

Wally Smith

Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry

Wally Smith served with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry as a Private and Stretcher Bearer in the Sicilian and Italian Campaign. He writes about the Liri Valley and the Hitler Line.

Late April, 1944, and it's time to leave the Adriatic front, where the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry has spent the last few months of the campaign in Italy.

Little did we know it was Sir Winston Churchill's decision to capture Rome that prompted our latest move. Numerous inspections and visits to our unit by Generals was a sure indication of something big coming up. We had a battalion smoker (mess party) to celebrate the WWI battle of Frezenberg, then exercises with tanks of the North Irish Horse, 8th Army veterans of North Africa. Shortly after arrival in our new area of action, near Cassino, we were bombed by the German air force. I mention this as it was one of the few times that the Luftwaffe bothered us.

We heard that the French Colonial troops were doing great on our left and that the Polish Corps had forced the Germans from Monte Cassino. As a private soldier and stretcher-bearer, I knew little of what was going on; confusion appeared to be the 'order of the day'. Plans of attack kept changing. Finally on the morning of May 23rd we moved off into a very heavily wooded area following an artillery barrage. The noise, smoke from burnt-out tanks, disabled by mines, the shelling and small arms fire all added to a hellish situation, and patching up the wounded has just left very depressing memories. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade made up of the PPCLI, Seaforth Highlanders and Loyal Edmonton Regiment, all had a very bad time. The Patricia's had over 220 casualties, 58 killed, 162 wounded and 27 missing. Two of my best buddies, both stretcher-bearers, were among those killed. Last summer I was able to visit their graves at Cassino War Cemetery.

To visit Cassino, the abbey and Polish cemetery in 2004 was a great sensation, but looking down on the Liri Valley left me wondering, 'was it worth it?' but very thankful to be alive.

Following Cassino and the Hitler Line were many more significant actions and many rivers to cross. One example, the Savio, a muddy stream of swollen storm water. Crossing this cost the Patricia's 79 men, 10 of whom were killed. This, in October '44, and still fifteen to twenty more rivers and canals to get over before being transferred to Holland.