



# The Monte Cassino Society

Furthering an interest in the Italian Campaign 1943—1945

photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, England

## Welcome to the Winter 2022 newsletter.

In our unsettled world, every year seems to bring a significant anniversary of a major conflict, and this year the March Past at the Cenotaph saw the presence of many Falklands veterans (wearing the distinctive blue, green and white scarves knitted for them as a gesture of thanks by Falkland Islanders), for whom 2022 marks 40 years since the campaign in the South Atlantic.

BBC reporter Sophie Rayworth informed us that this year also saw more people marching than ever before - 10,000 plus, and an indication of the continuing importance to so many of Remembrance, even as memories of older conflicts fade and current ones bring horrifying images to the screens of a younger generation. So it was good to see 25 members marching in London to represent the Monte Cassino Society, including several for whom the Italian Campaign was something their grandfathers may or may not have talked to them about.



The Society will be holding acts of Remembrance in May 2023 to commemorate Cassino and the Italian campaign. The 2022 meeting at the National Memorial Arboretum was memorable, but is also a very costly event for the Society to mount on an annual basis, so a simpler, less financially demanding, but equally important commemoration is envisaged for May 2023. Details are yet to be decided, so please read Lesley's message on page 2 and reply to her as requested, if you wish to attend either the NMA or Blackhall St Columba's Church in Edinburgh.

May 2024 will mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle for Monte Cassino, and in this newsletter we give details of the Society visit to Cassino which offers a guided tour with Italian Campaign guide Frank de Planta. If you wish to travel to Cassino in May 2024 with the Society, please read this carefully and respond to either me or Lesley as requested, as it is essential that we have accurate numbers in order for appropriate arrangements to be made for transport and accommodation.

Thank you once again to members who have sent me the personal memories of those who experienced the Italian Campaign. I continue to receive them, inevitably now mostly sent by family and friends of past veterans, and the latest are printed here. The article on page 8 by MCS member Antony Pittaccio is something of an exception, due to his unique experience as a young boy trapped in Cassino for the duration of the war. Please keep them coming. Invaluable documents all, they remind us why the Society exists, and why Remembrance matters.

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With best wishes for your good health, and a peaceful 2023.

Helen James, Editor

## **MEMBERSHIP FEES**

Annual membership Fees are due in January. Without your support, we would be unable to produce the Newsletter, provide the Society's Plot at the Westminster Fields of Remembrance and the wreaths which our members lay on Remembrance Sunday, both at the Cenotaph and War memorials across the country, or mark the passing of our Veterans and members.

Membership of the Society is £15, payable to our treasurer Diane Soady (see Contacts at the back of the newsletter). If you can pay by BACS transfer, this will save the Society bank charges. Please contact Diane for details.

### **May 2023 -the 79<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle for Cassino.**

#### **National Memorial Arboretum and Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh**

The service at the National Memorial Arboretum is planned for Saturday 13th May 2023. The committee are looking at a number of possible formats, but to give an indication of potential numbers for when we talk to the NMA team, would anyone expecting to attend please let Lesley Teasdale know (contacts at end of the newsletter) by 14th February 2023.

Following on from the request for donations to fund a Memorial Bench at Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh to mark the Society's links to the Monte Cassino Cross which they hold: We are pleased to report that a provisional order has now been placed, and although unfortunately no designs are available to show you at this time, we are looking to combine the iconic image of the Monastery at Monte Cassino, along with the logo of Blackhall St Columba's Church, the text "Monte Cassino 1944" and some poppies. The bench will be made of laser cut steel, 'hot dip' galvanized for weather and corrosion protection, and comes with a 25-year guarantee. Anybody still wishing to make a donation towards the cost of the bench, please forward it to our Treasurer, Diane Soady.

In addition, there will be a service of dedication at Blackhall St Columba's Church on Saturday 20th May 2023. Lesley will be attending the service, but (as there won't be another Newsletter before that date) if anyone else is interested in attending the service please let her know, as The Rev Cook has stated that we will all be very welcome.



Memorial sculpture dedicated to the civilians killed during the conflict at Cassino. It is sited on the slopes of Monastery Hill.

There is a similar, smaller, memorial on one of the roundabouts in the town .

## MAY 2024, VISIT TO CASSINO TO COMMEMORATE THE 80<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE FOR MONTE CASSINO

For those members of the Society who would like to travel to Cassino for the Commemoration of this important anniversary in May 2024, we have arranged a week's visit to Cassino from Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2024. The first four days will be a guided tour with Italian Campaign guide Frank de Planta ([www.cassinobattlefields.co.uk](http://www.cassinobattlefields.co.uk)), whose infectious enthusiasm and extensive knowledge of the Italian Campaign will already be familiar to some members, while others may recognise his role as expert adviser to Kit Harrington in the Channel 4 programme "My Grandfather's War".

We are still awaiting confirmation of the exact date for the Service of Commemoration by the Royal British Legion and HM Government, so the programme will of necessity be subject to some minor adjustments when we have those details, but Frank's programme will cover:

- Places and events leading up to, and the four battles for Cassino.
- The Amazon Bridge and Rapido river crossings.
- Visits to all the major sites connected with the battles, including Monte Cassino Abbey, Snakeshead Ridge, Point 593, the CWGC, Polish and German cemeteries.
- An opportunity to walk the Cavendish Road up to Snakeshead Ridge for those who wish to do so.
- The breakthrough to Rome.

