



**Welcome to our Summer 2025 newsletter.**

It was inevitable that with 2025 seeing the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VE Day on 8<sup>th</sup> May, the country focused celebrations on this commemoration, and it was a welcome mark of recognition for MCS and the Italian Campaign that ten of our members were able to enjoy the spectacular Gala concert in London by invitation of the Royal British Legion. The battles for Monte Cassino were even mentioned in his speech by HM The King when he reminded the nationwide audience of overlooked campaigns whose eventual success had contributed so much to that Victory in Europe being celebrated.

The contribution of the Italian campaign to overall victory in 1945, and our duty to remember those who served to free the world of tyranny in 'forgotten' campaigns, was also the theme of his address by Rev Fergus Cook to the congregation in Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, when we celebrated the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war in Italy. The same sentiment was echoed two weeks later by the Rev Victor Van den Bergh, when he addressed our gathering to commemorate the 81<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the battles for Monte Cassino at the National Memorial Arboretum on May 17<sup>th</sup>. Both men also reminded us of the need, now as ever, for humanity to learn the lessons of the past and strive to avert conflict in the world.

Since our memorable group visit to Cassino last year for the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battles for Monte Cassino there has been renewed interest among members in the Italian Campaign as a whole, with several joining Frank de Planta on his battlefield study tours to the Sangro, the Gothic Line, and Cassino. It is still possible to join our Society study tour with Frank to the Gothic Line in October this year, so please get in touch as soon as possible if you are interested. Details of the study tour can be found in the Winter 2024 newsletter.

In this issue we have reports of these and other events, and information for those members who wish to join us to march at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day on Sunday November 9<sup>th</sup> 2025. The support of our members on these Commemorative occasions is one of the most visible and effective ways to keep the memory of the Italian campaign alive, and is always much appreciated.

We also have more personal stories sent in by MCS members, including one major feature, a fascinating account of his time with mules by Major C T Berridge OBE, lent to us by his daughter Mary on page 14, and a letter home from the Italian front offers an alternative, soldier's account of his VE Day on page 21.

I hope you enjoy the newsletter, and thank you for your continued support of the Monte Cassino Society,  
Helen James

Editor, June 2025

## **November Ceremonies 2025**

### **Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph – Sunday 09<sup>th</sup> November 2025.**

Planning for this year's Gathering at the Cenotaph is already well underway by the Royal British Legion (RBL). Any member of the Society who wishes to be on Horse Guards Parade in November will need to have completed and returned the enclosed form to Liz Longman so that it arrives by the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2025. Please note that due to the wider security issues, we can only apply for tickets on behalf of current Members of the Society.

Once your application has been received by the RBL, you will receive an e-mail acknowledging this, sent to the e-mail address you specified on the form. The tickets will then be sent to the same e-mail on the 30<sup>th</sup> or 31<sup>st</sup> October, so if you have not seen anything from the RBL by the Middle of September, please contact Liz. This is the reason why your email address must be written clearly on the application form.

### **Westminster Abbey Fields of Remembrance – Thursday 06<sup>th</sup> November 2025.**

Would anyone who wishes to attend please let Lesley Teasdale know by 3<sup>rd</sup> August. Tickets for this event are extremely limited and there are no guarantees, but she will request tickets for any current Members of the Society who would like to attend.

### **Westminster Abbey Fields of Remembrance – Dedications.**

If anyone would like a dedication placed on one of the Crosses which the Society places in the Monte Cassino plot at the Field of Remembrance, then please send the details to Lesley Teasdale, who will collate them ready for November.

Liz Longman [liz.longman@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:liz.longman@hotmail.co.uk) Lesley Teasdale [lesleytea.lt@gmail.com](mailto:lesleytea.lt@gmail.com)

Thank you, Lesley & Liz

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## **WALKING IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS – 22-26 MARCH 2025**

### **THE EIGHT ARMY BATTLES ON THE ADRIATIC, OCTOBER-DECEMBER 1943**

On 22 March 2025, eight former soldiers and five members of the Society led by Helen James, Sue Hughes and Lesley Teasdale, set out for Rome. Their aim, over four days, was to follow in the footsteps of those Commonwealth Divisions who fought on the Adriatic side of Italy between October-December 1943. Frank de Planta was their guide.

Lesley's father had served in this part of the Italian Campaign in 2nd Battalion London Irish Rifles, Sue's father in 3rd Battalion 8th Punjab Regiment and Helen's father in 75th (Shropshire Yeomanry) Medium Regiment Royal Artillery. The soldiers in the group had all served together in 7th Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment.

