



The Monte Cassino Society

Furthering an interest in the Italian Campaign 1943—1945

*

Welcome to our 2022 summer newsletter.

After a time of so much uncertainty and many broken plans, it is good to be able to report on our successful gathering at the National Memorial Arboretum, the first for three years, and the corresponding service of remembrance at Edinburgh’s Blackhall St Columba’s Church on 14th May.

We are also looking forward and making some plans for the future, which include a potential visit to Italy in May 2024 for the 80th Anniversary of the Battle for Monte Cassino. There are no details at present, but if you are interested, please indicate this to Lesley, our Hon. Secretary, so that we may have an idea of possible numbers involved.



It is sad to reflect that any such events are now likely to take place without the presence of any of our esteemed veterans, for whom the Society was originally formed and has been such a valued link to their shared history, and we must acknowledge that preservation of the memory of the Italian Campaign now rests with other generations. Apart from the annual big effort for D Day, the interest of the British Government in supporting WW2 commemorations such as the anniversary of the Battle for Monte Cassino would, from experience of their lukewarm response to the 75th anniversary, appear to have dwindled to nought after the 70th anniversary in 2014, and so it is incumbent on organisations like the Monte Cassino Society to keep the memory alive.

The next Society gathering this year will be at the London Cenotaph Remembrance service and march, which will take place on Sunday 13th November. The application form is included with this issue, and we hope to see you there.

With remembrance in mind, the Rev Fergus Cook has suggested that a memorial bench would be a welcome addition to the site of the Cross of Sacrifice in the grounds outside Blackhall St Columba’s Church in Edinburgh. The Memorial Cross stands at the front of the church next to a fairly busy main road, and the bench will be seen by people passing by. Given the unique connection afforded by the Monte Cassino Cross, between the Society and this church, and the great support given to us by Fergus and his congregation, the society would like to reciprocate by donating towards the appeal for funds. If you do wish to give towards the bench appeal, please send donations to our treasurer Diane Soady, clearly marked ‘Bench appeal’.

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The proposed bench design “Lest we Forget” can be viewed at <https://www.davidogilvie.com/products/memorial-commemorative>

With best wishes for a healthy and happy summer,

Helen James, Editor

* photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, England

We are all aware that costs are rising for so many things, including postage and bank charges. While cheques incur bank charges, BACS payments do not, so Diane has requested that, wherever possible, could any money sent to her be by BACS transfer. Please note the message from Diane in the Contacts section at the end of this newsletter.

Gathering to commemorate the 78th anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino, at the National Memorial Arboretum, 14th May 2022

The Arboretum was looking its best in the glorious spring sunshine, as 46 members and friends assembled in the Aspects building for the first Cassino anniversary service to be held by the Society in 3 years. After the enforced break we all enjoyed meeting members old and new, although for the first time the absence of any Veterans was sadly noted.



As we walked behind the Society Standard and the Black Watch Association Pipe Band to the Monte Cassino memorial, we were joined by other visitors, no doubt attracted by the sound of the pipes but who also stayed for the service.

The Reverend Victor M Van den Bergh welcomed all, and led us through a simple and dignified service of Remembrance. The reading from Isaiah 2:1-4 was followed by prayers for all who suffer as a result of conflict, as relevant today as in 1944, Reflections and the Act of Remembrance, during which the names of all Society members who have passed away since our last gathering in 2019 were read by Lesley. It was sad to reflect just how many names there were, and especially so many of our Veterans who had been such stalwart members of the Society.

Wreaths and floral tributes were laid, followed by the Exhortation given by Ruth Holiday, daughter of the late Albert Darlington. Albert, a veteran of the Italian campaign died recently, and one of his final requests was that members of his family would attend our NMA memorial service in his memory. The family did him proud, with 8 members attending, and Ruth delivered a very moving tribute to her father.

The Last Post, two minutes silence and Reveille were followed by a collective act of Reconciliation, the Hymn 'The Day thou gavest, Lord is ended', the Blessing, and National Anthem. The band then played a new piece of music, "Monte Cassino", written specially for the society by their Pipe Major, Stephen Beattie *, before



leading us back to the Aspects building for afternoon tea. Later Stan Pearson and his young granddaughter Florence gave an interesting, illustrated talk about Stan's quest to retrace his father's last steps before he was killed at Cassino.

The gathering was much enjoyed by everyone who attended, and special thanks are due to Lesley for making all the arrangements, the Rev Van den Bergh, the band of the Black Watch Association, Bugler Antonio Socci, and Jez Teasdale, our Standard Bearer.