In addition to the guided tour the programme will later include

- Visit to the Museo Historico Piane delle Orme at Latina.
- \* Optional river trip to explore the Amazon Bridge and other bridge and crossing points of the Rapido river, guided by MCS member and Amazon Bridge expert George Cowie.
- The 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorations for the Battle of Cassino.

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- All hotel accommodation will be provided on a Half-Board basis.
  - All participants will need to have an up-to-date Passport, and the necessary Travel Insurance cover.
  - Members will be required to book their own flights in and out of Rome airports. With two airports to collect from, those wishing to fly into Rome Fiumicino need to be clear of Arrivals and ready for pick up at 1130 on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2024. For Rome Ciampino, the pick-up time will be 1230 on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2024. For return flights, please do not book to fly from Rome Ciampino before 1000 and before 1130 from Rome Fiumicino.
  - Please note when booking that at least one member of each party should be a paid member of the Monte Cassino Society.

Costs for hotel accommodation and transport, including to and from Rome and for the week in Cassino, will be determined by numbers participating, but will be approximately:

**12-19 May 2024.**

Twins/Doubles; £783 per person – price based on 10 twin participants, Singles; £842 per person – price based on 20 single participants.

Allow extra for lunches, entrance fee to Museo Piane delle Orme and the optional river trip.

**12-16 May 2024.**

For those who wish to return to UK on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2024, after the guided tour, the approximate cost will be Twins/Doubles; £486 per person – price based on 10 twin participants, Singles; £531 per person – price based on 20 single participants.

Allow extra for lunches.

\* George Cowie sent this link to a video on YouTube of the Rapido (Gari) river trip from Cassino to St Angelo, exploring the Amazon and other bridge and river crossing points, which were so vital to victory at Cassino and the breakthrough to Rome:

[4 Br Division's Assault on the Gustav Line River Gari Battlefield Tour](#)

Cassino in 2024 will be a big event with many delegates attending from all over the world. If you wish to be included in this 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary trip to Cassino, it is important that you reply to either Helen James or Lesley Teasdale by 31<sup>st</sup> May 2023, so that reservations can be made for transport and accommodation.

**SERVICES OF REMEMBRANCE, NOVEMBER 2022****London Cenotaph,**

by Liz Longman. (Thanks Liz, for organising this once again.)

We had another good turn out this year, with 25 Sociey members marching, and the weather yet again looked kind upon us. It was good to meet up with friends and celebrate our reasons to gather each year.







From left; Robert Evans, Liz Longman, Jim Bilsborough, Maureen Stringer, Catherine and Claire Bilsborough, Lorna Muir, John Robertson, Robert Deakin, Iain O’Hara, Jessica, John and Rosemary Hayward, Susan Deadman, Helen James, Kate Goldsmith, Lesley Teasdale, Sharon Shaw, and Des James.

**The Field of Remembrance 10th November 2022**



This was the 94th Field of Remembrance, and Her Majesty The Queen Consort attended to conduct a review of the plots, and lay a personal Cross of Remembrance. The Monte Cassino Society Plot was represented by Maureen Stringer, Susan Deadman, Sharon Shaw and Lesley Teasdale. Thank you to Maureen and Susan for laying out our plot so beautifully.





### Mottingham, South East London

by Dave Mann, Assistant Director, Meridian Chapter Harley Owner Group

Having had our routing interrupted over the past three years due to the Pandemic, I am pleased to report that Meridian Chapter Harley Owners Group members were able to resume our attendance at this all-important service of Remembrance with the Churches together group at Mottingham, South East London, our first with them.

For various reasons, this was a change of venue over previous years at Chislehurst, and in some respects somewhat fortuitous, as the cross of remembrance is in the centre of the road immediately outside our sponsoring dealership, Warrs S.E.

This gave us the opportunity to provide complimentary refreshments to those attending from the community, and space for both the service to be conducted and a place for the local band to play, on the dealership forecourt. Warrs also kindly put on a display of WW2 memorabilia, including a surviving military Harley Davidson Motorcycle.

The service was conducted by the Rev. Ian Welch, Rector of the nearby St. Andrew and St. Albans Church, and it was also officiated over by representatives from other local denominations. As expected, the service was very moving and attended by around 300 people, including scouts, cubs, Police Cadets and other local community Groups. The band in attendance was particularly outstanding with its wide range of

music, and especially the Last Post.

It was an honour to once again pick up lost threads in the community, and join together in remembrance of those who gave, and especially those who gave all. On a personal note, it was also another special moment to reflect upon my father and all who gave so much at Monte Cassino, a long and bitter battle often overlooked! Wreaths were laid on behalf of the Monte Cassino Society and Meridian Chapter, in memory of all.



### **Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh, by Michael Wilson**

I was delighted and privileged to represent the Monte Cassino Society on Remembrance Day, to lay the wreath at Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh.

The day was kind to us for the outdoor service, with bright sunshine and blue skies although the gusts of wind were powerful! The war memorial is beside the church on a corner beside a busy road.

There was an excellent turnout from the congregation. Fergus led the service with a sequence of prayers and Bible readings along with exhortations accompanied by responses to recognise peace and reconciliation and inspire our lives in memory and honour of those who had paid the ultimate price. Then there was the Last Post with the bugle and following the two minutes silence, the Reveille.