The study started at Montefalcone nel Sannio after a night in a delightful hotel on the banks of the River Trigno and a delicious meal. We started by looking at the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Division's operation to secure the near bank of the Trigno followed by 19th Indian Brigade's operation to cross and secure the little hilltop village of Tufillo. Throughout, the scenery was superb and it was easy to appreciate just what hardships

the soldiers endured. The setting was the southern outskirts of the Gustav Line and a place where the Germans had decided to make a stand.

From the River Trigno, we pushed north east towards the mighty River Sangro and studied all the challenges that the Allies faced along the way - the harsh terrain, the appalling weather, the winding and switching road network and the advantages that every German enjoyed by being in defence. We passed through villages that were mentioned in Helen's father's notes and marvelled at what was done to achieve success.

Our second night was spent on the south bank of the River Sangro with one group in Archi and another in Atesa. In both, evidence of war peppered many buildings. Perched on high ridges overlooking deep valleys, both Archi and Atesa offered stunning views of the ground over which tired soldiers' legs endlessly plodded through mud.

The morning of our third day was spent following the exploits of 19th Indian Brigade as they successfully crossed the River Sangro and secured the most important height in the area - Il Calvario at Point 360. This height dominated the River Sangro all the way down to the Adriatic 12 miles away and so had to be secured if subsequent crossings by 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division and 78<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were to be made easier. We saw how, after a gruelling two days and nights, the 19<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade task was achieved with 3rd Battalion 8th Punjab Regiment and 1/5th Battalion Essex Regiment leading the way.

In the afternoon, we visited the beautiful River Sangro CWGC cemetery and paid our respects at the graveside of men mentioned in the previous days. From there, we moved north, crossed the vast floodplain of the River Sangro and climbed up the far ridge to Fossacesia and Mozzogogna. Here we studied the brilliant 78th Infantry Division/4th Armoured Brigade operation to clear the high ground north of the river and the subsequent 21st Indian Brigade push north east towards Lanciano. Alan Whiting, one of the soldiers in the group, explained how his grandfather - a Sergeant in 5th Battalion Royal West Kents, was wounded at Villa Romagnoli during this 21st Indian Brigade operation. We stood on the spot and all were moved by his story.



Venturing further north beyond Lanciano, we visited the site of the *Impossible Bridge* and marvelled at the daring of the Indian Engineers. Unable to build a bridge over the River Moro from the near bank, the ingenious solution was to take all the bridge parts to the far bank and assemble them from there. The sappers installed it from the German bank to the Allied bank and gave the advance new vitality.

Our fourth night was spent with one group in Poggiofiorti and the other in Lanciano. Meeting the next morning in Castelfrentano, we spent the morning looking in detail at the tortuously challenging 2nd New Zealand Division operations to capture Orsogna - 23 days of grinding effort before the town finally succumbed. In the afternoon, after a lunch of Adriatic fish, we looked at 1/5th Essex Regiment's Christmas Eve attack on Villa Grande. This brutal event, in a tiny hamlet in Italy where neither side gave any quarter, is a battle honour on the Colours of the Essex Regiment.



The valley and flood plain of the River Sangro near the Adriatic coast

The Essex Regiment's success was almost the last hoorah of the Allied advance up the Adriatic coast. A grinding three months had so worn down the advancing Allied Divisions that a halt was called and five months of stalemate set in. The focus was on securing Rome, so attention switched to US Fifth Army at Cassino who were just 87 miles from the Eternal City. An approach on Rome from the Tyrranean side of Italy seemed to offer better prospects for success.

So, freed of the need to advance, Eighth Army were able to start releasing tired troops for use at Cassino and it was not long before 2nd New Zealand Division, 4th Indian Division and 78th Infantry Division found themselves entrenched at Cassino in support of US Fifth Army. Their gruelling time at Monte Cassino had begun and they were later joined by 8th Indian Division.



The visit to the Sangro area – and an in depth look at what the Eighth Army endured on that side of Italy between October-December 1943, made it very clear to everyone in the group that Monte Cassino was but one part of the Italian Campaign. The penny dropped that many of the Divisions, Brigades and Regiments who fought in the Second, Third and Fourth Battles of Cassino arrived in front of the monastery from the Adriatic side in a state of exhaustion from their exertions on the Trigno, Sangro and Moro.

These were D Day Dodgers.

By Frank de Planta

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### 'He was my best pal'

Many of those who landed in Italy never made it to Cassino, including a friend of my father's and the grandfather of one of the retired Royal Anglian soldiers on the Sangro study.

Things happened to soldiers before Cassino – and if they survived – things happened after, which brings a fresh perspective to those of us who have been to Cassino and beyond. The story of how they got there is not only fascinating but also as formidable as the battles for Cassino.

