

Raymond Ward Lawton

132nd Welsh Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

On January 6th, 1944 we eventually moved back to the Adriatic Coast of Italy. This was done with difficulty because of the snowed up roads, and on Jan 8th we arrived at Casoli and spent four weeks providing harassing fire. The area was dominated by the snow-covered feature Majella. Here for the first time the OP signalers had to wear white camouflage garments complete with hood. Occasionally we could see an enemy ski party moving about, and occasionally the OP officer used these groups for target practice.

On 11th February we handed over this sector of the front to the 3rd Field Regiment and we set off westwards through the mountains to join 5th Army as part of the New Zealand Corps at Cassino monastery. The journey was arduous, and the vehicles were sliding about on the mountainous roads. One night when we stopped to rest for a few hours, and have a hot drink, a number of men in our section of the convoy moved into a barn to sleep. My good friend Albert Place and I remained by the cook's vehicle to try and get warm by the fire. Suddenly an old Italian man came up to us and beckoned us to follow him (with his palms pressed together and his face touching the back of his clasped hands — indicating sleep). We got our ground sheet and blanket from our own truck and he led us into his house then into his bedroom where his wife was in bed. He got into bed with his wife and we lay down on the floor at the foot of the bed. There we stayed till daybreak. We thought it amazing that an enemy should be so hospitable but then realized that men like him during World War I were our Allies fighting against Austria and Germany. When we rejoined the convoy we found out that the men who went into the barn were pestered by rats.

After a mug of sweet tea and some army biscuits spread with jam and cheese, we journeyed on and passed through Capua and stopped at a hillside near Mignano (later referred to as the 'mud patch', an all too accurate description). It was dark when we arrived and we had to dig away several inches of mud before we could pitch our tents (2 men per tent). Pitching the Command Post tent took quite a time, but once our stove pot was installed with the outlet chimney poking through the tin plate in the roof, we were able to stoke up and feel warmer. There we stayed for several days waiting for orders — they came at the end of February, and we moved behind Mount Trocchio to fire onto the monastery. Once settled in at the gun positions, the rota was sorted out for 5-day stints at the forward OP overlooking the monastery at Cassino.

The first time up there was a real shock. There were dead men and mules lying everywhere, and they had been there for about 7 weeks. In Tunisia I had seen 400 killed in an attack but here 3000 had died in one offensive. It was such a rocky area that graves could not be dug, and occasionally a rat would scurry past with a hand or foot in its mouth.

Five days up there was like a lifetime.

The monastery just dominated the area, and was so close that when the American 6th howitzers fired onto the monastery our OP men along with the infantry had to take cover because lumps of monastery came flying back into our trenches. A lot of men suffered eye injuries because of flying pieces of stone. From these forward trenches, when a man was wounded, it took 13 relays of stretcher bearers to carry him down to Company HQ, and often he would be wounded a second time as he lay horizontal on the stretcher.

One day an 88 mm shell landed but didn't explode. It ricocheted off the rocky hill and knocked down an infantryman with a glancing blow in the ribs. I often wonder if he survived the war. The infantry colonel was interested to know why it didn't explode and our OP officer asked me to carry it down to Battalion HQ for inspection. It was a long walk and an infantryman said, "why not go the more direct route?" He explained the landmarks I would encounter, and so I set off. I looked for the distant empty farm building and the gap in the stone wall. By now the light was beginning to fade, and as I got nearer to the gap I had to pass through, I saw a German soldier each side of the gap, but with black faces. I realized that they were dead and kept walking. None of our men were in sight as it was inside the defence perimeter. I was completely on my own with a sizable shell under my arm. If I had stretched out my arms I could have touched both corpses as I went through the gap, and I just had to turn round after walking 20 feet or so to make sure they hadn't moved. Their black faces were due to 6 or 7 weeks in the sunshine. I returned by the longer route where I would have live company! That happened the second five days I spent at the OP. During the final stint up there we were told that a Polish regiment was taking over from us and everything had to be working properly for the take over.

Their advance party came and we found shelters for the men off duty (the duty men were either in a forward dugout or on the wireless in a damaged farm building used as Company HQ).

