

Tony Pittaccio was a ten-year-old boy staying with family in Cassino when war broke out in Europe in September 1939. Tony, his mother and sisters were stuck in Cassino when the frontiers closed, and his account gives a unique insight into the plight of the civilians caught up in the Italian campaign of World War 2. It is a fascinating tale of a young boy's experience of the war.

Tony's story in his own words, as told to Helen James, Felixstowe 13th June 2019

Family and the beginning of the War

My mother was from Cassino, she had family there, and we went there on holiday in August 1939. We lived in Southampton, and my father saw us as far as Paris. It took 2 days and a night by train to get from Southampton to Cassino in those days, via ferry to Le Havre. The war started about 3-4 weeks after we were there, on 3rd September. The frontiers were closed, my father was in England, and we were stuck there, me, my mother and my sisters.

I had to go to school there and learn Italian. But all children had to go to school to learn Italian anyway, because at home they spoke their own dialects. The dialect we spoke in Cassino was an offshoot of the Oscan language, which pre-dated Latin. I could speak Cassinese because of my mother, but I couldn't speak Italian. Now it's all changed – you go to Cassino now and you hardly hear any dialect spoken. It was a fascist country of course, and when Mussolini declared war against Britain and France in June 1940, we thought that we would have some pretty bad times, but we didn't. We were not discriminated against at all. There was an English lady living near us, married to an Italian, and she wasn't discriminated against. My school friends were far more interested hearing about Britain than anything else, so it wasn't a bad time at all. We also knew a Jewish family and they were not troubled; they were quite OK.

Mind you, I don't know what fascism was like in Turin or Rome or Milan, but in Cassino and the district of Lazio there was no trouble. They knew my father was in England, he was a dual national born in Cassino; they came to England at the end of the 19th century. The first official date we have is in 1901 when they opened a hairdressing salon in Bermondsey. We were a real Anglo-Italian family; some of his sisters and one of my sisters were born in England. There was no question of them being interned as Aliens. When we couldn't hear from him, we wondered if he had joined something like the navy, as he was a real sea-lover. He tried, but they said, "no" because they knew that his family was in Italy, and the British authorities thought that if the Italians knew that my father was in the military we would really be in trouble.

We weren't able to get any news to my father when the war started, but the Monastery was the source through which we could obtain some information, because with the network of the Benedictines throughout Europe, they just passed on messages. I remember my mother wrote a very brief note; it had to be very brief, you couldn't write a letter. Just something like "We're well, hope you are well love". And this was given to the monastery and it was months later when we received a reply that my father had received the note, and that my father was all right; this was by word of mouth of course - so that was the connections we had.

The War comes to Cassino

Cassino was first bombed on the 10th September 1943 when the Allies first went into Italy. In July that year Mussolini was deposed, much to the enjoyment of everyone. Well, 70-80% of the population did originally support Mussolini, and as Churchill himself said, if he was an Italian living in Italy, he would have supported Mussolini himself. Even his (Churchill's) wife said Mussolini was the most noble Roman of them all. The American press was full of praise for Mussolini, but then with just one signature he just threw all that away, he destroyed what would otherwise have been quite a good country. Even his own foreign minister and son-in-law was dead against it. He didn't like the Germans, and for most of the Italian population, it was only 20 years since they had been fighting the Germans and the Austrians, and they were certainly against it in their spirit. And you have to remember that many Italians, especially most of the peasant classes, had families in England, France, and when America joined the war, we used to say that the capital of Italy was New York! After that the population changed completely, except for a handful of hard fascists.

My mother was wounded during the first air-raid bombing, but it was only a shrapnel wound on her foot, not anything really serious. What happened, I was in Cassino and I had a friend who had a horse and cart; we lived along the Pasquale Road and he lived further up from us, and he said, "Come on Tony, jump up, we're going." So he set the horse off galloping, bombs flying everywhere. I got home and found that part of the roof was damaged, and my mother had that wound. It became serious later because there was no treatment. And when the fighting reached Cassino there was no infrastructure for the civilian population, there was nothing. We had to bury our own dead, treat our own wounded, search for our own food and water, and we only had the one lot of clothing on for 6 months. That was the situation for the civilian population. One thing we had to suffer a lot was malaria, so people were trying to cope with that without any available medical treatment. There was a centre established in one of my auntie's houses to examine for malaria.

