polskich Saperów ("Street of the Polish Sappers"). This time, the Germans had anticipated the use of armour and had laid ample anti-tank mines, and so the tank assault stalled at the "Bottleneck" and could not reach Albaneta Farm.

There is a report that a path with information boards, following the route of the Cavendish Road, will be opening soon.



Route of the Cavendish Road



Polish Memorial at the top of Cavendish Road

## The Son of a Liberator

Written by David R Mills

2nd Lothians and Border Horse made their way up the Neri valley towards Narni under tremendous fire from the retreating German forces, the steep sides of the valley making it treacherous, and progress was slow. The regiment finally entered Narni through the southern gateway and the proud Italian town was liberated on 13th June 1944.



My father, Frank Mills remembered fondly the reception that they received; the kindness shown by the residents was outstanding and although they were close to starvation (the Germans having taken over all food supplies in the town during occupation) they wanted to share what little they had. The orders were given that such offers of food should be politely declined.

Fifty years later, in 1994 the Commune of Narni conferred Honorary Citizenship on the regiment for their liberation in 1944. A special ceremony was arranged, but unfortunately my father was unable to attend, so his magnificent citizenship scroll was posted to him, which he framed and hung with pride at our home.

In 1995 I made contact with the co-ordinator of the ceremony in Italy, Mary Leonori. She was delighted, and suggested that we meet and she would show me around Narni, so I organised a holiday to Umbria for May of that year.

Arriving in Italy for the first time I was in awe of its beauty, and from my hotel in Spoleto I spent a few days exploring the area, eating gorgeous food and trying out my tourist Italian! The owners of the hotel ate in the same dining room as the guests, at their table. Each evening dinner was at a set time, and although there was a set menu it was excellent and very typical of the area.

I arranged to meet Mary later that week, and chatting to the barman in the hotel the evening before I told him about my adventure the following day and why it was so important to me. On entering the dining room, the waiter approached me with a large menu, and when I said I was on a fixed menu he shook his head and pointed to the table across from me where the owner and his family sat. The owner, who had the air of a kindly Mafia boss, rose and came towards me, shook my hand and in excellent English said how honoured he was to meet the son of a liberator. I was

tremendously touched and fought back tears at such kindness. So, as a consequence of my father's actions I dined like a lord at the behest of this kindly family.

The next day I met Mary in Narni, parking near to where she lived in a building that her father had bought many years previously. It stood right next to the Porta Romana, a re-built Roman arch that stood to the south of the town and through which the tanks of the 2nd Lothians and Border Horse had made their way in 1944.



As I ascended the marble stairs, taking in the delight of the coolness of the building, a lady below me shouted "Hello, I'll see you shortly, I'm Mary's sister". Mary greeted me with a kiss and hug, and we sat in her living room overlooking the steep valley below as she spoke about how she, her sister and their parents had watched as the tanks scraped through the arch to liberate the town. She later showed me the marks on the arch where the tanks had scraped the ancient stones, and told me her father had stopped them being replaced. Her sister joined us for tea, and then Mary took me on a tour of Narni.

First we left the town and made our way past the magnificent bridge built by order of Emperor Augustus 27BC to take the Via Flaminia over the river, its ramparts and one wonderful arch still standing.

We then set off up the other side of the valley along a bumpy unmade road, driving through chestnut groves whose luxuriant growth gave splendid shade on a very hot May day.

We continued to mount the hill, Mary giving directions, and eventually came into an opening with an ancient building, the Abbey of San Cassiano. Mary said that they don't normally allow visitors but she'd see if I would be allowed in, since I was a special visitor. She rang the bell, chatted with someone through a grate in the large ancient door and then came back to the car to say I had been given special permission to enter as the son of a liberator, another honour conferred on me making me proud to be the son of Frank Mills.

Although I asked Mary to come with me, it being a male Benedictine monastery she was unable to enter, so sat in the shade of the trees quite happy with herself that she'd obtained entry for me.

I'm not religious at all, but I felt a very special calm in this holy place and was honoured indeed to be allowed into the ancient edifice. The monk who showed me round was a young chap of similar age to me and spoke English in a soft Italian accent; he was obviously very proud of this site. He showed me a simple room that he claimed St Francis used as a retreat from Assisi, it was

beautifully peaceful. I thanked him, we shook hands, and I made my way back to Mary, who had the biggest smile I'd seen; she wanted to know what it was like inside and did I see where St Francis had stayed? We chatted on our bumpy way down the hill back towards Narni.

Mary wanted me to meet the Mayor of the town, and dismissing my protestations said that as the son of a liberator I could go and see who I wanted, so duly put in my place we drove down the tiny Roman road that took us to the town hall. The building was obviously Roman in origin, with alterations in the Medieval Period. I was in awe!

After a few moments I was ushered into the office of the Mayor, who had donned his official sash and greeted me through Mary as interpreter. He said that he was honoured to meet me, that the British will always be their friends, and that Liberation day would be celebrated for as long as possible to ensure that people did not forget. I was delighted to have met him and felt humbled that everyone I had met had been so kind.