My father, Captain Wilfrid Potter (1922-2003), was a British officer who served with the 3rd Battalion 8th Punjab Regiment (3/8 Punjabis). He was 21 when he landed at Taranto in September 1943.

Prior to the landing, in Transjordan he took pictures of Petra; it was through a letter from Captain Denis Stewart, describing Petra to his family, that I discovered he was my father's friend. As brother officers, they landed in Italy at the same time and both are listed in the 3/8 Punjabis War Diaries.

I have been to the Sangro Cemetery before, but on reading a letter that Frank de Planta acquired, written to Denis Stewart's mother by another officer, I knew those words needed to be repeated at his grave. And that is what I did.



Four 3/8 Punjabi graves in the Sangro cemetery

There are four 3/8 Punjabis graves in a row in what I call 'my corner of the Sango' and Denis Stewart is one of them. I also spotted those of men from regiments attached to the Special Air Service who were killed during vicious fighting at Termoli in October 1943 (there are 21 in all).

Having soldiers who have served on numerous recent tours, hard men who have heard words like these before, taught me to appreciate every location in a different manner. The Sangro experience brought home just how depleted the forces were, long before they sighted the Abbey on the hill at Monte Cassino.

Alan Whiting is one of the former Royal Anglians in our group. His grandfather Frank Whiting served as a Rifle Platoon Sergeant in 5th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment and was wounded by machine gun fire which tore through his knee just west of Mozzagrogna at Villa Romagnoli – a village on a forward slope beyond the Sangro. After spending months in hospital in Italy, he returned to England.

On the exact spot where he was wounded, Alan explained how his grandfather's war ended; our stories merged because my father and Alan's grandfather were in the 8th Indian Division by then.

Denis Stewart died on 23rd November 1943, aged 26, and Alan's grandfather was wounded on 3rd December 1943. Both men never reached Cassino.

The 'letter to a grieving mother' was also read at the recent MCS NMA Remembrance Service... when I had to compete with three noisy flypasts by a Lancaster bomber marking the Dambusters' 80th. It will feature in a future newsletter.

By Sue Hughes




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Service at Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2025, to commemorate the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of the war in Italy.

Report by Helen James

Several members of the Society attended and were made very welcome at the gathering in Blackhall St. Columba's Church on a sunny afternoon. The Rev. Fergus Cook led us in a beautiful service giving thanks for the end of the war in Italy and remembering all those who suffered and died in the conflict, while reminding us that it is as important now as it was 80 years ago to continue to strive for peace and truth in the world. During the service, the Last Post was played by state trumpeter Tony Laidlaw.

After the service, and led by Pipe Major Mark Macrae and the Standards of the Seaforth Highlanders and Cameron Highlanders Regimental Associations and the Monte Cassino Society, we proceeded to the War memorial where wreaths were laid by the Consuls of Canada and India, representatives of the Polish Veterans Association, the Royal Artillery Association, the Seaforth Highlanders Association, Sikorski Polish Memorial House, the Cameron Highlanders, the Veterans Chaplaincy, Blackhall Kirk Session and the

Monte Cassino Society.

Back in the Church, everyone enjoyed a delicious and very convivial afternoon tea prepared by members of the congregation, bringing a conclusion to an uplifting, and at times emotional, commemoration. Our sincere thanks go to Fergus and his team once again, for their warm hospitality and commitment to remembering the Italian Campaign.





## VE Day 80 A Celebration to Remember

By Sharon Shaw

The finale of the VE Day celebrations culminated in a live concert from Horse Guards Parade and ten members of the Monte Cassino Society were honoured to be able to attend.

With stars of stage and screen performing iconic wartime songs, and veterans telling their own stories, it was a truly memorable evening.

His Majesty the King delivered a speech at the precise moment 80 years after King George VI spoke to the nation to celebrate VE Day. The King recalled words from her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's diary, which was both moving and humorous and he delighted our attendees by mentioning Monte Cassino in his speech.

With Union Jacks waving and light-up bracelets shining brightly, the audience were treated to a truly spectacular event, with a flypast by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (Official's) Lancaster as a surprise treat.

As the evening drew to a close, beautiful renditions of the 'White Cliffs of Dover' and 'We'll Meet Again' didn't leave a dry eye, especially as the wonderful veterans in attendance could be seen singing along and waving their flags in the royal box. It was certainly an evening to remember for all of us.