Wreaths were laid for the Monte Cassino Society, Edinburgh Council, the Scouts, the Kirk Session, and the congregation. Our main anxiety was that the wind might blow away the wreaths but fortunately that did not happen, although when Fergus moved from his lectern to lead the congregation in placing wooden crosses with names within an area on the other side of the path the wind did blow away some of his notes! A courageous member of the congregation rushed out into the road to rescue the sheet from the traffic.

Fergus showed his usual enthusiasm and passion for the service, and the congregation showed me a warm welcome. It was evident that they appreciated having someone from the Society to lay the wreath. I enjoyed a cup of tea and biscuits, and discovered several mutual contacts in our chat.

### **Private William Stanley Gray**

*Kevin Gray's father was one of those soldiers who did tell others about his experiences in Italy, and Kevin recently sent these anecdotes told him by his father, Pte William Stanley Gray.*

My father died in August 2021, aged 97. Dad told so many stories about the battle at Monte Cassino. He went into the Army at 18, when he joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment, as he was working in that area at the time. He spent time training, and after that he commenced his national service.

He saw active service as part of 17 Infantry Brigade, 5 Infantry Division in Egypt, Italy, Belgium and Germany. The main focus in Italy, about which he told us many stories of day to day life, was down on the Tyrrhenian coast opposite Minturno during the First Battle of Cassino in January 1944. 17 Infantry Brigade were heavily involved in the crossing of the River Garigliano, in securing the far bank and all the high features around Minturno.

Digging out the trenches, which were some 7 or 8 feet deep, I think he said they just stood up all the time. They used to do two hours on and one hour off during the night, and all stood up even when asleep. Very shortly afterwards, 17 Infantry Brigade was rushed to Naples where they boarded ships and sailed to Anzio. Here, they went into the line and stayed in the beachhead until 23rd May 1944 when the breakout started.

The British were supported by the Americans, who unfortunately took heavy casualties. He said anyone who said they weren't nervous was telling a total lie. Dad said they used to go out at night on "recces". One night they had gone out and a fellow soldier had taken a promotion, meaning he took the lead and



used the compass to ensure they were going in the right directions. Unfortunately, after a while he told the six men who were with him that he couldn't read a compass, and he asked my dad if he would do it for him. Dad said "You have the stripes - if you don't know how to read it we should return to base", so they did.

On another patrol there were 15 men in a line. Mortar shells came over where they were. Dad was 13th in line. The 12th and 14th men were killed, dad didn't get injured at all!!!!

Whilst out on a further recce and taking cover, his mate got pushed to the ground by dad as he saw a German soldier. That soldier had already fired his weapon. On getting up, Dad said to the soldier "Have you had a shave today?". He said "No, why?". Dad replied "Just feel your collar then". The bullet had passed straight through the lapels on his tunic. Sadly, he was killed the next day.

There was one occasion where dad and some others had left the trench to move forward. Having done so, Dad had run out of ammunition. He was stood in front of a German soldier, some 100 yards away, having exchanged gun fire before they stood up. From being under cover in the grasses, the German soldier had now also run out of bullets, and Dad thought it seemed sensible for both of them to retreat to their respective trenches, or areas where they were keeping hidden. The German soldier had other ideas, and charged Dad with his bayonet. Just before the German soldier was about to push the bayonet into dad, who had a small dagger in his hand (no bayonets on Dad's rifle), he moved to the side and pushed the bayonet away. The German soldier's momentum took him through, and he ran straight into Dad's blade. He died at the scene.

On another occasion he made me chuckle when he talked about the toilet regime and what they "had to hand" or not, as the case may be. The toilet was a trench with a bar across it. He said they sat on the bar, did what they needed to do and then used their finger. Dad chose his longest finger, (left hand, as he was right-handed!) and then wiped it in the grass. Essential to remember which hand was used when eating one's food! Rations were brought up from behind the main combat lines, and were the same every day. All in a tin - type receptacle. "Nourishing" I think he said, and "did the job it neded to".

### **My family came from Cassino.**

by Antony Pittaccio, 2022

My family came from Cassino. My paternal grandfather, a hairdresser, moved to England with his family towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and in 1939 we went to Cassino to spend the summer with my mother's family. My father saw us as far as Paris but could not accompany us any further because of his work, and he returned to Southampton.

Cassino before the war was an elegant city, conscious of its position at the foot of the world's most famous Christian monastery to which it gave its name, Monte Cassino. It held a bustling Saturday market, including cattle, that served the surrounding countryside and villages. It was the seat of justice for the area and had a high school, Liceo Ginnasio; Cassino today bears no resemblance to the old town.

We went to a Fascist country. How did we feel about it? Like about 80% of



Antony, aged 15, in the NZ Army.





Liceo Ginnasio, pre-war Cassino

the Italian population, we felt proud. Let me explain. The word Fascist comes from the 'fascio', the bundle of rods held together by a ribbon to signify strength through unity. Roman soldiers carried it and that symbol is to be found in several national emblems, including President Lincoln memorial in Washington. Fascism in Italy did not come about through blood and iron. As Mussolini said, he simply extracted it from the subconscious will of the Italian people. They were desperate for a united country, free from corruption and lead by a strong man. Churchill once wrote "This country gives the impression of discipline, order,

goodwill and smiling faces". In 1933 he said in a speech 'The Roman genius impersonated in Mussolini, the greatest law giver amongst living men.....has indicated the path that a nation can follow when courageously lead'. Mussolini was highly praised in the UK and America. So, of course we were proud. Italy was finally on the map. And what is more, George V awarded Mussolini the Order of Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. The Italian national anthem was, to my mind, a very beautiful one, Its title "Youth, Spring of Beauty" praised youth, the Italian painters and writers, etc. Nothing to do with being superior to any other country or to conquests.