Back at Mary's house we lunched on fresh bread and cheese, home grown figs and peaches and copious cups of tea. I left Mary on a high and made my way back to Spoleto. What a day I had had, and I felt so proud to be The Son of a Liberator.



*Ed. note; The full text of David's story can be viewed in Recollections on the society website.*

*I was pleased to make contact with Alison Morgan, a fellow Shropshire Yeoman's daughter, who wrote:*

"My father, EWL Keymer joined B Troop, 101 Battery, 75<sup>th</sup> Medium Regt, Shropshire Yeomanry in July 1943 at Messina, but by 1944 he was Gun Position Officer with D Troop, 102 Battery. He didn't talk about Cassino either, except to say 'it was a bit messy' when I pressed him – he too was brilliant at the funny anecdotes: 'Ah yes, I remember Civitavecchia, I had a bath there', etc. But eventually he wrote the attached account for us, as part of his memoirs. My father called wine 'vino' for the rest of his life!"

EWL (Bill) Keymer served in the 75<sup>th</sup> (Shropshire Yeomanry) Royal Artillery Medium Regiment during the second World War and was awarded an immediate MC in 1944. He left the army in 1946 with the rank of Captain, and died in 2015 at the age of 93. In 2009 he wrote up his memoirs in the form of a booklet titled *Recollections 1939-45*. This extract describes his experiences at Monte Cassino.

### **E. W. L. Keymer and Monte Cassino**

'After some unpleasant weather at San Eusanio during which we continued to support the New Zealand Division, we came out of action to rest and refit. We then went to Cassino – described as the hardest nut of the Italian campaign. En route through the mountains pink snow fell. No clear explanation of this has been given. We went into action again – this time in support of the Poles, and in one twenty-four-hour spell in May the Regiment fired 4,500 rounds.

From my gun position which unfortunately, as we often had to cut down trees, was in an ancient olive grove, I had a clear view of the monastery, but the enemy did not occupy the building and initially we did not fire at it. The enemy were however installed on the slopes below the monastery which commanded the Liri Valley and the route to Rome, and we fired at a lot of targets in the vicinity. The town of Cassino was heavily bombed.

One day an Italian visited my gun position and, claiming to be the owner of the grove, sought permission to dig up some property he had buried in case the enemy found it — money, jewels etc.

He was a lucky man. I am not sure my sceptical Shropshire Yeomen would have been inclined to take his word that he was the owner and let him have it if they had found it first! They might well have thought it was legitimate 'spoils of war'.

After Cassino was taken in May and the so-called Hitler line was breached, the way to Rome was open but we were disappointed we had to go through it at night. We suffered a most unhappy tragedy on our way. A truck ran off the road and over a tent killing the sleeping occupant — a recently recruited young soldier.'



Premature explosion at a Shropshire Yeomanry gun position

The citation for Bill's MC reads as follows:

On the night of 30 December 1944 this officer showed great courage, leadership and devotion to duty. He was at the time Gun Position Officer to D Troop, 102 Battery in action in a position south of Fontanelice [near Bologna in Italy]. Between 1800 and 1900 hours the troop was subjected to heavy and accurate shelling due to the fact that a hay stack near the position had been hit previously and was burning. It was in view to the enemy who continued to bombard with four guns at very frequent intervals. The Troop Command Post received a direct hit, an officer and signaller being wounded and evacuated. Shells continued to fall very accurately on the main road alongside the Command Post, hitting two ammunition dumps and setting alight charges; a passing three ton lorry containing petrol was also hit. Lieutenant Keymer, after seeing that all his



men were under cover, together with Regimental Sergeant Major Poole rushed out to separate the unburning charge boxes from those that were burning, realising that another fire would only mean further shelling.

He then noticed that petrol from punctured petrol cans in the hit lorry was pouring down the road in the direction of the second ammunition dump. Without hesitation he and the Regimental Sergeant Major proceeded to deal with the second dump. By means of a long pole they pushed the burning charges away from the petrol thus preventing a second serious conflagration which must have been seen by the enemy.

Lieutenant Keymer was severely burnt on one arm and the other hand at this stage, but not until he had completed it and made the necessary arrangements for the evacuation of the vehicle did he admit to the great pain he was suffering and report to the Regimental Aid Post. Throughout this time shelling was continuing all around him but he persisted in this valuable work which prevented both the loss of a considerable quantity of ammunition and equipment and further casualties from increased shelling. Lieutenant Keymer showed complete disregard for personal danger and the highest qualities of courage and fortitude. Granted an immediate Military Cross.

Alison adds: "When I asked what the MC was for, he said 'for misdemeanours in Italy.' His own, later, version read, 'While our men took cover as instructed, we therefore spent some time distributing the boxes along the road to reduce the risk of major explosions. For this rather rash behaviour we were "immediately" awarded an M.M. and M.C. respectively: some reward for me for burning my hands!' He apparently once told Capt Nick Trevor that they'd really had no choice at all, because the wine barrel was in among the ammunition, and the men would never have forgiven them..."

If you wish to read more of Bill's Recollections, please follow this link; <https://www.lulu.com/shop/ewl-keymer/recollections-1939-1946/paperback/product-5465554.html?page=1&pageSize=4> (or just search EWL Keymer Recollections in any search engine).