The cable car stopped working before the battle, after it was bombed by German planes. I went up by cable car to Monte Cassino. We were left dangling once for a couple of hours in a power cut. It was a storm that caused it.

There was me and another couple of lads, we went up there for schooling (special lectures) very occasionally, and the chap there kept us cheerful. He said, "don't worry, this happens so often."

The air raid bombing of Cassino town in September 1943, that was just one incident. But when they landed at Taranto and Salerno, following that there was the Barbara Line and the Volturno and that was in October 1943. My school was taken over by the German military and turned into a first aid post. We saw the convoys of ambulances and vehicles bringing these wounded Germans into our school, and I have to say we felt very sorry for them.

We didn't realise it was going to be that serious. We thought, "OK, a couple of weeks and it will all be over, it will all be through." We didn't have any provisions for 5 or 6 months. We just went; we thought we should evacuate to a place further away from Cassino because we were too near, and we didn't bring a lot with us, and that was the situation. We moved out of Cassino soon after the Volturno battle. In fact, the Germans started to demand that the

population moved out of the town, because that was going to be the main part of the Winter line and they wanted to defend it, put up fortifications and things. I didn't see a lot of the defences being prepared, but they did force men to go and work for them, and my uncle was one of them. So they did see all this was happening. But then they managed to escape, I don't know how, they escaped and came home. He fought in the 1914-18 war, so he had some idea what the military situation was going to be. And he was the one who said, "Look, we need to go further back from where we are now".

Strangely enough, the Christmas Eve of 1943 we were in a stable – there was no bull or donkey, or anything like that, but there was straw that kept us warm. But this stable of course was attached to a farm in which there were Germans. That night they started singing. I didn't know anything about carols, to me they were songs, but it was the first time I heard "Silent Night.... Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht ...". And we were there also on New Year's Eve when they started firing all their guns in celebration.... but there was this solitary (Allied) plane that used to come out every evening and drop a bomb somewhere. And on that occasion he was deliberately aiming for where we were, because they knew there were Germans there. He dropped the bomb but thankfully he missed, and that's when we said "OK, we have to leave here", because we were obviously a target; and we went to other places.

Whenever there was a bombardment of artillery or planes, my mother and the other women used to put a pillow over their heads. I thought "Yes, that's going to save you!" But you would do anything to shut it out.

We went to one house, and one evening my sister said, "Hey, I can hear English!". We opened the window and they were Americans, and we thought, "Fantastic!". The second day, there were Germans there! We were shelled out of that place, and we were making for another house, and it was shelled before we got to it. But there was a family in there. We went to a third house, but my uncle said, "I am going to go back to that house and see if I can help people". He went, they were dead, but there was a child (still alive) whose leg was hanging by a thread (a nerve or something), and so he (my uncle) amputated it with a pair of scissors. It was all he could do – of course, the child died. That was the plight of the civilians.

The Germans didn't care where people went, they just had to go. A lot of people went to the Monastery. Another uncle of mine, his family went there. He also realised it wasn't as safe a place as it seemed, so they left there before it was bombed.

We ended up in one house which thankfully was not shelled, so we were there for quite a while. Quite a bit of it was destroyed anyway, so there were about 25 of us sheltering in one room; my family, my auntie's family of course, and others.... because of the weather. But I don't remember the weather! It was the worst weather ever! But I was 14 and it was very exciting, and I was far too interested in what was going on around me to notice the weather! Especially at night-time seeing all the tracer bullets, it was like fireworks.... we were surrounded by artillery being fired.

Talking of artillery – I had an auntie who was very strong (actually we owe a lot of our survival to her); there were some planes flying over where she lived, and a German lorry came into the courtyard with an anti-aircraft machine gun. She went out and shouted, "You go and play with your toy elsewhere!" – and they clicked their heels and left! She was formidable, that auntie....