And so life in Cassino was very good. But I looked forward to coming back to Southampton, to my dad, school, friends and to seeing again the arrival and departure of great liners from our kitchen window. We lived in Bugle Street. But just as we were about to return to England, war broke out, frontiers were closed, and we were stuck in Italy. With my father in England. And our world truly shattered when Italy declared war 10<sup>th</sup> June 1940, influenced by the injustice suffered by Italy at Versailles, as Mussolini put it. But his image suddenly plummeted. Many men who fought in WW1, including my uncles, (one of whom was awarded Italy's highest military medal) simply could not come to terms with the fact that former bitter enemies were now our allies. It was a truly painful time for my family. Two countries we dearly loved were at war with each other. To make things worse, with my mother and sisters we were in one of the countries, and my father in the other.

We were a bit apprehensive because we did not know how we would be looked upon and what would happen to us. The police did come round to check on us and to ask questions, but nothing happened. In fact, the council's general secretary, the highest-ranking Fascist official in Cassino, was very



Antony with his mother and sisters, family passport photo

helpful and always tried to make sure that we were ok, in spite of the fact that my mother did not hide her feelings about the stupidity of Italy entering the war on Germany's side and her now hatred for Mussolini. I became quite friendly with the secretary's son who always asked questions about life in England. And here I must say that we were acquainted with a Jewish family who never suffered any harm.

And so we settled down to a new life. I spoke the Cassinese dialect and started my Italian education at a school run by nuns, where I learnt Italian. I was ten years old. Two or three times a year we used to go to special services in Monte Cassino. We used to go by funicular. The monastery was very helpful to us in trying to get news about my father. It used to take months and we would only get news by voice of mouth a couple of times a year, just saying that he was ok. How the Monastery managed to do that, I have no idea.

Apart from severe rations, the war did not touch Cassino at all until the first bombing by the Allies on 10th September 1943. We actually started waving to the aeroplanes because they were now our friends, but then we saw all the black dots in the sky and realised that they were bombing us. My school was also taken over by the Germans and used as an emergency first aid centre for the wounded German troops who fought in Salerno. We had to evacuate Cassino, and we sheltered in a farm a couple of miles south of the town. Christmas Eve 1943 my family was actually in a stable. There were no animals, but the straw kept us warm. Most of the rest of the farm was occupied by Germans and we heard them sing carols that Christmas Eve. One German used to come and spend a couple of hours with us every evening in the stable and play with my young cousins. He had children at home and was missing his family so much. On one occasion he brought some chicken soup and a chicken leg for my young cousin. He said it was his ration but giving it to my cousins it was like giving it to his own children.

Then one night a bomb missed the farm by a few yards. We realised that the Germans there had become a target, so we moved to another farm. The fighting came ever closer, and we watched, especially at night, a flickering red sky made so by the battles raging along the Mignano Gap. And we knew that we would soon be in the middle of a battle, but which we thought would only last a couple of weeks or so. How wrong we were.

The farm we were in was hit by two shells, but thankfully we got out untouched, although my mother was wounded during the first bombing of Cassino. We made for another farm, but it was hit minutes before we got there, and so we made for a third one. And it was in this third one where we met our first American troops. One evening we had a fire lit and we invited a young American soldier to come in and warm himself. He did. He took off his helmet, sat down, and he soon started crying. He cried for quite a while and the women in the group cried with him. Not a word was spoken. He then got up and left and we wondered why he cried. Was it the act of kindness on our part, was it because he lost a good friend that day, or was it because he was missing home?

In a war situation one focuses on the military, and rightly so. But there are also civilians in the midst of a battle. During all the months while the battle raged in Cassino, we civilians had to treat our own wounded and bury our own dead. There was no help for us at all. And how did mothers cope when their young children cried because they were hungry and there was no food,



Antony with Lt Taylor, NZ Army

cold and there was no heat, scared and there was no shelter? The only consolation we had was Monte Cassino, towards which we addressed our prayers. It was our only hope that good would prevail over evil. It was our only light in a dark world. We therefore looked on in utter desperation when that light was put out by the bombing of the Monastery. The world had indeed become a terrible, darkened place.

Having just turned 15 years old, I joined 23rd New Zealand Infantry Battalion just before the Fourth Battle. They were pleased to have a young interpreter join them, and I was with the battalion until it disbanded in Trieste when I was transferred to the NZ Graves Registration Unit, the last handful of Kiwis left in Italy. I returned to England in 1947.

### **“What a nasty business war is” – Recollections of Cassino from the diaries of a Signaller in the Eighth Army.**

*Sent by David Hampson, son of Signaller Brian Hampson*

#### **Introduction**

On 9<sup>th</sup> July 1943, Generals Montgomery and Alexander had been in town. Montgomery predicted that three weeks would be enough to take Sicily. These were the words of my Father as he waited patiently in Malta for “zero hour” and the start of the invasion of Italy. He predicted that Italy would be beaten by Christmas.