Everyone enjoying themselves at the VE day concert



### **81st Anniversary Commemoration Service at the National Memorial Arboretum**

By Sharon Shaw

On Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> May, 40 members of the Monte Cassino Society attended the service for the 81<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino. As we all gathered at the Society Memorial Stone, what had started out as a very chilly, cloudy morning turned into a beautiful afternoon when the sun appeared as 2 o'clock struck, very apt under the circumstances.

A beautiful service was led by the Revd. Victor M Van den Burgh, who always manages to bring the right balance of light heartedness and reverence to the proceedings.

As Sue Hughes, the Society's Liaison Officer took to the lectern to deliver her reading, a rumbling noise could be heard in the distance. As Sue bravely carried on, over the horizon appeared a Lancaster bomber engaged in a flypast for another memorial taking place. This continued three times but instead of it being an interruption it was an incredible sight for us all to see.



Sue's Lancaster bomber!

The lesson was read by Dr Michael Wilson, and Helen James read 'On the Road to Rome', a very emotional piece from the History of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, describing conditions as the Allies moved forward into the Liri Valley after the Battle of Cassino.

The Last Post and Reveille, always very moving, was played as usual by the bugler Antonio Socci and the Society's wreath was laid by Major (Retd) Karen Czernik whose father fought at the Battle of Monte Cassino with the Polish Second Corps.

As we all took a moment of reflection, a recording of 'Dear Lord and Father' by the band and singers of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards played, and the service ended with a rendition of 'God save the King'.

Afterwards members chatted and reminisced and made their way to the café to partake of some much-needed refreshments.

As in previous years, it was a lovely day to give thanks, to remember and to spend time with companions and friends.



The gathering at the National Memorial Arboretum



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### Monte Cassino Society Pin badges.

We have Monte Cassino Society pin badges featuring the new society logo, available for purchase.

Measuring 1 inch (2.5 cms) in diameter, the badges are available from Lesley Teasdale ([lesleytea.lt@gmail.com](mailto:lesleytea.lt@gmail.com)) at £5 each, including postage and packing.

MCS ties and scarves are also available. Ties are £13 and scarves £20, both include postage and packing.



### Maintaining the Amazon Bridge memorial

By Paul Taylor (son of Herbert Taylor, 28th Brigade).



Paul and John at the 4th Essex memorial, Cassino

In the winter newsletter there was a message from George Cowie about going to Cassino in May 2025 to help Cassino Adventureland set up a battlefield tour. Part of this visit was concerned with maintaining the monument erected in remembrance of the Engineers who constructed Amazon Bridge, which was built and put across the river Gari in the dark and under fire on the 13th May 1944. John Leach, whose father was in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and killed in Cassino, asked me if I was interested in helping with the work.

Subsequently the two of us flew to Naples in early May where we met George. He had arranged for a small party of retired Engineers to help as well and over a long weekend we cleaned the monument, which is a 1942 panel from a Bailey Bridge, and its brick supports. It is surrounded by a grassed area which has a sprinkler system, the trouble being that the water is very hard and the resulting lime took some shifting from the panel and the brick. Also the pebbled area immediately around the monument was infested with a particularly strong couch grass, so we shovelled off the pebbles, replaced the barrier matting and then did more shovelling. George was pleased with the result. The ongoing problem with maintaining the monument and the others remembering the regiments in 10th Brigade (the Beds & Herts, DCLI and East Surreys) is that they are all unofficial, and as such are maintained by volunteers and not the commune in Cassino or any other body.

In the newsletter George mentioned the booklet which he and Paul Hooton have written on the 4th Division's assault on the Gustav line, and as a reward for our work he took us on a tour of the battlefield as outlined in the back of the booklet. It was very interesting to see the sites of the three bridges which the 4th Division put across the river and how it fared in the following few days. At 5am on the 13th May a short service was held at the site of Amazon Bridge, which was very memorable, and a service was also later held in the CWGC cemetery in Cassino.





The Cassino Shiny 7 group at the Amazon Bridge memorial service

### Snippets

From Antony Pittaccio:

Regarding Montecassino's La Birra d'Abbazia, it goes back to the fifth century when it is said barley was grown for beer production within the Montecassino Abbey. The Monastery is considered the first one to produce beer. I don't know when or why it ceased but Montecassino now produces again what it refers to as an iconic, naturally carbonated craft beer. It can be purchased by going to [www.birramontecassino.co.uk](http://www.birramontecassino.co.uk), although it is a bit expensive.

### Dad's war

*While in conversation after the NMA service, the Rev Victor van den Bergh recounted this short story of his father's Monte Cassino experience. This was all his father told him:*

"It's a short story really, Dad's Wellington ditched somewhere north of the battlefield and so he and the rest of the crew spent a bit of time enjoying the hospitality of the locals - presumed dead and later presumed awol, as they took their time and supported the resistance and the local wine producers and women. Seems he had a great war all in all...."