Contributed by Alison Morgan, Bill's daughter.



Bill Keymer at the Garden of Remembrance, 2006

## Does anyone remember the fireflies?

Those of you who watched the online service on May 15<sup>th</sup>, may remember the moving poem "Old Soldier" written by poet and MCS member Pat Rigg, which was originally intended for the Arboretum, but read instead by Fergus in Edinburgh.

Pat is currently in the process of researching and writing her late husband Brian's story of his time in Italy with the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, and would like to ask our members if they know anything about experiencing fireflies, which is something Brian used to speak about. She wants to include this and any other useful information in her book, so if you can help, Pat can be contacted through the society.

The following link is to an article about Pat which was printed in her local newspaper:

<https://www.shieldsgazette.com/news/people/south-shields-woman-retraces-steps-late-husband-who-fought-second-world-war-campaign-3101160>

## Books

**"They fell from the Sky"** by Heinz G Konsalik.

Translated from German, this novel tells the story of Monte Cassino from a German paratrooper's perspective.

**"Cassino, Portrait of a Battle"** Fred Majdalany

**"The Monastery"** Fred Majdalany

**"Monte Cassino under Fire"** Eusebio Grossetti and Martino Matronola.

The journals kept by two of the monks through the period, and a harrowing account of total war.

**"War Diaries from the Abbey"** Edited by Faustino Avagliano, the Prior of Monte Cassino Abbey.

(A quick Internet search of the above title showed an interesting paragraph in the obituary of American scholar Virginia Brown, relating to her work on manuscripts at the Abbey with Faustino Avagliano).

**"The 16th Durham Light Infantry in Italy 1943 -1945"** Peter Hart

**"Cassino, New Zealand Soldiers in the Battle for Italy"** Tony Williams

## Corrections from Winter 2020 issue:

In the In Memoriam section, we stated that Thomas Stuart Worthington was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. He was in fact a Private in B Company, 2<sup>nd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Hampshire Regiment.

### **New members**

**John Riordan**, son of Sgt. TMJ Riordan (Tommy), 7th Company Royal Engineers – Bridgemaster for the Rapido Bridge.

**Emma Walker**, great, great niece of Corporal William Haig Reading, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Regiment, killed in action at Monte Cassino

**Judy Johnson**, daughter of Private Thomas Worthington, B Company, 2<sup>nd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment

**Pauline Glover**, daughter of Signaller James Frape, C Troop, 75<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment, Shropshire Yeomanry, Royal Artillery

**Michael Wilson**, son of Captain Arthur Wilson, 64<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank regiment, Glasgow Yeomanry, Royal Artillery

### **In Memoriam**

**George Lesniak**, son of Cpl Franciszek Lesniak, 5th Workshop Company, 5 Kresowian Infantry Division, Polish II Corps

**William Berry MBE**, nephew of Guardsman Tom Ferguson, The Scots Guards. Killed in Action at Cassino

**Geoffrey Winter**, Veteran, 1st Battalion, The York and Lancaster Regiment

**Alan Bidgood**, aged 97. Veteran, C troop, 102 Medium Battery, 75th Medium Regiment Shropshire Yeomanry, Royal Artillery

Alan Bidgood



Rev. Edward William Carre Bale



**Rev. Edward William Carre Bale. 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021 aged 98 years.**

Ted's son and daughter, Christopher and Diana, sent this message about their father:

We were booked to bring Ted to the reunion at the National Arboretum in May, but it was cancelled due to the pandemic; he was very disappointed.

Ted was posted as a Sgt wireless technician from 219 Squadron (Beaufighters) from North Africa to support 2788 Squadron RAF Regiment, and for February 1944 he wrote in his archive:

"We joined the 5th Army and were given the Monte Caira sector adjacent to Monte Cassino, and took turns "in the line". The Monte Cassino Abbey loomed over our every move we made, like an all-seeing eye, so for that reason we were pleased to see the Abbey bombed into rubble - but I remember thinking "is this the best thing man can do?" and from then on, I questioned what life was for. I came out of Cassino with no more than a shrapnel hole in my greatcoat and we moved on to Rome, then Corsica, and I was back with the RAF for the landings in France with a Mobile Signals Unit." (Chris writes 'I believe that was Mobile Signals Unit 105, as we have a group picture entitled same').



Rev. Edward William  
Carre Bale

Ted left us a 1-page message that he'd written a few years ago and we printed it in the order of the celebration service on 4<sup>th</sup> June. I quote: "I was privileged to become an Aircraft Apprentice in the RAF and joined a wonderful bunch of men who gave me a love and trust in the common man. The war took me to beautiful parts of the world, and I was nearly frightened to death at Monte Cassino, but they missed me!"

A piece of hot shrapnel, which explains his words, got embedded in the greatcoat that he was wearing in his foxhole. He kept it ever since and it is now in the proud keeping of my elder son, one of Ted's 4 grandsons. We have asked for permission to include the RAF crest on his headstone as his 13 years' service were most important to him, completed prior to him training for his Church ministry of 34 years.

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