

Roland Dray

5th Northamptonshire Regiment

Roland Dray was a seventeen year old gunner with the 5th Northamptonshires when his battalion relieved the 2nd Cameron Highlanders on Snakeshead Ridge. This is an excerpt from a series of emails he sent us.

We left San Michele where we were camped after coming across from the Adriatic coast at night in mid March, crossing a flat valley which led up to a mountain track which led up to a hollow, which was referred to as 'the bowl'. The path was very steep for us lads carrying all our fighting kit plus rifle and other bits loaded on us by the CQMS, but we had frequent breaks when the mule trains came back, having taken up food and ammunitions, also mail and a few NAAFI goodies to those who were holding the forward positions at the top of the ridge.

The ground covering the mountain side was so rocky we were unable to dig fox holes, as would be the norm, so the first troops up there had built sangars from the stones that lay around. The idea of sangars came from the time when our army was up on the NW Frontier of India. They were much like an Eskimo igloo, but not quite such a long entrance tunnel. After spending the rest of that night and the next day in 'the bowl', we were told we were going to move forward to the front line positions and as darkness fell we were lead as platoons, by guides, to the top of the ridge. We were told by the CMS, "You people who have not seen dead men before, had better get used to the idea, as you will be seeing plenty tonight." As we stumbled up the rock strewn hill side we understood what he meant. Bodies lay everywhere together with broken rifles and equipment. At last we reached a small stone built building which was our Company HQ, which also had a Red Cross flag flying from the roof, indicating it was a Regimental Aid Post. It was in full view of the Monastery. After being sorted out in our platoons, we were then led forward to the front line sangars and the lads of the unit we were relieving, quickly said "cheers take care" and were off; your father would have been among them.

Thank you for wanting to hear the adventures of those that served in WW2; so many do not. Not that I think they should or should not. They owe us nothing. It so happens that we did save the country from being taken over by the Nazi regime, but if we are honest, we fought to save our families and ourselves, not thinking of future generations.

Before I start telling you more of our adventures, NAAFI goodies were luxury things that the army did not supply us with, such as chocolate, cigarettes, scented soap, beer, (yes beer, only a small bottle, no cans in those days) chewing gum and little things like that. NAAFI was Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes, a canteen for servicemen and women. We had to pay for what we had, but of course we never had to fork out money while in the line, but a note was made and the CQMS made the deduction from our pay. The army was a marvel the way they organised things. Sometimes we would not be paid for weeks if we were in the line for a long time and when we came out we would be paid a standing amount, only enough to buy a few things, but we were never cheated and all the money owing us was paid eventually.

Now, I told you we had arrived up on the Snakeshead Ridge. After settling in our allocated sangars we were then detailed what were to be our duties. As our positions were exposed in full view of the Monastery, we could not move out of our sangars during the day, so we did night shift and slept during the day. As darkness fell, we crept out of the sangars and, do not be shocked,

but in the dim light one could see a lot of round white bottoms, as the first thing to do was answer the call of nature. Just imagine, during the days there were two men to a sangar and we lay side by side as it was only about three feet high and six feet in diameter. We had a jam tin each, to wee in and throw out of the opening, but that is how it was. There was no water for washing, but as we must have all ponged, we did not notice it. You will understand why I laugh when I hear this business of girls joining the infantry. Dead men lay around and the stench is with me to this day. Beside the track, from our sangar positions to the little building I told you, was our Company HQ. There were eight bodies on stretchers covered in blankets and we referred to them as 'the meat pie men'. How callous war makes men.

Our forward positions were about 60 yards from the Germans and we could hear them moving as they, no doubt, heard us. They frequently sent up flares which lit the whole ridge like day light. When a flare went up, one froze with head bowed and just prayed that he did not see you. There was a well up there, but the water was filthy and we did not touch it. If we had tried to get some water from it, we would be taking a chance as the Germans had a machine gun with a fixed line on it and occasionally would give a burst of fire around it. Some days he would send over small mortar bombs, which made us very unhappy, to say the least. The 5th Northants war diary says during one of these bombardments a bomb made a direct hit on a sangar, but apart from shaking up the occupants, did no harm. Believe it or not, it was on our sangar it fell and it smashed our machine gun as we had it laying on top as there was no room for it in the sangar with us.

We would then be detailed to do various duties, my co-habitat and I were machine gunners (two to a gun) so we had to go to a forward position, two hours on, four hours off; that was a good job. Others had to go back to 'the bowl' and carry up rations, water and ammo and stand to for a period during the night. Toward the end of each night we were given rations for the coming day. These were mainly tin food with Tommy cookers to heat it. We also were given a water ration with a mixture of tea, dried milk and sugar — too bad if you did not take sugar. So we spent the day sleeping, writing letters, heating food and tea and smoking, so much in fact, it is a wonder the Germans did not see the smoke rising from the sangars.

He made two attacks against us during our stay, but we drove him off and on one of them we took one prisoner, which we were rather pleased with. We had so many cigarettes up there that when he (the prisoner) was sent down that night he was given a stack of them and was smiling all over his face. War over for him; Tommy had given him a months supply of cigs and a meal before he was sent back.

We were up in the forward positions for four days and then went back to 'the bowl' for four days, where we at least could walk around in day light. My next installment will be our relief and exit from Snakeshead Ridge.

The last time I sent you the details of how we lived up on the Snakeshead Ridge, not a very exciting time up there, but a time I shall always remember. At the end of April we were relieved by Polish troops and in spite of the lack of language communication, we got away without much interference from the Germans.