### The Peace in Europe Conference.

On Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> May I was delighted to join MCS Members Richard O'Sullivan, John Strafford and Rosemary & Keith Haywood at the London Scottish House, Horseferry Road SW1 for the inaugural 'Peace in Europe Conference' which Eddie O'Sullivan had organised, and to witness the formal launch of **The International Second World War History Association**.

The very title itself throws up questions, until you consider that whilst the Allies were celebrating their Victory, for everyone else the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 marked the end of the war and the outbreak of Peace in Europe. Which for the majority of us (although sadly not everyone) has endured ever since.

Having argued a very strong case for this change of perspective, the main thrust of the conference was more to do with ensuring that the personal and family memories of all those who lived through those momentous events are kept alive and to ensure that those who, having discovered 'Great Uncle Albert's box of letters and photographs' in the loft, are guided through the process of learning more and are able to place these valuable, first person accounts somewhere that not only will they be preserved, but they will be made available to future archivists. Something that we in the Society experience regularly via enquires through the website, and try to support through the advice we give and by publishing personal stories in the Newsletter and on-line.

We were treated to a number of very interesting talks, ranging from Paul Woodage from the YouTube Channel WW2TV, who talked about the Pros & Cons of producing History Videos on Social Media, to Mark Howard who through a series of photographs taken by his Grandfather on active service in Sicily with the Royal Artillery, demonstrated how (when published online) these allowed the conclusion of a longstanding argument regarding the location of an 'infamous' location associated with the Battle for Primosole Bridge. Subsequent to this discovery, a plaque was able to be erected there.

Whilst the family experiences related by the speakers covered everything from growing up in England and discovering much later that your biological father had been killed in the war, to an uncle who died on the Sandakan Death March in Borneo. There were a surprising number which dealt with the Mediterranean and Italy, proving that as we already know, there was more to the war in Europe than D-Day, Arnhem & Luneburg Heath.

Given the Society's strap line of 'Furthering an Interest in the Italian Campaign', **The International Second World War History Association** efforts to look after the crucial, but low level personal memories of the individuals who took part but barely spoke about things afterwards, and whose legacy is now being discovered across the country, is to be lauded and something which I feel the Society should get firmly behind.

Whilst nothing definite was announced on the day, I am extremely hopeful that this was the first of many such gatherings, and that more members of the Society will be able to attend the next one, whenever that might be.

Lesley Teasdale

*Continuing our series of articles on animals in WW2, the following one was sent in by MCS member Mary Berridge, who recently found it among her late father's effects, along with an amazing set of photographs which he may have taken, some of which are shown here. Many more are available to view on the IWM website.*

*Reprinted by permission of the Imperial War Museum (IWM).*

### **Major Clifford Thomas Berridge**

**Pack Transport, 359 Company, Royal Army Service Corps**

by Mary Berridge

The Battle of Monte Cassino was always a huge part of my father's life and much of my childhood was



surrounded by stories and connections about the Battle. My father grew up with horses and was involved with horses all his life, so being involved with the mules at Cassino was a perfect fit for him. After Cassino he proceeded to the High Apennines between Florence and Bologna supporting US Fifth Army that the British XIII Corps were attached to, serving under appalling conditions of weather and terrain - for this he received the OBE and was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. The citation from the archives reads: "the satisfactory record of the Group is due in large part to the enthusiasm, energy and tact displayed by Lieutenant Colonel Berridge".

After the war he was debriefed in Rome at the Allied Commission and met my glamorous Italian mother who was an interpreter there. They married in 1947 in England, and he subsequently retired to live in Rome. After a short service commission 1947-1960 he retired from the service.

### **SOME ADVENTURES OF A PACK TRANSPORT COMPANY IN NORTH AFRICA AND ITALY**

BY MAJOR C T BERRIDGE OBE RASC

A British cadre of pack mule-trained Officers and Non Commissioned Officers (NCO), most of them seconded from ex-mounted units to the Royal Army Service Corps for these duties, arrived in North Africa at Algiers and were formed into a Pack Group. Drivers were Arab, lent by the French with two French Officers and some NCOs for each Pack Company. The Group, known as 4 Pack Group and commanded by famous horseman, Lieutenant Colonel J Hume-Dudgeon OBE MC, took a strenuous part in the latter stages of the North African Campaign. They were attached to 46 British Infantry and 78 British Infantry Divisions in the capture of the mountains in Tunisia before the fall of Tunis and Bizerta, which heralded the end of the German Afrika Corps – and the capture of 200,000 German soldiers. After North Africa, it was obvious that "Pack" was going to be a big thing and that with the coming campaign in Italy, a great any mules and men were going to be needed.