Father’s words were written in one of six hard-backed diaries that he maintained throughout his war service since leaving the UK from the River Clyde in February 1942 via Cape Town, the North African Campaign and Malta to Italy, and finally ending in Austria in May 1945. He was conscripted into the Eighth Army Headquarters Signals and served away from the front lines. He did not suffer any physical injuries, although he was hospitalised with malaria on three occasions. He did not speak much about the war to others, but it was clear that Monte Cassino featured significantly in his thoughts and memories. This prompted me to visit Cassino with Frank de Planta which in turn sparked my interest in other areas of the Italian Campaign and how they are portrayed in history.

Father arrived at Cassino after six weeks in Sicily and eight months on the Adriatic side of Italy before, at the end of March 1944, the Eighth Army switched to concentrate on the western side of the Apennine Mountains to mount a major, and hopefully final offensive on the Gustav Line. Below are a few of his observations on the battle for Cassino and its aftermath northwards to Pontecorvo and beyond.

#### **Cassino**

“25<sup>th</sup> March 1944 - as we drove along the main road - Highway 6 - to Cassino we could see the ruins of the monastery which has been so much in the news just lately. It is perched on a sheer summit of a hill on three sides, almost perpendicular. The town of Cassino is at the base of this hill but all the same is still about 2,000 feet up.

Our present position cannot be more than 3 miles from Cassino itself, we are on the slope of a mountain opposite the hill on which the monastery stands – known as Monastery Hill. We have a marvellous view and look right down on to the town but cannot see much movement because of smoke screens; ours is laid all over the valley and in the parts of Cassino which we hold, and the Germans lay theirs above the town and all along the road, which we can see quite clearly with the naked eye winding around Monastery Hill until it reaches the top.



Undoubtedly, we are unfortunate here as regards the taking of Cassino. It looks impregnable, as it is marshland to the west and sheer sided mountains impossible to climb to the east. It's easy to appreciate why this one major obstacle holds up an army. Cassino stands right in the path on the road to Rome. It must be taken and can only be done by frontal assault.

The whole of Monastery Hill is ringed with underground passages which are so big that the Germans can take all their guns and tanks through them<sup>1</sup>. Some are almost a mile long. There is one passage that runs from the monastery right down the mountain to the Continental Hotel, on the outskirts of the town. Others go from place to place in the town. If we could capture these entrances, which are very difficult to locate, we should certainly control Cassino. Parachutists could not be used because it would be extremely difficult to land men on such a small space, and naturally could not be done in the daytime. All the buildings in the area where we have stopped are terribly knocked about and looted, only odd bits of furniture are left. We shall be assured of plenty of firewood.

21<sup>st</sup> April - after much shelling, we had word to move out of this area and very pleased we are too as it was getting almost unbearable, and at 8.00am we moved off to our new position. Once again we are in a farmhouse, which is better than a dugout as shrapnel falls about like rain every night, and so a dugout is useless. We are much better situated here – only about a mile further back, but high up the side of a mountain. We now look down on the monastery, so we are at least 2,500 feet up but much below the mountain where the Germans are said to have their O.P. (a mountain alongside Monastery Hill which over 4,500 feet and the highest in the district). This location is really good – we are in an olive grove and the Germans are not likely to spot us and unlikely to shell either as all our guns are well away. Only a few Indian troops with mules and horses are about here – the Polish Corps are further away in the mountains. We can appreciate how Monastery Hill and entire area has held us up so long. Huge underground pits strengthened with sheets of metal are everywhere. The Germans seem to be much more thorough than we are in digging in – but then usually they have bombers to contend with and we don't.

3<sup>rd</sup> May - as expected we have had to move, and our present site is almost at the top of the mountain. When the battle begins we shall have one of the best views ever of any battle, this coming one is likely to be unique also, as it is likely to be one of the biggest battles of the war.

14<sup>th</sup> May - our guns are keeping at it day and night, already I suppose great numbers of men have been killed on both sides. What a nasty business war is. So far our boys have made good progress and have already half circled Monastery Hill; the push extends all the way to the Mediterranean coast, but no real move forward can take place until Cassino is neutralised.

15<sup>th</sup> May - terrific fighting has taken place today and the Germans are putting up a good show. Every message that we have taken shows that our troops have been very heavily shelled and mortared and have had a rough time, but keep nibbling further into the Gustav Line all the same. Before Cassino is in our hands, I can contemplate many casualties.

16<sup>th</sup> May - the battle is raging with great fury, our losses must have been heavy but the enemy more so (except possibly in Cassino), as our fire power is far greater than his – moreover we have hundreds of tanks and over 400 are already across the Rapido River<sup>2</sup>. The French have done good work in the south having out-flanked the Gustav Line<sup>3</sup>. Scores of German prisoners keep coming in without escorts,

absolutely dithery – almost crazy, what’s more many lads were very young; as one officer said, it was almost a crime to fire on them. Still, it has to be done.

17<sup>th</sup> May - today the enemy is showing signs of panicking, as he is throwing in tanks which are getting knocked out wholesale, guns and anti-tanks are also being steadily wiped out. He is definitely losing the battle, and all the time we are gradually encircling Monastery Hill. One big difference in this battle to previous ones – no air cover at all – all our aircraft did was bomb the enemy’s rear.

18<sup>th</sup> May - last night was a rip snorter, not shells this time but bombs – dozens of enemy planes dropping flares everywhere, it was a nasty hour or so, but we knew what it was for – obviously to cause a diversion and evacuate their troops from Cassino. This didn’t work for them, as orders had been given to shell the road to Rome (Highway 6) all night.