At the time I was not aware of things like Hove Dump being made, or Cavendish road, it is difficult to imagine because of the noise that would entail, but of course it was such a noisy place and there was artillery everywhere. In some of the battles those guns were firing 7 rounds-a-second into Cassino town – that was NOISE! The firing caused as much damage to the houses they were surrounding, as to the houses they were aiming at. Every time they fired a gun, something from the house fell.

The first battle when the Americans went across the Rapido, the Germans actually stopped firing, because they thought, "this is just murder"; there is a ceremony on the Rapido near St Angelo where the local women throw petals and flowers on the Rapido, and it's quite moving.

The first American we ever really encountered... I remember, one day we had a fire going - there was a lot of smoke but that didn't matter because there was a lot of smoke everywhere. There was a young American outside and we invited him to come in and sit by the fire. He came in, took off his helmet, put his rifle down beside him... and after a few minutes he burst out crying, and he cried and cried for maybe 20 minutes, and the women were crying with him. Then he put on his helmet, picked up his rifle, and out he went. Not a word was spoken.... I have often wondered why? was it suddenly the feeling of humanity – an invitation? Or was it because he had lost his best friend that day? We will never know.

Another thing I remember about the Americans – there were haystacks, the old-fashioned kind. I was outside this house one day, and I saw something sticking out of a haystack. I went over to look and there was a box of food – cheese, biscuits, chocolate. And there were half a dozen more. I took it all in and we had a feast! Then in the evening this group of Americans came and started searching through the haystack – it was obviously their ration! We felt so guilty, these poor guys - but then at the same time we did all right, and anyway they would probably have got some more food from somewhere else...

We saw the battle for Mignano Gap (November and December 1943). We could see the mountains silhouetted against a red sky, because of all the bombing. We thought then, "Oh my goodness, this is heading our way" – but then we thought, "OK in a week or two they would be through (Cassino) anyway."

We wanted to get on the Allied side. If we went north it would just be prolonging the agony. The uncle of mine who went to Monte Cassino (the monastery), they went north to a far worse place, to Monte Maio, and had a worse time of it than we did. One of my cousins, 18 years old, was shot by the Germans – there was a small group of airmen they were hiding (2,3, or 4, I'm not sure), I don't know if they were American or British, but they were supplying them with food, and my cousin was carrying water to them. Two German patrols stopped him; I don't think they meant to do anything, but my cousin panicked and started running, so they shot him – they didn't kill him, but ironically it was a German military doctor who was trying to save him. He died, but that is the peculiarities of war...

(Before I joined the New Zealanders), we were a few miles out of Cassino. My uncles, me and one or two other men, we had this little wall which we were behind, observing what was going on. We couldn't keep track of everything. When one of the battles ended, we didn't know if the British had gone across or not, until some while after we found that they didn't achieve anything.

The bombing of the Monastery, 15th February 1944

That monastery, it was the intellectual centre of Europe during the Dark Ages and everything we know about the Dark Ages comes from there. It was at that time considered one of the most beautiful buildings.

"How did you feel when you saw the monastery being bombed?"

Oh God, devastated. Because, you know, the only sense of hope we had was that monastery, as civilians. We would pray to it every evening, facing it. We felt that the monastery was still there taking care of us. Whereas this was completely opposite from the Forces, who saw it as a malign presence brooding over them. But then when it was bombed, we felt we had nothing, we had been abandoned, there was nothing there anymore. No-one ever thought that would happen. The museums in Naples had even sent a lot of their treasures to the monastery for safekeeping. The Germans took a lot of precious things out to save them, because they knew it was going to be bombed. They showed on their newsreels that they were taking stuff out to save it, and the British showed the same newsreels saying that the Germans were looting the treasures! The truth is the greatest victim of war!

I remember Hangman's Hill, there was an Indian unit that captured it, and they were stranded there. So the British had to supply them with air drops during the day because nobody could get up to them; we saw that and we thought, "What the hell is going on? Were they dropping something to the Germans, or what? It was that sort of thing that was difficult to work out what was going on. The Indian division was supposed to occupy the hairpin bend first, to allow the Gurkhas to go through and occupy Hangman's Hill. But there was no sign of the Gurkhas, they had fought and fought, and that came to an end, and then the Gurkhas sent this very weak message to say they weren't sure where they were, but they thought it might be Hangman's Hill. No-one had any idea how they had got there, they just got lost and kept going! These Indian divisions fought to try and make a path and then somehow, they just got up there!