Only two Companies of 4 Pack Group had by this time been formed and these were embarked for Sicily. I



was left behind to form a third Company at Cape Bon, Tunisia, to be used for training personnel of Infantry Divisions destined for mountain warfare. This task completed, I rejoined the Group. I shall never forget visiting the French cavalry barracks in Tunis with that wonderful "eye for a mule," Major Ian Maclaren, RAVC, to purchase our mules. All through the heat of that August day, he had mule after mule trotted out for him, and in spite of the high-pressure salesmanship of the French, he only accepted seventy out of 300, but what a seventy! Throughout their stay with the Company these mules, all in B Troop, proved to be easily the soundest and best-looking mules in the Company.

In December 1943, we embarked for Italy in an old meat ship with a maximum speed of eight knots. Loaded to the limit, even including loaded mules on the top deck, with horses, sea-sick Arabs, French and British all jumbled together with no accommodation other than in the straw by the animals, this rickety old ship eventually arrived off Southern Italy after being at sea for fourteen days. The ship flew the Panama flag, the skipper was French, the mate Danish, the first engineer Swedish and not one member of the crew of the same nationality!

Our services were urgently needed. The two battle-scarred Companies of the Group were working with the Eighth Army on the banks of the River Sangro and the Fifth US Army were demanding mules for Divisions operating in the country between the Rivers Volturno and Garigliano. One Company was allocated to 5 British Infantry Division, and so my Company, 359 Pack Company RASC, arrived in time for the 17-18 January 1944 Garigliano crossing after covering the last sixty-eight miles on foot in two days. Our tough training in the mountains of Cap Bon stood us in good stead.

The day before the battle, my unit was switched to the 56 British Infantry Division who were further inland than 5 British Infantry Division. Our orders were to cross the river in front of Castelforte and San Lorenzo, in the wake of 167 Infantry Brigade, to follow them across the short plain and to supply them with ammunition, rations and water when they had captured the first line of mountains to the left of Cassino – the San Salvatito feature and Monte Damiano. Unfortunately, the battle for the crossing, with 46 British Infantry Division holding ground on our right, was a very bloody affair. Only A Troop and the medical mules were able to get over on the night 17-18 January 1944 but were then stuck out on the plain with the held-up infantry. It was another week before San Salvatito-Monte Damiano objective was secured, and the Fifth US Army had then established a line running from just south of Gaeta, on the west coast at the beginning of the Apennines, along a ridge across Italy to the mouth of the River Sangro, taking in Cassino in the centre. The whole of Fifth US Army – except for II (US) Corps in the Liri Valley directly below Monte Cassino, was now located in mountains without proper roads and out of reach of wheeled transport. Pack had come into its own with a vengeance!

At this time, February 1944, pack transport in Italy consisted of 4 Pack Group (three Arab and one Italian Company), A and B Groups of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, and some odd Italian Companies which were badly off for equipment and personnel. It was decided to form these latter Companies into a proper Pack Group with a fairly strong British cadre and to fetch No 1 Cypriot Group from Palestine, and to form two further Italian Groups when the necessary personnel, equipment and mules could be procured. The veterinary services were organized with one field remount depot and one veterinary hospital for the whole theatre, one V. and R.C.S. to each Army (Eighth and Fifth), and one C.M.V.S. to each Pack Group. A Senior Veterinary Officer was held on the strength of each Pack Group HQ with the rank of Major, while each Pack Company had its own Veterinary Officer, a Sergeant and two Dressers. The organization was sound and practical, for in all the odd and difficult places where Companies operated, a casualty was

replaced within twenty-four hours. The Company Veterinary Officers did a fine job of work, were quickly on the spot when necessary and would always lend a hand to the often-harassed Troop Leader.

In March 1944, I received orders to hand over my present commitments to some French Pack Companies which had just arrived with the Free French Infantry Division and to proceed to the forward maintenance area responsible for looking after the Cassino sector. The Company marched south-east over the mountains until the rear supply dump, christened *Brighton*, was reached; this was about twelve miles south-east of Cassino, and from here all rations, ammunition and stores for the troops holding the line opposite Cassino were transported forward along the dreaded American-built Inferno Track by jeep to the advanced supply dump known as *Hove*. Forward of this point, all supplies went by mule across the Rapido valley floor. As nights shortened, the lift could not be carried out with safety, and it was decided to deploy troops to suitable sites further forward across the valley under the very noses of the enemy. B Troop was positioned on the lower slopes of Monte Cairo, in a small grotto just out of sight of the monastery. A Troop was located in a paper factory in the deserted village of Sant Elia: both these Troops were to support a Brigade of 2 New Zealand Division. C Troop was hidden in the houses of Vallerotonda, a little farther to the right and a quarter of a mile from the enemy, in support of the Italian San Marco Groupe. Lastly, D Troop was well hidden behind the mountains at Acquafondata in support of a unit from 6 South African Armoured Division. All these positions were to the immediate right of the monastery.