8.00 am - I have just sent a message to the Army – Cassino town, Monastery and Baron’s Palace evacuated by the enemy, so our capture of the whole will not be long delayed. Cassino is now surrounded, and any Germans left must be killed or captured.

11.00 am<sup>4</sup> - Polish flag stuck on Monastery top (on top of the ruins to be correct). I took the all-important message and the first to notify the Army – practically the whole of Corps G Ops. and Army Ops. relies on ‘J’ “griff”. I shall keep the message as a souvenir.

The P.O.Ws. taken in the strong points of Cassino such as the Continental Hotel, Hotel de Roses and the ancient Roman Colosseum say that they were left to fight, and said that 500 were waiting to surrender in the Monastery. From messages I picked up, Germans are walking about with their hands in their pockets out in the open, and not even pretending to fight. Reports say that the Poles massacred the Germans waiting to surrender<sup>5</sup>. Many German and Polish dead were found with their hands round each other’s throats and the Polish wounded were also trying to kill the German wounded.

This seems to be the end of another great battle and once again victory for the Eighth Army – but oh! the many dead on both sides. As already the enemy are well behind their next line of defence and about 10 miles away<sup>6</sup>, we are almost certain to move forward<sup>6</sup>, tomorrow. It looks as if we shall push straight to Rome now – certainly to our bridgehead.”

### **To Pontecorvo and beyond**

“19<sup>th</sup> May – as expected we went off to a new location early this morning. On our journey we went through all the main defences of the Liri Valley part of the Gustav Line. The pains that the Germans must have taken digging in is something to marvel at, practically every house had a dug-out underneath it. But for this, the enemy could not possibly have held on all the months that he did. The whole area for miles was pitted with shell holes every few yards, trees up-rooted, and not a single house anywhere was still intact; tanks and guns were lying everywhere, but practically all of them belonged to the Germans.

Our destination was on the Canadian part of the line alongside the French of the Fifth Army, and so we travelled more west than north; this meant that we left the Monastery further away than ever. Travelling along, we passed many ambulances loaded with wounded, even some on Jeeps sitting up and smoking with their faces half shot away and the colour of the Jeep red and not brown – the blood had stained them so much. The smell of dead bodies was very bad, but I only saw one dead body – a German with no head -

the advance has been so fast that there has been no time for burial of all the dead. There were mines laid all over the place, and we had to keep switching in and out on the track to miss them.

20<sup>th</sup> May - this morning we rose early and got ourselves organised; the house nearby was too badly knocked about to be of much use. As in other cases, the Germans had built massive shelters under the house – how on earth they dig them so deep with wood supports I can't imagine. We were not too curious, however, as there may be booby traps. Actually, there was not much to worry over, as our advance troops had already been in this house, as could be seen by empty tins of English rations. All the same we had to walk about carefully with all the explosives left around. It is obvious that the Germans had to get out quickly, as apart from fire arms and grenades etc we found about 100 German brown loaves and their army biscuits (better than ours). Later on, after lunch we found an empty well and in it were hundreds of sheets, bedspreads, pillow slips, etc. The Germans had obviously been through these but there were still plenty left – I should imagine an Italian would have a nice little black market here, certainly the average Italian would have never had all this lot.

Our latest spot is about six miles from the front and should be ideal, from where we are we can see Mount Cairo away to the west<sup>7</sup>. Apparently, the Germans are still fighting the Poles there. Also the monastery can still be seen, and from this side it looks huge, it must have covered a great area and almost as large as a town.

26<sup>th</sup> May – the first thing that struck me most was the graves. Graves and more graves and nearly all Germans – the fools! Why don't they give in, they don't stand a chance? However, there were many dead among our own boys, but nothing like the number of the enemy. The Germans make a very neat grave with a large black cross, I don't know how they find time to bury such a number while retreating. Not all the dead were buried, we passed three horribly shot up Germans lying on the side of the road and at least a score more were seen half hidden in a small dyke on the side of the road - and the smell!

For the first time since I left Cassino I saw a few civilians even in Pontecorvo, which was another 'Foggia'<sup>8</sup> and looked as if an earthquake had hit it. They must have had a terrible time, as in this valley full of fruit trees and long grass there is nowhere to hide as there would be in the mountains on each side of this valley. I saw one woman look at the dead Germans by the side of the road and start crying but she held her head high as we went past - real pluck, I'll say! The civilians in Pontecorvo looked bewildered and I should think so too, the mess and debris had to be seen to be believed. Not a single civilian in Britain really knows what a bombed town – a really bombed town – looks like. Every house will have to be rebuilt in Pontecorvo; it did have a population of 10,000 people.

We paid heavily in tanks – not that it matters as we have plenty of them – but it is the crew that counts. Several Shermans had a little round hole about the circumference of a tennis ball in the body of the tank – an armour piercing shell from an anti-tank gun – one can only guess what happens to the crew at such a time. At least 16 Churchill tanks had been knocked out and almost alongside were the Germans' self-propelled guns and anti-tanks. Some heavy fighting must have taken place at point blank range.

Around midday we arrived at our new spot, near another house (always damaged, not a single house from Cassino to here hasn't had at least one hit) and about 5 miles away from the line. Everything is very quiet, not even any sound from our own guns. However, on getting on the sets we soon found that a big



tank battle was going on along Highway 6, and at the moment we are being held. There are still some good defensive positions in the mountains for the enemy on the way to Rome.