I happened to be off duty for a couple of hours, and after about 20 minutes of mortar fire by the Germans, I heard in the quiet which followed, a whimpering noise. I tracked it down and found a Polish signaller shaking like a leaf in his shelter. I went to him but he suddenly took off in full flight around the side of the hill heading for a known danger spot. I chased him and did a rugby tackle to bring him down. I lay on him until I saw two stretcher-bearers complete with stretcher, and I called them for help. They got the Polish man on the stretcher, but the mortar fire started again and he jumped off and ran away. They chased him and so I left them to it.

Obviously he had suffered shell shock and had been sent too soon back into the front line.

The following day we showed the Polish signalers how to operate the equipment; we were supposed to hand over in the early hours of the day after that. As it got dark the enemy shell and mortar fire increased and the field telephone line from OP to Company HQ was constantly getting broken. My mate Roy Thomas, from Merthyr Tydfil, and I mended it time and time again. When a shell hits a telephone line it flings the broken ends yards apart. Sometimes it's not easy to find the end of the wire lying ahead. Roy was on his hands and knees searching for the other wire when he put his hand on a maggoty corpse lying on the hillside.

The eventual hand over was about three or four hours later than planned. We weren't supposed to move in the area in broad daylight. At last we set off on our walk down the mountain track and joined the truck, which had come to meet us at a quarry. We clambered in and started down the narrow road following another truck, when—flash bang—a shell landed on the bonnet of the truck in front. The driver was, we believe, dead (though we couldn't see for certain, as it was still dark). He was lifted out and put in the small trailer we were pulling. We pushed his truck off the road down a steep hill because we couldn't pass on such a narrow road. We took the man to the nearest RAMC post and continued on our way to the gun position behind Mount Trocchio.

It was just breaking daylight as we arrived back. That was the last we saw of the monastery at Cassino because we pulled back to Alvinzano near Capua (some 35 miles behind the front line). That was on 27th April. After a rest we did specialized training for river crossings and house clearing ready for a return to Mignano on 9th May. On May 11th at 2300 hours we joined many

field guns to fire a barrage which lasted until 0345 hrs the following day (800 guns fired simultaneously in one valley so that the ground moved under our feet). This was the start of the big push up the Liri valley. There were rivers to cross and a strong defensive line named the Adolf Hitler Line to cross, but this line we finally breached and eventually linked up with the Anzio beachhead troops. We stopped just short of Rome on June 2nd and the Americans occupied Rome the following day. We were ordered to stay put in order to enable the Americans into Rome first.

On reflection there are so many incidents which had occurred during the awful winter of 1943/44 that I couldn't possibly relate them all. One I like to recall is about my friend Albert Place who survived the air attack in Tunisia. He and I often shared duty at the observation post, but on this occasion he was with someone else. I don't know all the details, but he set up the transmitter whilst under severe shellfire, and the resulting communication provided the infantry with covering fire when they desperately needed it. The infantry officer was extremely grateful and as a result of his recommendation, Albert was awarded the MM.

This decoration was one of 59 decorations won by various members of the 132nd Welsh Field Regiment RA (TA) and almost all of the ones won by signalers were gained because of their total disregard for the enemy. An example of this was when Dixie Dean MM was on duty during the tank battle at Tebourba, Tunisia. He sat in a canvas covered 15 cwt. signal truck operating a wireless transmitter with armour piercing machine gun bullets and 88 mm tank shells criss-crossing all over the gun position. It's not easy to ignore such activity and concentrate on the job in hand.

During March 1944 whilst resting at the gun position after 5 days at the OP, we witnessed an Allied bombing raid on the monastery of Cassino and the town. Over 1000 aircraft took part dropping 1,100 tons of bombs. Sadly the American pilots were off target and some of our personnel suffered.

June 2nd 1944 we stopped just short of Rome. Soon we were off Northwards again to join the fighting, and we were in the thick of it again until 2nd July. Suddenly we moved southwards back through Rome to Tivoli where we stayed for 10 days. Trucks were laid on for us each day for sightseeing trips to Rome. During the 10 days we handed our guns over to the 65th Fld Rgt RA and received the news that we were off to Egypt soon.