There were awful conditions for the troops on the mountainside, especially Snakeshead Ridge. The Americans were the first to get there, lived in sangars etc. in terrible weather - when they were relieved, they couldn't walk, their legs were fixed because they had been in the same position for so long. Many of them had to be lifted up and stretchered down. Also, when they bombed Monte Cassino, the British troops were about 1000 yards away. The British troops weren't informed, and didn't know what to do, so there were a lot of lives lost because they weren't told.

The 23rd New Zealand Battalion

We experienced most of the armed forces – the Germans, Italians, British, Americans, Poles, Moroccans, Algerians (they were the worst) and then the New Zealanders. They were camped in the field where we were. After they had finished their meals, they would give anything left over to the local population, but it wasn't controlled. My friend and I (we were 14 then) thought we would control it, so we got two sticks and people would wait in line. The New Zealanders gave us each an arm band stating "KP", Kitchen Police! So we controlled the crowd, but strangely enough we didn't save anything for ourselves. The New Zealand chap asked why we weren't saving anything for ourselves, so we started to save some for ourselves first and give out the rest. After the fourth battle of Monte Cassino, at the end of May 1944, one day (I had just turned 15) I saw they (the New Zealand 23rd Battalion) were clearing up and moving out, and I thought "How sad", and said, "Can I join you?". They said "yes, of course you can!". My other friend didn't want to (join them). They were going to Arce, about 15 kilometres away, to a rest area, and my idea was that if this didn't work out, I could always come back. I went to my family and said, "Look I'm in a hurry, I'm not coming back because I am going to join the New

Zealand army", and they said, "Yes, of course you are, good luck son"! They thought I was having a joke... Then when I didn't turn up, they realised it was true.

I was comparatively well-off when I joined the New Zealanders, because I was getting regular food, but I don't remember what we ate. I remember very little about things like that.

I looked even younger than my age then. They didn't ask the officers or anything, it was all unofficial. It was in Arce that the officers asked what was going on with this young lad and they said, "We've enlisted him". The Colonel, the Battalion Commander, Sandy Thomas, (he was only 24 years old when he took command of the Battalion) said, "OK". They gave me a uniform, and drove me to see my family; then I was with them (the New Zealanders) right through to Trieste. We went through the Gothic Line, the Genghis Khan line, several other lines.... we went via Rome, almost up to Sienna. My battalion, Sandy Thomas's, was the first one in Florence. But we were ordered immediately to retreat, because it wasn't for the New Zealanders to be the first into Florence, it had to be another division; that was for somebody else. So we then went to the Adriatic side of the Gothic Line. This colonel we had in the battalion, he was very young, 24 years old and a colonel. They were just fighting a battle, and the thing that attracted him was an 80-year-old woman rummaging through the destruction of her house, trying to find a picture, or a sheet or something. She could hardly walk, and he wondered if she would be able to walk to the next village. I thought to myself, "Here was a man involved in such a military operation and yet the thing that drew his attention was this old woman trying to see what she could find". I thought that was fantastic. Humanity.

Some of the worst fighting was at a place called Celle, north of the Gothic Line. Then there was the River Senio. The Germans made a huge mistake, after Cassino; they should have retreated completely to the Po. Thank goodness they didn't, because had they fortified the Po, that would have been a hell of an obstacle to get across. Instead they fortified all along, and were weakening themselves as they retreated through Italy.