The move into the locations had to be timed very carefully, the whole area was shelled most of the day and night, and the only movement possible was during the hours of darkness. Mules were sent off the first night in pairs at half-minute intervals to the forward dump, *Hove*, where they lay up during the following day, only just hidden in the olive groves. The second night they went on to their locations, and it says much for their march discipline that no losses occurred. All grey mules were dyed with permanganate of potash, and the resultant greyish dun blended well with the mountainside. All stores now went across the valley by jeep from *Hove* to the new mule locations, and the shorter lift forward was easily carried out by the Companies. B Troop, however, suffered heavy casualties, mostly from mortar fire, and after three weeks only sixteen of the original seventy-five mules (seventy of them Major Ian Maclaren's) were left. The men, too, through lack of proper sleep and hot food, were getting very tired. Just before the final battle for Cassino was due to commence in May 1944, Brigadier Crump, Commander Supply 2 New Zealand Division, gave permission to change over the personnel of B Troop with that of the fresher D Troop, leaving the mules unchanged. The New Zealanders, who were grand to work for, lent fifteen 15-cwt trucks that night for the change-over. The whole operation was extremely hazardous. The Troop Officer of D Troop had recently been killed, and Warrant Officer 2 Company Sergeant Major Holdsworth was Acting Troop Leader. No 15-cwt trucks had used the tracks before and the work by B Troop had to be carried out before they could hand over. Added to all this, *Hove* dump had been hit by shell fire in April 1944 and completely destroyed so that the convoy had to start from the rear dump. Nevertheless, the change-over was successfully carried out at the cost of one man and three trucks. For leadership and courage, Mr. Holdsworth was Mentioned in Dispatches.

As soon as the enemy pulled out from Cassino, the Company was ordered to follow up the Eighth Army, and a long march lay ahead. It was not until Perugia was reached, 200 miles farther north, that contact was made with the enemy. We rested for five days at Todi, on the upper reaches of the River Tiber before moving off again to Umbertide to support 4 Indian Division in an operation which threatened to be another Cassino. Two Brigades of this Division, each with a Pack Company, operated ten to twelve miles on either side of a main road, dislodging the tenacious Boche from the high ground dominating all

approaches up the road. The Pack Companies lived, as far as possible, on the country; their role was transporting small arms, ammunition, mortar bombs, water, rations and blankets for the infantry. The greatest difficulty was experienced in keeping in touch with the Staff Captain at Brigade, the troops and the rear echelon. On leaving the troops nicely sited in a dry river-bed in the early hours of the morning for a day's rest (all our operations were by night) one would return to the previous night's base, send the rear echelon forward to join the advanced element, go on to Brigade only to find they had moved, trace Brigade and return to the Troop locations only to find they had moved on to a destination unknown! So it went on through late June, July and August 1944, creeping forward mountain after mountain, river after river, until after the fall of Arezzo the upper reaches of the River Arno were reached and the Army halted to re-group for the assault on the Gothic Line. Here 4 Indian Division handed over to the 10 Indian Division and with their Pack Companies proceeded to Siggillo, 100 miles south of the Gothic Line.

The plan was for 4 Indian Division to advance, fully mule-borne, over the wild mountainous country northwards, and to breach the fortifications at Monte Calvo, the highest point in the Gothic Line. One Pack Company was allotted to each battalion, only three mules per Company were to be used for domestic purposes, and all personnel were to travel as light as possible; we got it down to one small pack and one blanket per man! The mules in this operation were to accompany the attacking force, their role being to save the infantry soldier from fatigue caused by carrying equipment. My Company carried for 3/10 Baluch Regiment. I divided my commitments up among my Troops so that each had a specified load; for instance, A Troop carried blankets, two-man tents and any clothing required. B Troop, signal equipment, digging and trenching tools. C Troop, small arms, ammunition, mortars and mortar bombs. D Troop, cookhouse equipment and emergency rations. The medical mules were equipped with cacolets and stretchers for carrying wounded.