The same afternoon, a service of Remembrance for Monte Cassino was held by the Rev Fergus Cook at Blackhall St Columba's Church in Edinburgh, and also streamed online for those unable to attend either of the live events. Thoughtful planning ensured that the many nationalities involved in the Italian campaign were represented by the symbols of different faiths displayed on the altar, and Fergus also made reference to the current conflict in Ukraine. The service is available to view on YouTube via the website for Blackhall St Columba's Church, and once again we are indebted to Fergus for his invaluable support of our Society and the memory of the Italian campaign.

Helen James

** Judith Coote writes: "Until this year the Society's anthem was "Highland Cathedral" but this year and in future they will play "Monte Cassino" written and arranged by their Pipe Major Stephen Beattie. Steve, always a very good friend to the Society, accompanied Arthur Simmonds to Cassino for the 70th anniversary in 2014. With the exception of the official service in Monte Cassino Cemetery, Steve was there, in uniform playing for us whenever we visited a cemetery. It was particularly poignant when we visited Sangro River, where we were met by a group of civic dignitaries and he led us, with our standard and the Italy Star standard down to the cemetery. Arthur passed away shortly after that visit. His son in law, Chris Buckley is a member of the band."*



November Ceremonies 2022

Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph - Sunday 13th November 2022

Planning for this year's parade is already underway, therefore can everyone who wishes to be on Horse Guards Parade this November please fill in the enclosed form and send it to Liz Longman to arrive **no later than 5th August**.

Westminster Abbey Fields of Remembrance - Thursday 10th November 2022

Can anyone who would like to attend the opening of the Poppy Fields please let Lesley Teasdale know by **5th August**. It should be understood however that places for this are extremely limited.

Westminster Abbey Fields of Remembrance - Dedications

If anyone would like a dedication put on one of the Crosses which the society places in the Monte Cassino plot at the Field of Remembrance, please send the details to Lesley Teasdale, who will collate them ready for November.

For Lesley's contact details, please see the Contacts at the end of the Newsletter.

For Liz's contact details, please see the attached form.

Memorial painting unveiled.

Captain Nick Trevor, based at Telford with the Shropshire Yeomanry, has recently been researching the history of the regiment during the WW2 Italian campaign for his MA. At the time, the Shropshire Yeomanry had transferred to the Royal Regiment of Artillery for the duration of the war and were renamed 75 and 76 Medium Regiments, Royal Artillery. They formed part of 6 Artillery Group Royal Artillery, an organisation that mostly provided medium, heavy and super heavy guns in support of various Infantry Divisions and Corps. Nick's particular focus was the experience of the individual soldiers involved - not an easy subject for research due to the paucity of information available from the Shropshire Regimental Museum (home of the Shropshire Yeomanry archive), and the frustrating lack of detail or reference to individuals in the official War Diaries or Regimental history, especially considering that the Regiment's actions in Sicily and Italy, including the battle for Monte Cassino of which it can be justly proud, rank among its highest Battle Honours.



Nick's ongoing research has therefore gone some way to redress the balance and flesh out the details of the lives of ordinary soldiers during the Italian campaign, and he decided it was time to raise the profile within the Regiment, of Shropshire Yeomen who had received awards for outstanding bravery in WW1 and WW2. He commissioned two paintings by artist David Thorp showing incidents which had resulted in awards of the Victoria Cross (Whitfield, WW1) and Military Cross (Keymer, WW2). In February we attended the unveiling ceremony in the Officers Mess at the Telford barracks along with several generations of the Whitfield and Keymer families, who were clearly appreciative of this gesture of recognition by the Regiment.

The WW2 painting depicts the incident which resulted in Bill Keymer being awarded an immediate MC, on which we reported in our Summer 2021 newsletter. Artist David Thorp described the painstaking process of research which precedes the creation of paintings such as these representing an actual event, especially when there is no photographic record to use as a reference; while there always has to be allowance for a certain degree of artist's licence, if every detail of the incident, including military uniforms and hardware is not depicted as accurately as possible, it will be sure to attract criticism and disapproval in a very short time.

The Amazon Bridge Memorial Inauguration Ceremony, Cassino 13 May 2022

by George Cowie

Eight years after the idea was first mooted, a memorial, the 'Amazon' Bridge Memorial, to commemorate the valour and sacrifice of the 4 Division's Royal Engineers who toiled for 12 hours building the vital assault bridge over the river Gari under withering enemy fire, finally came to fruition on 13 May 2022 when its inauguration ceremony was held and wreaths laid, on the 78th Anniversary of Amazon bridge being constructed. The memorial was built in October 2021 by four 1960s veterans of 7 Field Squadron RE and Ron Gilleard, son of sapper Joseph Gilleard who served in 7 Field Company and took part in building the Amazon bridge. The idea was born in 2014, following a battlefield tour of Cassino. Three years were spent finding a site and obtaining planning permission. Once we had planning permission we could apply for a grant from the Royal Engineers Association, which was granted at the next annual finance committee meeting. The project was supported by 21 Engineer Regiment, home of 7 HQ and Sp Squadron RE who intended to send out a party to build the memorial when they were free of other





commitments. This was a long waiting game; a free period was coming up but alas, our joy was soon to be scotched by Covid and the two years of travel restrictions.