I was an interpreter. I wasn't actually fighting - they made sure I was never in a firefight situation. But of course, I was in Company HQ, and we were always under fire from shells and bombs. When we left Arce, we were in a place called San Donato, and I saw 2 Bren Gun carriers (they were only jeeps with tracks around them). We had Bren Gun carriers at Company HQ. I asked where they were going and they said they were just going out on patrol, so I asked (me again!) if I could go with them, and they said "Yes, jump in!". Then one chap said, "Look Tony, if the shit starts flying, just lie down, you'll be all right". And I thought, "What the hell is he on about - if the shit starts flying?"! I didn't realise they were going out for a couple of kilometres to see where the Germans were, exactly. We came back and reported no sight of Germans. Although they (the Germans) were there, but they didn't want us to know they were there. The captain was furious that they took me with them, but they said, "Why not, he's a lad!" - we lived dangerously, but they were Kiwis for goodness sake! That's the only real danger I was ever in, if you can call it that. I would go with them when we used to supply the troops at the front with what they needed.

There was only one truck that had permission to leave the camp at any time and that was the water-tanker. I got so friendly with this guy, we used to go everywhere - "We are just going to look for water" ... "OK!" I suppose to a point, I got away with some things the ordinary soldiers couldn't. I had some sergeant's stripes - Sandy Thomas said, "Look you are an interpreter, you should at least have sergeant's stripes." Of course, they were purely honorary, I had no authority whatsoever; I wasn't paid or anything, but I did get my medals.

The end of the War

Talking about the Germans at the end of the war - I was at Battalion HQ for a few days on the Adriatic coast at a place called Latisana. There was only a small group of us, and we came across 500 Germans, fully armed, who put up the white flag and wanted to surrender. They wanted to surrender, but did not want to surrender to the Italian partisans (the Germans were afraid of retaliation if they surrendered to them). We were surrounded by Italian partisans; we were the only British anywhere near there. So there had to be a conference; their officers and our officers got round a table and discussed the surrender. It was most uncanny because we were armed, they were armed, it only needed an accident or something to happen. One of our officers called a chap (I think his name was Jim) to go with me and find out where the Italian partisans' HQ was, so we could inform them of what was happening. So OK, we went here, there and everywhere, and finally we found the HQ. We told the Italian partisans about the German prisoners and the commander asked where they were. Jim said, "You go in Tony, I'll stay here and guard the jeep". So I went in and the Commander opened a map, and I realised I didn't know where we were. I went outside and asked Jim, and he said, "I haven't a clue"! So that was my big day - it all went phttt! When we eventually traced our way back, they had all disappeared.... we didn't know what had happened. I was told another British force had arrived on the scene and they had taken the prisoners; at least that's the story I heard. Whatever happened after that, I don't know.

Towards the end in Italy things were very confusing... one day I went with the cook to find some eggs. We got in the 15cwt truck and went along a small track road with a farm at the end. We hadn't got far when a German appeared with his rifle. The cook said, "Tony, are you armed?" I said, "No - are you?" "No!" So we thought, "A fine mess we are in"! We thought that if we tried to turn around, they might take a few shots at us, so we had to stand still. We had an iron rod, a tube, in the vehicle, so the cook said, "I'll wind the window down and you hold this as if you are holding a rifle, and I'll go out and tell them to shoot off." I can't remember this chap's name, but he was very courageous. I said, "Yes OK", and that's what I did. Then another German walked out, there were two of them. They were about 50 yards away, and he very courageously got out and walked towards them.

The last thing I saw was he took the rifles off them, and told them to get in the back of the truck, and off we went. So we went back to camp and said "We haven't got any eggs, but we've got two prisoners!" They had had enough, they wanted to give themselves up, but, you know, it might not have been like that, we didn't know.... That must have been early 1945 because the war ended in Italy in May 1945. German morale was at an all-time low, and they must have realised it was over for them. Everything was going well on the second front, the Russians were nearly in Berlin, and hearing all that news must have been terrible for them – but there was still a group who fought to the end, against all odds.

October 1945, Trieste; keeping the peace

What was known as the blue line – the Yugoslavs didn't want to give up Trieste, and the Battalion I was with were in the front line there. The Yugoslavs put up road-blocks and we put up road-blocks, and sometimes it was pretty dangerous. But I think it was due to the diplomacy and the discipline of the troops of the 23rd Battalion, that nothing serious actually ever happened. In fact, after a few weeks the Yugoslavs gave a party and asked some of us to go, and said, "Please could we forget it, forget Trieste?", and they withdrew. We weren't allowed in Trieste unless it was really necessary, and we weren't allowed to be alone in Trieste, there had to be at least 2 of you and you had to be armed. But we used to go out at night anyway...