I well remember that night, together with my number two on the machine gun. We were approached by our sergeant and a couple of Polish soldiers, who had not a clue as to the position of the ground around us. They were standing on the ridge and it was very dangerous as the Germans would see them on the sky line. Our sergeant was trying to explain that they had

better get down; however they did not seem to understand and in desperation our sergeant just grabbed them and forced them down on the ground. We picked up our gun and were off.

The track down to the Liri valley was very steep and the poor mules had to bring all the supplies up this track and we had to try and get by going down. The Germans seemed to have got an idea something was on and started shelling the area at the foot of the track, a place that was known as the Jeep Head. The Jeep Head was where the jeeps could get up to, to collect wounded and bring other things the mules could not. The shells were coming very low over our heads before crashing down below and we had to go down and through their target area. When it came to our turn we were halted and lay low for a while, during which time a water bottle full of rum was passed around. I, thinking it was water, took a mighty swig and nearly choked to death, having never had rum before. I cannot face rum to this day, sixty years after.

When things seemed to have quietened we were given the order to move and down we went. What a mess there were. Many dead mules and smashed jeeps. We were told to put our heavy things on to the jeeps and to get going. We did not require telling twice. We had to cross the Liri valley which was in full view of the Monastery and it was getting light, but our artillery were sending over smoke shells that were covering us from view.

It was raining quite hard by the time we reached San Michele where we were put into lorries and off we went to Capua, where we were camped in a lovely green orchard by the river Volturno. The war was far from over but we did not think about what was to come. We were out of it for a time and we were going to have some vino and other enjoyments, so it was 'forget the war for awhile'.

We spent a very enjoyable time in the tented camp at Capua and soon forgot the war and dismissed any thoughts of what were to come. Mobile showers came up and we were able to get rid of the dirt and grime that we had collected up on the Snakeshead. Visits to town were also organised and although the shops had nothing to sell, we spent our money on vino and got quite tipsy, which did not please our Sergeant Major who was heard to remark, 'we were a bloody disgrace to the British Army', but if any one else had said that he would have exploded like a mother tiger in our defense. Dear old Sergeant Major Saggs, got a piece of shrapnel in his bottom later and we never saw him again. After the war, when he turned up at one of our reunions, he still reckoned we were a shower, but cried with us when the time came to break up the party. I saw him once again, but he has been gone some time now. I expect when we get on that parade ground up in the sky, he will still be calling us to order.

On the 11th of May we were ordered to get our kit together ready to move and to the north there was an awful din from gun fire; the attack across the Rapido river and on the Gustav Line had begun. We were embussed and our journey back up to the line began.

As we got nearer Cassino, the din of the barrage was so great we had to shout to be heard and as it was dark as we arrived, the gun flashes lit us up as in sunlight. We were camped down to await orders to advance; that order came on the 12th. We were able to cross the Rapido quite easily as a bailey bridge had been installed under heavy fire by the courageous Royal Field Engineers. The first wave of the attack had suffered a lot of casualties and had only established a narrow bridge head. We passed through them on the morning of the 13th and within a short time were in action. I remember I was in a section detailed to take a particular farm house and as we got close we saw a huge German Tiger tank creeping from behind it. A couple of our lads shot at it with an anti tank weapon called a P.I.A.T. Two of their missiles struck it and the crew

was seen to bale out, which allowed us to move forward and get into the buildings around the house, from which was coming a lot of machine gun fire. We were able to return the fire and lob a few grenades in the windows and soon had a bag of prisoners, for which we were given a credit by the C.O. later; and the P.I.A.T. gunner got the M.M.

All this was happening with the Monastery on our right still held by the Germans, but the guns were still firing smoke shells to cover us from view. We advanced about two miles, having swung right and headed for the main road, Route 6, which ran up from Cassino to Rome, which it was intended to cut and trap what Germans were left in the town and Monastery.

The 2nd Lancaster Fusiliers were on our right and it would be them who were to reach the highway first, with the intention of joining up with the Poles coming down from the Snakeshead (a terrible task) on the other side of the road. Contact was made as arranged, but, unfortunately, the Germans had guessed our plans, pulled out during the night and we were left with an empty town and Monastery.

From then on for the next few days we slogged it out, fighting for every farm and other defensive position the Germans got in until we reached Aquino and the Hitler Line. Here I got sniped in the hip, not a bad one, but out of the line for a while.

We had lost my Company Commander, Major Reginald Cook, and nine other ranks and some twenty wounded. All buried in Cassino cemetery. From then on the Germans were on the run and Rome was to fall on the 5th of June, but there was a lot more hard fighting ahead for us. But that is the story of what my battalion, the 5th Northants, did at Cassino, and I was only seventeen.

I have been back three times, in 1989 with the Monte Cassino Vets, and in '03 and '04 with my young friends who are very interested in the battles for Monte Cassino. We went up to the Snakeshead and found that the building we had as our Aid Post has been repaired and an old couple lived up there, loads of chickens and goats running about. A lot of scrub has grown over the ridge but the well and the paths are all there still and we spent some time fishing about, finding lots of bits and pieces we left there in '44.

If you wish to tell my story please do so and thank you for thinking it worth doing so, it being one small grain in the whole of the sands that flowed during the years '39-'45.

Thank you, Roland J. Dray. Pte. 14416444.