During this time the ownership of the memorial site had changed hands, which meant we had to renew the planning permission, though this was not a problem thanks to the new owners, Cassino Adventureland, who were very supportive and helpful throughout. It was during the middle of the Covid period that we decided to build the memorial ourselves as 7 Squadron were likely to be heavily committed again - everyone needs a Sapper - so we purchased most of the materials in the UK to minimise

possible delays at Cassino looking for what we required. Nearing the end of the Covid restrictions we exported the materials to Italy. We started work on 13 October and the memorial was completed on 27 October 2021, with great relief. In addition to the Amazon bridge memorial, we built with kind permission of Cassino Adventureland, two small memorials, one to the 1/6 Bn East Surreys who actually captured the site in May 1944, and a small memorial to the 2nd Bn the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. With the existing Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiments' memorial in place, all three of 10 Brigade's infantry who fought on that site are now commemorated with a memorial.

On 13 May 2022 the memorial dedication ceremony was held, with a gathering of about 60 people including families of the bridge builders, several local historians, a small contingent of serving Royal Engineers from JFC Naples, and the president, CEO, and operations manager of the Royal Engineers Association. Wreaths were laid on the Amazon bridge



memorial by the Mayor of Cassino, Major Gen (retired) Alastair Dickinson CBE, and Colonel Scullion. General Alastair Dickinson CBE went on to lay wreaths at the three other memorials and at the CWGC Cemetery. Following the wreath laying there was a tour of the historical points around the Cassino Adventureland site, which was known as Point 36 in WW2. This was followed by a standing buffet, and in the afternoon a boat trip down the river Gari to St Angelo to view the river assault crossing sites. It was a highly successful and momentous occasion, helped by warm and sunny weather.

“A compilation of photos of the ceremony has been uploaded on YouTube. The link is below. I hope you enjoy it and share it on various social media platforms, George”

[Amazon Bridge Memorial Opening Ceremony](#)

The Last of the Few Research Project

I received this message from Dee Vyas of Manchester Metropolitan University.

Dee has worked with, and recorded the stories of several survivors of the Holocaust and WW2 campaigns, including a Tuskegee airman and veterans of Alamein, Arnhem and the bombing of Dresden, Dunkirk, and Omaha beach on D-Day:

“I wonder if you could help me with a research project I have been carrying out for the last 15 years – The Last of the Few, during which I have been contacting World War 2 veterans and Holocaust survivors. The aim of my research is to share their stories with a wider audience, as it is important the next generation are aware of the past and those who have lived through these moments in history. This has provided me with the opportunity where possible to ask them to sign and inscribe a book/card/letter with any words they would like to share for future generations of their amazing life, and the opportunity to highlight their inscriptions. The two words that highlight these men and women are humility and humanity.

My research will be made available as a virtual tour and as a display at the university I work at, Manchester Metropolitan University, eventually to be made available as a learning resource. Connecting with the survivors is truly inspirational and my research is now also a passion to capture and highlight their words. As a father of twin boys, I share these books and inscriptions with them also, as it is their generation who must be aware of the past and how it can affect millions, and the inhumanity that can arise. I wanted to request with your help if it would be possible to contact any veterans you are aware of who could help with my research. It is important those who were involved and integral in these moments in history are never forgotten.”

For any members who would like to contact him, Dee’s contact details are below:

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Faculty Arts and Humanities, Manchester, M15 6BH | United Kingdom |

Twitter: [@deem131](https://twitter.com/deem131)

Email: ahtela@mmu.ac.uk **for Moodle/TEL-related issues**

Semantics or Error?

Wandering around after our memorial service in the Mediterranean section of the National Memorial Arboretum, I was puzzled to read the text on the information panel, which states at the end of the second paragraph '.....until the surrender of Italy on 2nd May 1945.'

My understanding of the Italian campaign is that Italy surrendered on 8th September 1943, so I wrote to the NMA suggesting this statement may be misleading, especially to members of the public reading for the first time about the Mediterranean campaign, and should for clarity refer instead to '.....the surrender of the German army in Italy on 2nd May 1945'.

Some correspondence has followed with the Head of Participation and Learning at the NMA, whose latest email to me states *"I'm sorry that you remain confused by the interpretation. The statement accurately reflects history and Nazi Germany's surrender of Italy. We will review phrasing in line with our interpretation redisplay in due course."*

Having since shown the text to others with varying levels of knowledge of the Italian campaign, I have yet to find anyone who is not also 'confused' by the wording on the information panel. Correspondence will therefore continue, as I believe it is important to make historical information as accurate and understandable as possible. Otherwise, what is the point?