While I was with the New Zealanders, I managed to get back to see my family a couple of times. Quite often when I was with the RASC, (it was a clearing-up operation by then), we had to drive down to Bari. I remember one occasion we had to deliver jeeps and spare tyres, but the papers only said jeep and 4 wheels, so we took off the spare tyres and sold them. One occasion when I was with the 23rd, we were sent to guard a petrol station where they had hundreds of gallons of petrol in jerry cans. So we loaded up a lot of jerry cans and sold them to the locals. There was lots of stuff like that going on, and you had to do things like that just to forget what was happening.

At the end of the fighting, the Battalion disbanded in early December 1945. Some went to Japan and some returned home to New Zealand. We were in Florence at this time, and I joined the New Zealand Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) for a few months, then the New Zealand Graves Registration Unit. I was with them for about 4 months. We built a cemetery, and our job was to go and collect bodies here, there and everywhere and bring them all to that one cemetery. They were the last handful of New Zealanders left in Italy. They then went off to Austria and I decided to come back home to England. I went back to Cassino first because I had to get passports and tickets and everything, and then came back home.

When I went back to Cassino, of course it had been reduced to rubble, but they were starting to clear and build the first houses, as it was over a year since the battle there. I came back first by myself, then went back to pick up my mother and sisters. My mother was trying to get treatment for her foot, which she did, but it wasn't very much, and they amputated her leg when she came back to England.

Return to England

My father met me at Victoria Station. He knew what I had been up to, because he was writing to me by then, as communication had got a bit easier with me being with the New Zealanders. In his lifetime my father had been at sea, he was a hairdresser in charge of the hairdressing shops on the Union Castle lines. On one ship there was a ship's doctor, a New Zealander called MacIntosh. My father had a hairdressing shop in Oxford, and one day in walked this chap and they recognised each other from the ship they had been on together. My father told MacIntosh the story of me being with the New Zealand forces and this Professor MacIntosh was the chief anaesthetist at the Nuffield Medical Research centre in Oxford. He told my father that when I got back to England there would be a job for me there, so I spent two years as a technician apprentice there, although I wasn't really interested in medical research. My father thought I would be a hairdresser; he tried to teach me, but I wasn't interested in that either.

When I got back, first of all I tried to do something about my education. I had to go to evening classes quite a lot, and I took languages. I did several things; I was a medical rep first in Devon and Cornwall. I was also a courier for ages with coach tours around Europe, but my main career (this is why we are here in Felixstowe) started with a Company in Ipswich that wanted to start exporting to Europe; they applied for a linguist, and I got the job, so I spearheaded their exporting activities to Europe. I was with them for 8 years and then I went to Wiggins Teape and world-wide exporting. So that was my main career.

Tony's recollections of Pisinisco and mountain villages around Cassino

I have a friend whose father was on the Arandora Star. So many (on that ship) were from Scotland, but there is no monument to the Arandora Star in Scotland (*see note). So many of the mountain villages around the Cassino area were destroyed, mostly by Allied forces during the fighting. You went through after the war and you saw all these villages quite destroyed.