4<sup>th</sup> June - just before lunch I disappear into some shrub for the necessities of nature – taking a spade as it is most familiarly termed, and quite suddenly I came across 17 German graves, two of them were of boys of only 20 years of age. It always seems to me when I look at any war graves that if the people only could see their loved ones lying buried just like animals in fields and woods there would be a different tone among people in all countries. Forgotten men already.

As we reached the mountain town Torre Cajetani (near Trivigliano), a terrific storm broke out and we got very wet, but our spirits were well up with the news that the leading troops of the Fifth Army are only four kilometres from Rome: all over bar the shouting - as regards Rome anyway. Everybody is sure the invasion from the west (D-Day) will begin any day now. It simply must come now with the Germans completely routed here. It will be a crime if it doesn't."

### The campaign continues

Father's words indicated his optimism that the war in Italy would soon be over and that he would be on his way home. However, the Germans retreated northwards and the Eighth Army moved northwards up the centre of Italy towards Florence before, in August 1944, switching back to the Adriatic Coast in August 1944 for the next critical stage of the Italian campaign – Op OLIVE<sup>9</sup> and the assault on the Gothic Line. Father's war would last another year.



*This photo of my father was on the front of a postcard send to my mother dated 26 April 1942. Having checked his diary, I believe the photo must have been taken in Cairo.*

1. This was a commonly held but false view held by many Allied soldiers. There was no extensive network of tunnels.
2. Actually, the River Gari. The Americans named it the Rapido when they attempted to cross it in January 1944.
3. The French Expeditionary Corps of 99,000 men cut through the Gustav Line rather than outflanked it. They were rapidly across the Ausonia valley and into the Petrella Massif heading for Pico.
4. It was at 10.20 that the Poles planted the Polish flag on the Monastery, placed the Union flag alongside it and played a bugle call.
5. This did not happen. Wounded German soldiers in the crypt, which was the temporary aid post, testified that no massacres occurred. The Germans wounded were well treated by the Poles.

6. The Hitler Line was six miles north of Cassino, running from Pontecorvo to Aquino to Piedimonte San Germano.
7. Away to the east.
8. Foggia was a town further south which the Allies had flattened in October 1943. They then turned it into an enormous airbase from which to launch strategic bombers into southern Germany, Rumania and the Balkans.
9. 31 August-23 September 1944.

### Snippets

*Received from Richard O'Sullivan, June 2022:*

Thank you for including my father's story (Summer 2020 newsletter). Earlier in the month, I had the pleasure of meeting up with Charles Ward, who joined the London Irish Rifles (LIR) on the same day as my father in October 1939. Charles served with 2 LIR from Oct '39 to May '43 in the UK and North Africa before transferring to SOE in Algeria, and worked there and in Italy until he moved across to the Royal Signals in Italy at the end of the war. Charles is now 103 ½ years old, a decent age.

Separately, myself and my brother are travelling in early July to Bologna to finish filming the story of my father's journey from Algiers to Austria. This part of the story takes him from Florence to the Po and onto Villach.

*Received from artist David Thorp, June 2022:*

Many thanks for the credits in the attached Newsletter (Summer 2022).

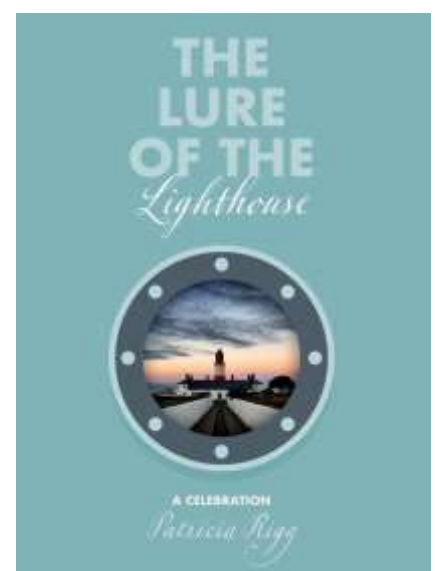
It certainly makes interesting reading. I am not very knowledgeable on the Italian campaign, so I am reading your newsletter with great interest. I had a very good friend who was in the Guards Regiment who was captured in Italy. He finished up at a camp in Fallingbostal, near Poland, from where he escaped whilst on the 'long march'.

He died in 2014, still complaining about his frostbitten feet!

Many thanks for what you do, it is so important that these associations are kept going now that most of the Veterans have passed.

*Received from Pat Rigg (Newsletter winter 2021):*

Just wondering if there is a space to mention a book I have written - a collection of 12 poems, plus photographs, about Souter Lighthouse, a National Trust property on the Northeast coast, not far from where I live. To the North, South Shields, to the South, Whitburn and Sunderland, the Lighthouse is a popular place for visitors from all over the country and abroad. Just thought, perhaps, one day, some of our members may be visiting this area. The coastline is spectacular. Lovely beaches. Sandhaven, in South Shields, is the Sunday Times 2022 Beach of the Year. Plus, of course, a Geordie welcome and prize-winning fish and chips!



The book is called "The Lure of the Lighthouse", and was sponsored by McCarthy Stone, so all money raised goes directly to the Lighthouse, where it is on sale.