Members' feedback would be most welcome on this one!

Helen James



National Battlefield Historic Sites and Battlefield Parks in Italy – an idea

I recently received this message from Robert Desourdis: *“I am hoping to get the resources and build a team (including Frank) to do what the paper proposes. I have begun to share it with an Italian Cultural organisation and Consulate in the US. The more people who know what I am trying to do with Frank, the better, we need initial funding from possible sources. Please publish it and/or distribute. Best regards, Bob Desourdis”* robert.desourdis@gmail.com

Robert Desourdis Creating WWII National Battlefield Parks and Historic Sites and Landmarks Throughout Italy

A White Paper

Robert Irving Desourdis
Frank de Planta de Wildenberg

Abstract

This paper describes the motivation and preliminary approach to adding WWII National Battlefield Historic Sites and Battlefield Parks to commemorate the sacrifices made in Italy, particularly—though not exclusively—from September 1943 to May 1945. Enough time has passed, about 80 years, since these events, that a fresh look on adding these sites to the Italian Cultural experience history should be assessed. In particular, the motivation to teach Italian children about this disaster that befell Italy, Italian civilians and military (e.g. Monte Lungo and St. Pietro), is critical to understanding their vital cultural world contribution beyond the ancient ruins, great food and beautiful landscapes. This paper describes the important motivation for creating these sites, the high-level approach roadmap for their creation, and the benefits of doing so. Finally, a short biography of those launching this effort and their personal motivation is provided at the end.

Motivation

There are excellent tours available to take the visitor to key battle sites throughout Italy, but without those guides, there is little or no overt public site-specific presentation of what happened during WWII, particularly (i) the large-scale battles of Italian liberation from Nazi occupation following the Armistice with the Allies, and (ii) the sacrifice made by the Allied forces, including Italy, to push out the occupying German forces. Given the conflicts still occurring in these modern times, commemorating these events in Italy is particularly important. Here, we explain the following three motivating reasons to do so:

- Education - providing Italian youth as well as those unaware of how WWII tore through Italy with the understanding that will put them among the world's leaders in supporting freedom and opposing authoritarian rule worldwide
- Economic growth - Creating a renewed and impressive economic vitality to many businesses in Italy, including local, regional, national and international, hotels, restaurants, private and public museums, retail stores, transportation companies, and small tourism businesses

World commemoration – to demonstrate to the world the Italian commitment to remembering the fallen from many nations who gave their last full measure of devotion, whose cemeteries are found, often with no explanation, throughout the countryside.

Education

One would imagine that of all nations deeply involved in WWII, Germany would be in the most difficult position to contend with the rise and fall of the Nazi party and the consequences of its existence to millions of human beings. During the author's tour of Ravensbruck, a female concentration camp in Germany, the guide was asked, "How do you prevent German children from feeling guilt, which they should never do, for what happened?" She responded that "I would feel that any German child would feel a responsibility, not guilt, because of their citizenship to think how you behave. A responsibility [not for what happened], but to be a democratic human being who tries to be a shield for international human rights, to be very idealistic."

Economic Growth

Many remote regions of Italy retain their agrarian culture from centuries past, so the impact of any park or historic site must be minimal, while offering both employment and enhancement to local hotel and restaurant business. Of course, additional private museums, souvenir shops, and many other establishments—comparable to those along the D-Day beaches in France—would evolve in designated areas. All these current and new businesses would benefit from visits by educational entities, such as local schools, but also the many tourists who come to these areas today, or would come, if there were improved historical facilities and tours attracting them to the area.

Commemoration

There are Italian, American, British, Polish, German, French, Canadian, New Zealand, South African, North African and Brazilian families, among others, whose ancestors fought, survived or died in many well-known as well as unknown locations in Italy. Isolated markers and cemeteries can be found throughout Italy, but most have been placed through private initiatives. Growing interest in the Italian Campaign would be immensely enhanced through the creation of National Battlefield Parks and Historic Sites or Landmarks in Italy. These sites, where so many young men from across the world made the ultimate sacrifice in the defence of freedom, need to be formally protected by the Italian Government and their place in the ultimate victory needs to be much better understood by the generations that benefitted so greatly from that sacrifice.