Rebuilding Cassino after the war

The first organisation was a military one, and they then established a civilian one. Everywhere they went the military would take over first and try to organise, and get the civilians together. It wasn't just a case of moving through and leaving everything as it was. They got the wounded people accommodated first, and because my mother was wounded, she was in the first block of flats to be built in Cassino, which is still there. The north of Italy prospered quite well (from the regeneration) after the war, but the south still remained poor, and Cassino became prosperous when Fiat built the factory there; and of course, it is also a University town, with engineering as its main faculty. In Cassino, when they were clearing (the rubble), they still came across lots of bodies buried, and even in the castle a long time after, they came across the bodies of 3 British soldiers. I remember seeing this; they came across a German tank which, when they bombed Cassino, obviously this tank was in the middle of the street somewhere and everything fell on top of it, and of course they couldn't get out. So those poor devils in that tank, I don't know whether they shot themselves or what they did, but they knew they couldn't get out. I remember them disinfecting this tank when they found it. My mother's leg; When things began to get into place, when there was a hospital built in Cassino, she had treatment there, but it wasn't very good. They were short of supplies. She had a cast on, she came home with a cast on. I remember she used to cry in the night, but that was all you could do; you could hear all the people crying, screaming because of their pain and there's nothing you can do. If you asked a soldier if he could give you something for the pain, he would probably say, "no" because he had probably only got enough morphine or whatever in case he got wounded or something, so it was a bad situation. It was bad because it lasted so long. Then I think of people like in Berlin, or Stalingrad, or the ghetto in Poland, and what those people must have gone through. Cassino is totally different from how it was – now it's rubbish, I don't like it. It was a very dusty town, but it was an elegant town, because we were influenced by the Monastery; so being the town at the foot of Monte Cassino we had to behave, we had to be nice. They rebuilt some of it where it was before, but most of it is on new ground. The Roman ruins were more intact before the bombing, there had been Volscian ruins before the Romans, but all that disappeared. We have been back (to the Monastery) a few times to see Annigoni's paintings, but I now have only 2 elderly cousins in Cassino. Senger Von Etterlin was the greatest commander, he was a lay Benedictine and he forbade any military involvement so many hundred yards from the Monastery. The monastery was still self-sufficient; Albaneta farm behind the monastery supplied it, and they also had their own water supply because monasteries had to be self-sufficient. But when it was bombed everyone left. They had hundreds of students and monks at the monastery before the war, but only about a dozen now in that huge place.

VE day- I remember the soldiers' reaction when VE day came was, "Is that it then?" There was no feeling of celebration, feelings were so mixed up. I remember Christmas day in 1944; we were served by the officers. We had just come out of the line about 2 days previously, but we had a fantastic meal, even oysters; it was fantastic, but then suddenly there was a solemn mood because you realised all the officers that were missing. That was the thing. We had in our battalion Major Boyle; he was killed 2 hours before he was due to go home. He had written to his wife that he was coming home and everything – he and his batman were killed by a shell. I remember at his funeral, oh gosh, he was on a stretcher, he was covered in a blanket, but his feet were sticking out and he had no shoes on, just his grey socks. And it took me all my willpower not to go back and push the blanket down over his feet. My son went to New Zealand once and met some of the people I had been with, and they gave him a tape recording to bring back to me, to say "hello". There were things that I couldn't remember doing, or I thought I had imagined, but they really did happen. There was so much going on that it is impossible to remember it all, especially as I was such a young lad; there were things that interested me that wouldn't have interested the more mature soldiers. They are all gone now. The last New Zealander I was in contact with was a person called John Ross, and he died 2 years ago. But I am in touch with their children (including children of Captain John Harvey) and have met some at the cemetery in Cassino. We went to New Zealand about 40 years after the war. I wrote to a New Zealand newspaper, saying I had been with the 23rd, and asked if anyone remembered me, and I got such an influx of letters back, it was wonderful. I went to a reunion and was a guest of honour with Sandy Thomas the Colonel. I was with the 23rd Battalion of the 5th brigade. They were good lads. The 23rd, we always moved with a Maori battalion, the 28th; they flanked us, and we always felt very safe with them on either side of us. At the 70th anniversary in Cassino, I was made an honorary member of the Maori battalion, which was nice.

Tony's wife, Jackie says "These last commemorations (2019), there has been a strong rapport with children, and the veterans are realising that people are really interested, so they are opening up... I am much more interested in the civilians' stories than the military tactics etc. Nobody ever thinks about the civilian side of it – like the bombing of London. My parents went through the blitz and there is quite a story there.....when the D Day

landings took place 10,000 French civilians died; you hear all about the troops, but not often about the civilians; nobody thinks about the civilian casualties.

(*note) In 2011 a commemorative Italian Cloister Garden was opened at St Andrew's Cathedral in Glasgow. The central plinth contains the names of all those Italians lost on the Arandora Star.