One memory I have of Salerno - standing on beach with veterans and hearing their stories. One man, sadly no longer with us, was only 19 when he landed. He raced across the beach, to take cover behind a wall and actually found the spot, over 70 years later. He had wonderful stories to tell of Cassino.

### Books

"Sacrifice on the Steppe" The Italian Alpine Corps in the Stalingrad Campaign, by Hope Hamilton

"Hitler's Italian Allies", by MacGregor Knox

"War in Val D'Orcia 1947", by Dame Iris Morigo Origo:

*Iris Origo was British-born and married to Antonio, an Italian aristocrat. Together they owned and ran a large estate, La Foce, in Tuscany's Val d'Orcia, where they devoted their time to improving the land, lives and conditions of the tenant farmers of their 57 farms. In her diaries Iris documented the progress of the war in Italy, and the courageous and clandestine work which went on to help the many refugees who passed through the estate, from children fleeing the bombed towns to escaped prisoners of war. Her journals, often buried for safekeeping at the time, give a fascinating insight into the lives of ordinary people caught up in the war.*

### Following dad's footsteps: A journey from Rome to the Gothic Line.

By Helen James

In late September 2022, I travelled with MCS member Sue Hughes, guide Frank de Planta, and three others on a 9-day journey to follow the route taken by the Allies after the fall of Rome in June 1944 until the end of the Italian Campaign on 2nd May 1945. My father served in the 75<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment RA, Shropshire Yeomanry, and Sue's father in 3/8 Punjabis in the 8th Indian Division, and we wanted to know where both men had been when the Allies moved north through Italy after Cassino. We found they had followed a very similar path, their routes overlapping, and that my father's artillery had often been actively supporting the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, as at Monte Grande, southeast of Bologna.

Dad never spoke much about the war, unlike some of his comrades who told me that some of the heaviest fighting they encountered was after Cassino; also the





most brutal weather conditions, after the Allies became stuck in the Apennines in the worst winter on record of 1944-45. The Generals had intended to be well north of the Apennines by Autumn 1944, but strong German resistance and the onset of that winter led instead to the advance stalling, and the breakthrough not happening until April 1945.

Following a route from Rome to the Po valley and the Argenta Gap, via Orvieto, Foiana della Chiana, Florence and Faenza, our journey was to take us steadily climbing



The German Cemetery, Futa Pass

through the Apennines via the Futa Pass, where we visited the German cemetery. This is surely one of the most forbidding places on earth, and on that day given an even more sombre air by a dense mist - no coincidence for a cemetery deliberately designed for chilling effect. In contrast to the elegant solemnity of the many CWGC cemeteries, or the glorious grandeur of the vast American one near Florence, we found a dark, bunker-like memorial, no flowers or glory, just a bare, grassy hillside studded with hundreds of rows of black gravestones laid flat to the earth, the starkest reminder of the futility of it all.



Orvieto CWGC Cemetery with Orvieto behind



The American Cemetery, Florence

In the Apennines we explored the Gothic Line, the depth of whose 16 miles deep defences extended along its whole length from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic. With spectacular autumn scenery and warm, sunny weather, it was difficult to imagine the devastation and harsh conditions experienced by Allied troops in that winter of 1944-45, (and there are no relics of defences left to assist the imagination). I knew from research that my father and his comrades had followed those same narrow, winding roads, and passed through or been positioned very close to some of those now quiet and picturesque villages. It felt very far away from the tourist trail.

Later, from our base in Rimini we travelled into the foothills around San Marino, to study the undulating countryside where every bit of raised ground provided an enemy vantage point, and advance without detection was impossible. Now a landscape of fertile fields and peaceful hilltop villages, this area saw relentless and bloody fighting during the Allies' slow advance towards the Po valley in 1945. We were reminded of the bravery of the Italian resistance movement and the Partisans, by photographs of wartime

destruction on the walls of houses in the village of Gemmano, one of many rebuilt from the ruins after the war.

This journey was something I had wanted to do for a long time, and I was not disappointed. It was rewarding to cover the ground with an expert guide and like-minded companions, and to put a face to all the places on my well-marked map. I look forward to the next time and more discovery.



The site of the bombing at Alleron Bridge



Gemmano



Alleron Bridge Memorial. The inscription reads:

'On 28th January 1944 whilst a freight train was transporting British, S. African and American prisoners of war towards prison camps in Germany, the United States Army Air Force bombed the bridge causing over 300 dead. These rails, bent by the violence of the attack remain here as a perpetual memory. Orvieto Nov. 2015'

**New members**

**Jessica Hayward**, granddaughter of John Brailsford Hodgson, 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Natal Carbineers, 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division

**In Memoriam**

**Alan Bramley** Veteran, Royal Corps of Signals, July 2022, aged 99 years.

*Conscripted in 1942, Alan served in North Africa and the Italian Campaign, landing at Salerno on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1943. He left a detailed personal account of his wartime experiences, which can be found in the 'Recollections' section of the Monte Cassino Society website.*

**Contact us:**

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

Rockstone, Rocky Park Ave, Plymouth, Devon, PL9 7DJ. 01752 492799

**Helen James, Newsletter** : helenconrad@btconnect.com

**John Leach** : johnleachportloe@gmail.com

**Phillip Soady, Web Administrator** : filfishtank4@gmail.com

**Paul Taylor** : paul\_taylor17@yahoo.co.uk

**Diane Soady, Treasurer** : dianesoady@gmail.com ; 01760 722590

*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).