Approach

We have at our disposal the methodology and access to former employees and current advisors from the US National Park Service, which is responsible for hundreds of battlefield parks and historic sites nationwide. Thus, we would integrate the methodology used by Italian preservationists, private and public, with the best practices of the US NPS, to create this system in Italy. A vital element of this approach is a feasibility study for each site, including the economic benefit from the local, regional and national tourism as well as their educational system. Thus, the following four phases would likely be necessary to achieve the goals of this effort:

1. *Feasibility Study*. The first programme project would be to determine the feasibility of a National Battlefield Park and Historic System in Italy. This effort would build university and private partners in Italy and internationally plus acquire funding from the many international public and private entities who would benefit from a Battlefield Park and Historic Site system in Italy. Ideally, no Italian funding would be needed unless and until the economic benefit of the proposed system was proven, and then only for sustainment and local employment. Funding from the many organisations involved in commemorating these battles, certainly those from Britain and Poland, would be included. Initial funding would support a national impact and feasibility study as a cost versus benefit analysis of a set of alternative forms for such a national system.
2. *Design Plan* - Assuming the proposed system proves feasible, the next step is to develop a

preliminary national implementation and funding Design Plan. This plan would include a fact-finding project nationwide to understand both the local historic significance of potential sites as well as the economic needs and interests in each surrounding environment. Understanding of private and publicly held lands, the interests of the landowners, and local educational institutions would all be collected. This input would be used to propose alternative configurations for the initial park or historic site elements in each local area. A cost/benefit analysis using proven methodology would be employed for each site. A plan would be developed, including an oversight body comprised of representatives from each affected Italian region, to provide oversight for the optimum implementation selected for implementation. The specific regional plan with local features would be documented and put forward to the necessary local, regional and national authorities for necessary updates and, ultimately acceptance.

3. *Implementation Plan.* Assuming the Design Plan is approved, the third phase of this four-phased effort would be to develop a site-specific design with a team consisting of the national program team, regional and local universities, business owners, historians, and others. As a result, specific physical designs as well as advertising communication plans and economic sustainment would be documented. In this way, all authorities would know exactly what was to be implemented, how they would benefit from it, and the resources needed to do so. Of course, local business would be identified exclusively in the plan to support any construction necessary to achieve plan details.

Sustainment – As each physical site is designed and then implemented, the necessary sustainment funding is collected by the plan-designated custodian, public or private, for the national system. It is the commemoration of all these people that provides the basis of human spirit and freedom at the heart of the envisioned Italian National Battlefield and Historic Site System.

Author Biography

The attached one-slide biography provides an overview of the author's experience and education, as well as the covers of books to which he has contributed or created. He is currently working on a fourth book on Italian battlefields done with the well-known battlefield historian and guide (including for NATO), Frank de Planta.

Online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ravensbr%C3%BCck_concentration_camp. Accessed 28 April 2022.

Online: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/SpecialResourceDocuments.cfm>. Accessed 28 April 2022.

Online: http://www.cassinobattlefields.co.uk/page_1238185582984.html. Accessed 28 April 2022.

**Ed. Note: For reasons of space, the last two pages of Robert's document have been omitted, but the full document can be viewed on our website, www.montecassinociety.co.uk*

Richard O'Sullivan sent in this piece written by his father, Edmund O'Sullivan, recalling his service in Italy:

Edmund, conscripted aged 20 in 1939, saw action in the Operation Torch advance in Algiers, and as CQMS was among the first troops to march into Tunis in May 1943. During the Italian campaign he served in Sicily, Termoli to the Sangro (October to December 43), the Apennines (January 44), Monte Castellone/Liri Valley (March to May 44), and north of Rome to Trasimeno (June 44). After recovering in Egypt from a bout of pneumonia, he returned to his regiment north of Florence in December 44, and January 45 once again saw him in the Apennines, then the Senio Floodbanks in March 45, before the advance to final victory through the Argenta Gap to the Po in April 45. He was sent to Austria in May 45, and finally demobbed as RQMS at the age

of 27 from Villach in March 1946. As Richard pointed out, his father's service record included no fewer than 10 D Days.



Edmund at the Spanish Steps, Rome

“With respect to Gordon Cruse's story (newsletter Winter 2021), my dad (Edmund) and Lesley's (Teasdale) dad (Robert) were also both up to their knees in mud and snow north of Castel del Rio at the end of 1944 with 2nd Bn London Irish Rifles, as my dad described later”:

The conditions were appalling. Mule point was a broken-down farmhouse without any heating. Each night, I had to make my way to the company with about a dozen mules. I would climb a precipitous track to the peak where the company was. The last stretch was too much for the mules. They would just lie down. The Italian drivers and I would unload the mules and carry the loads up the slippery steep incline. We would then set about coaxing the mules to their feet and persuading them up the hill. This the Italian drivers did with kicks, curses and prayers to the Blessed Virgin which they often offered on their knees. At the top, we would reload the mules and proceed.

The terrain was a mixture of mud, snow and ice. ‘It was worse earlier as the mules drowned in mud’, I was told when I arrived at the front. I would send the mules back and, in pitch darkness, climb down to the road. Here it was even worse. By then, heavy frosts covered the road with black ice, and I often had to resort to crawling on all fours. Back at the mule point, I would throw myself on my blankets fully clothed and slept. I should never have returned. I was too weak from my illness. But I was better off than the men on the bleak mountainside...

There was little enemy activity during my nightly journeys. I believe that the Germans withdrew to the warmth of the valley and the towns, leaving patrols to do the work. Our generals were obsessed with the idea of holding ground, even the bleak mountain peaks. It was a Great World War mentality that was not successful then. The Poles had shown us how to do it at Montenero. A weak, half-frozen platoon on top of a mountain was no match for properly equipped mountain troops on skis.

The 78th Division was described as a crack mountain division. This meant we always operated in mountains though we had never been trained in any mountaineering skills. Only a few officers could ski. Our clothing and equipment were rationed in the same proportions as those in rear areas, and even the base had more winter clothing. To cap it all, we often did not issue winter clothing as we were afraid of a threat of a court of inquiry, as happened the previous winter in Montenero.

After a short rest, we returned to the line once more. My conditions worsened. The daily route to the company followed the course of a mountain stream which wound along a valley. The mule track was straight and cut across the stream, which was covered with thin ice. Each crossing was

too wide to jump and the ice too thin to bear my weight. Twenty-eight times the crossing was made in frozen water that splashed up to my midriff. Then the track turned to the right and across another stream. It culminated in a climb where, once again, off-loading and reloading was necessary. When I got back to base, I just rolled into a blanket and slept in soaking clothes..

“Luckily, my dad and his fellow sergeants were able to dine in state on New Year's Eve 1944 - see attached - he'd been away from home since Nov 1942, so it must have been pretty nice. He got home on leave at last in June 1945”

Richard O'Sullivan,

London Irish Rifles Museum.



Salerno

A visit in April to study the landings at Salerno with a group led by Frank de Planta, was a reminder that there was so much more to the Italian campaign than the battles for Monte Cassino.

As usual with these field study trips, several members of the group were there because of a direct family connection to the Salerno landings, as either sons or grandsons of veterans whose war on the Italian mainland had started with coming ashore on one of the beaches along the Salerno sector, their main objective being to take and secure the port of Naples, and other sites including Montecorvino airfield.



The Tobacco Factory at Persano

Between 8th and 19th September 1943, 165,000 British and American troops landed on the Salerno beaches during Operation Avalanche, and initial planning and operational errors on the Allied side combined with German resistance, were to result in hard fighting and significant loss of life, as attested by the CWGC cemetery in Salerno. With all the crucial, high vantage points, from ancient water-towers to the hills behind Salerno at first being in enemy hands, Allied forces were at a huge disadvantage as they fought inland across the coastal plains of Salerno and Naples, before Naples was eventually secured on 1st October.



The Tobacco factory

Those fertile plains are now host to hundreds of square kilometres of tomatoes and salad crops being grown under plastic, so looking down from the high points in the foothills of the Parco Regionale Monte Picentini, it was often difficult to distinguish sea and rivers from areas of horticulture. Post-war drainage of mosquito-ridden coastal marshes inevitably resulted in development of the land for housing and industry, so the area now looks very different from how it would have appeared to those British and American troops coming ashore in 1943. At that time the primary crops were tomatoes and tobacco, and remnants of the tobacco-drying sheds still survive – huge, tall brick buildings with high

open arches, which allowed the free flow of air to dry the tobacco leaves hung on racks inside. We visited the Tobacco Factory at Persano, five now half-derelict buildings arranged in a semi-circle and central to a strategic area of territory, which changed hands several times during the advance, and which still bears the scars of the fighting 79 years later. A sad but iconic site, deserving of preservation as a monument to the battle for Italy.

Helen James, April 2022



The memorial in "Hampshire Lane" to soldiers of the 5th Battalion, Hampshire Regiment, who were trapped between the high walls of a narrow lane and mown down by enemy tanks, not far from the beachhead at Salerno.



Ancient water towers situated near the beach at Salerno, were used as lookout towers by the enemy forces. This one has since had a house built on top.

We reported the death of veteran Albert Darlington in the Winter 2021 newsletter.

He is remembered here by his daughter Ruth:

Albert Darlington 1926 - 2021

When asked to write something about my father Albert Darlington I wondered where to start, so I looked up the file I have on my computer labelled 'Dad'.



On that list were strange references to book signings, microlighting, birthday invitations, river raft experiences and many other wide-ranging events. There were photographs of him in costume and up mountains, newspaper articles about competitions and a thousand other subjects, and it started me assessing who my father really was.

He was obviously a war veteran. It was the Monte Cassino society asking for this obituary so that goes without saying. He was severely injured in the war and was in a wheelchair for many months. He underwent hundreds of operations on his hands and legs, and qualified for disability benefit for the rest of his life.

But a man is made by how he deals with these experiences. My father never let it slow him down. He was a fast-thinking opportunist. This had saved his life many times. He ducked and dived at Monte Cassino and continued throughout his life. One of his many sayings was "they can't shoot me for it". He believed embarrassment was self inflicted and never doubted himself. He led his life on his own terms with no compromise.

That led to many successes and many failures, and a wife and four children could have been a barrier to his ambition, but they were not. We had an unusual upbringing, where nothing could shock our father. He said "I don't care what you have done, just don't bore me."

After our mother died in 2001 Dad dealt with his grief by writing a book about his war experiences and this was the first time we had heard about them. It was a sombre revelation to hear about his mental breakdown and to partly understand what he had been through. It also made us realise what our mother had gone through, to deal with his nightmares and extreme mood swings.

Some of those young men who returned from Monte Cassino were ruined, and I understand why. My father was not ruined, he was scarred but defiant. His most often quoted phrase was

“ I haven’t been frightened since 1944, do your worst.”

This led to a life of risk and of great rewards. Quite a ride!

Ruth Holiday

Albert’s book ‘The D-Day Dodger’ is available on Amazon and can also be obtained from the publisher, 'Laundry Cottage Books' in Admaston, Shropshire. He appeared on television many times, most recently in a series called 'Frontlines' which is still available on UKTVplay. Albert was interviewed in 2020 and is the star of episode 3, talking about his experiences at Anzio.

Snippets

Email received from Liz Longman following the funeral of Jim Knox:

Just to update you both on Jim's funeral. Maureen Stringer, Susan Deadman, Deborah Hogan and I all attended. Mike Anslow brought along the Monte Cassino Standard and took part in the parade.

There was a huge turnout of military personnel from the Paratroopers who lined up alongside both sides of the hearse as it arrived at the Crematorium. 3 Standard bearers from the British Legion, from the Paratroopers and our own MC Standard. I think Jim would have loved the attention and affection that was shown by all. We met up with Colin and Jan, Jim's daughter and son in law, who thanked the Society for the floral tribute sent, it was very much appreciated by them.

Books

“Beneath a Scarlet Sky”.

A biographical novel by American author Mark Sullivan, based on a true story of resistance and courage in WW2 Italy. See also “Beneath a Scarlet Sky” book talk with Mark Sullivan, by the US Museum of Jewish Heritage, available to view on YouTube, in which the author describes the background and his extensive research for a fascinating story.

“The Gothic Line”, by Douglas Orgill.

New members

Roger & Ruth Elias, Friends of Vera and Robert Stevens, Royal Corps of Signals

Sue Hughes, Daughter of Capt Wilfrid Potter, 3rd Battalion 8th Punjab Regiment.

Sarah Elderkin, Daughter of Gordon Cruse, 132 (Welsh) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

In Memoriam

Jack Andrew, Veteran, 145 Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps.

Kenneth Bartlett, Veteran, 2nd Battalion Hampshire Regiment, 128th Infantry Brigade, 46th British Infantry Division.

Patrick Linehan, Veteran, 2nd Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry.

Thomas William Jennings (Tom), Veteran, The Kensington Regiment ('Princess Louise'). Died 9th February 2022.

At the age of 18 Tom joined the Middlesex Regiment which became the Princess Louise Kensington regiment in 194. A memory he once told was, after signing up, he travelled to Greenock in Scotland to sail to Algiers, North Africa and that the men were told to dress in Indian clothes so Hitler would think they were going to India! The ship was torpedoed going to Algiers and he was one of the very few who were rescued. He managed to keep afloat on a railway sleeper that came off the ship when it was sunk. He then went on to Italy and took part in the fiercest fighting which took place during the battle of Monte Cassino. On leaving Italy he went on to Austria to help lay the telephone cables from Villach to Klagenfurt.

He was well loved and will be sadly missed by his daughters Ann and Pamela and friends.

Vera Stevens, Widow of Robert Stevens, Royal Corps of Signals.



Vera (in wheelchair) at the Sangro River Cemetery, May 2019

Vera will be sadly missed by many in the Society. Her friend Roger Elias, wrote : I have to report to you the sad death of one of your members - Mrs Vera Stevens of Bexhill. She was so proud to be a member of the Monte Cassino Society and so proud of her husband Bob who had seen active service there with the 8th Army. She had been born in Rome, and married Bob and lived most of the rest of her life in this country, and was so proud of its traditions and a great Royalist. One of her greatest moments was when she met Prince Harry in Italy with the Society. Sadly, Bob passed away 7 years ago but she maintained membership and attended events at the National Arboretum.

She was 97 on Sunday and had celebrated her birthday the day before with afternoon tea. It was apparent to all of us who were with her that she was deteriorating. She was admitted to hospital on Tuesday and died peacefully on Thursday. She was not afraid of death as she truly believed it was by dying that she would be reunited with the love of her life and in the presence of her God in whom she had an absolute faith.

It was my honour to be her GP for many years and also a friend of both Bob and Vera. She was planning to be with you on the 14th May but sadly this will now not be the case, but she will be with you in spirit.

A full account of Vera's life can be viewed in the Recollections section of the Monte Cassino Society website.

Gordon Cruse, Veteran, 132 (Welsh) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery.

Gordon Cruse, who died on April 3, 2022, aged 98, was born in Shrewton, a village in Wiltshire on the edge of Salisbury Plain. Gordon had a country childhood and then his first job, aged 14, with a newsagent, before he was called up in 1943. Gordon, 19, and his girlfriend Helen married during his embarkation leave.



Gordon on right with old comrade Aubrey Evans, 2009

Gordon was shipped to North Africa, where he was soon chosen to drive the regimental second-in-command, a task he would perform throughout the remaining part of the war, based at the 132 Welsh Field Regimental Headquarters (Royal Artillery), in the 78th 'Battleaxe' Division.

The Battleaxers joined Field-Marshal Montgomery in Sicily in July 1943, where they were recorded as having fought with distinction, particularly at the Battle of Centuripe. The 78th went on to join the Italian campaign in September 1943. After several notable engagements, they reached Monte Cassino, and there, from his Company's camp near Monte Trocchio, Gordon would drive each night across the Gari river plain to the foot of the mountain, ferrying supplies to the donkey caravans coming down from the front line. It was an unnerving experience, Gordon said, where every shadow looked like a German soldier. He had many hair-

raising experiences during his war, among them the day he had to drive the second-in-command into the open to draw enemy fire and facilitate the escape of soldiers in a Sikh regiment who had become trapped behind enemy lines. Missiles fell all around the vehicle, but the mission proved a success and everyone escaped unscathed.

After Cassino, the 78th Div was shipped back to Egypt briefly for rest and reinforcements, returning to the front line in October 1944, just after Gordon's 21st birthday. The Battleaxers' final engagement was the Battle of the Argenta Gap, part of the Spring 1945 offensive.

By their spirit and resolve throughout the fighting, the Battleaxers had earned the Division the reputation of being one of the best in the British Army during World War II, with "high morale and excellent leadership". Montgomery was reportedly of the view that the 78th had been the best mountain warfare division in the entire Eighth Army.

The end of the war found them in Austria, where Gordon's experience with and love of horses as a boy led to his taking over and running an establishment in Klagenfurt where war-horses and other officer-owned horses were stabled. He remembered these months as a very happy time. Finally, in 1946, he and those of his comrades lucky enough to have survived were demobbed and returned home to their wives.

Despite serious illness for years after the war, followed by life-changing surgery, Gordon was always a hard-working and active man. He had been declared fit only for light work and he found employment as a civilian batman at a nearby army camp, but he also managed to buy a small piece of land and build up a pig-farming business that became the enduring focus of his life and something he continued to work at until long after retirement age.

During later years, Gordon and Helen made many trips to Italy and also to Austria, visiting places where Gordon had been stationed during the war. He continued to go regularly to Italy for Monte Cassino memorials until just before the pandemic. His three surviving children had the privilege of accompanying him on several of these trips, as did two of his grandchildren.



Gordon with Major General Gary Deakin CBE at Cassino,
2019

Helen preceded Gordon in death on May 22, 2020. They were married for 77 years, and both are remembered with love and respect by their children, eight grandchildren, 16 great-grandchildren and many friends.

Sarah Elderkin, June 2022

Contact us:**Lesley Teasdale, Hon. Secretary** : lesandjeztea@talktalk.net

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A message from our Treasurer, Diane Soady:

Payments by BACS Transfer

As with all organisations, the Monte Cassino Society has to pay bank charges on any cheques we pay into the bank. Over a period of time this can amount considerably, but these costs are completely avoided if members can send any payments by BACS transfer. We therefore strongly request that in future as many payments as possible are made using this method to reduce the cost to the Society. Please contact Diane for bank details, and when making a payment by BACS, please also inform her by email, what the amount is for, so that this can be entered against the correct account.

Reference: Membership/ NMA/ Donation/ Bench (please insert the relevant item).



The Castle, Monte Cassino

Photo credits: Des James, David Thorp, George Cowie, Helen James, Ruth Holiday, Sarah Elderkin.