This operation was a real pack job and a classic example of how to use pack transport to the best of its ability. A whole story could be written of that gruelling trek in the heat of the Italian mid-summer over bare and rocky mountains, of our desperate searches for water for the animals, of frightful evidence of



German atrocities against the unfortunate civilians, their houses and animals, and of the night the Company Sergeant Major and I slept on the wrong side of the line and watched the spearhead of the Eighth Army pass our mountain bivouac. The mules suffered a lot from galls, especially those carrying the mortars; a good deal of this was caused by never having the opportunity to dry out the sodden panels of the saddles and also that however tight one had the crupper one could not prevent the saddles working forward down the steep gradients. This, however, was total war, and we just had to press on.

The Division arrived in front of Monte Calvo three days before the enemy expected it, and we had an absolutely first-class view of the battle. After the RAF had dive-bombed the fortified positions, the whole of the Divisional artillery was trained on them, and when the dust and smoke had subsided, what little there was left of Monte Calvo was in the hands of the Gurkhas. Our old friends, 56 British Infantry Division, was battling away on our right, but got very badly cut up on the Gemmano Ridge, so that 4 Indian Division were called to the rescue. Our long trek, instead of ending, went on into the Republic of San Marino, where another wonderful view was had of the battle going on in the plain round Rimini – actions by 1 (Canadian) Corps and the Greek Brigade. From San Marino, we at last saw the promised land, the Po valley, and on our right we could see the blue Adriatic. At last, we seemed to be clear of mountains.

We now said good-bye to 4 Indian Division, but the Companies were to work for 43 Lorried Gurkha Brigade, and later for 10 Indian Division again until Cesena was reached. Here I had orders to hand over my Company, which I had commanded for so long, and to take over command of 21 Italian Pack Group supporting the Fifth US Army, north of Florence.

21 Pack Group was the first Italian Group to be formed, and consisted, in fact, of the odd Companies already mentioned but now welded together with a British cadre. The Italian Officers were mostly from the cavalry and the men big, strong, Alpini troops, many of whom had taken part in the Albanian Campaign. The British cadre were mostly volunteers from almost every unit in Italy, including three Officers from the South African Defence Force.

The time of the year was October 1944, and we were to support 1 British Infantry Division, 6 British Armoured Division and 78 British Infantry Division who, together, came under command XIII (British) Corps. As they neared their objective, Bologna, the higher the mountains became, the heavier the rain and the deeper the mud until, with roughly twenty miles to go, all became completely bogged down. Behind us lay a range of mountains stretching some thirty-five miles to the nearest maintenance area and one single, much-blown track, which occasionally disappeared in the night, to serve as a three-divisional axis. Many will remember that awful *Arrow Route*, as it was called.

21 Pack Group had an exhausting time struggling after these Divisions, and now faced the prospect of spending the coming winter standing out in the open in a very congested area, the mud having stopped everything in about the same place. No shelter was available, men and mules were parked on the rear slope of a mountain and very soon the lines were over two feet deep in mud and no prospect of a move to a better site. A veteran of Passchendaele told me that he saw nothing worse in the First World War in the way of mud, which wasn't exactly a cheering observation!

Most of the mule tracks used were in view of the enemy at some stage, so that the columns could only work at night, and as it got colder and the everlasting rain heavier, the carry instead of taking four or five hours, began to take eight or ten, at the end of which both man and mule were completely exhausted and seldom able to dry out. Neither could recuperate, as men were too wet to sleep well and the mules



unable to lie down in the deep mud; in fact, on several occasions they did lie down and were drowned in the process! Two muleteers were also drowned through falling off a track into a stream during darkness, the swift current carrying them away before rescue could be effected. This feat of endurance was, of course, impossible to continue and strong representation was made to both Corps and Division for other companies, in order that a system of reliefs could be instituted. An Arab and an Indian Company arrived and reliefs commenced, each company being lifted in turn by motor transport to Rear Group Headquarters area for fourteen days' rest. This enabled the Group to stay in this sector right through the winter, actually twenty-two weeks, until relieved.

During the latter part of December 1944 and through January and part of February 1945 the area was covered in about fourteen inches of snow, and at night the frost was very intense. At first this added to difficulties as the mules went through the thin ice and suffered accordingly from cuts and bruised legs, but as the ground became harder, things improved.

No clipping was carried out, and generally speaking mules kept their condition surprisingly well without contracting any skin diseases. They were rugged up when not working, but standing in perpetual mud resulted in a fair amount of mud fever and a good few lost all the hair off their legs. Tails got so matted and heavy that the hair was cut back to the dock. Shoeing was a problem as the sticky mud pulled shoes off almost as fast as they were put on, but the farriers stuck it and just managed to keep pace with losses. This operation was quite the hardest and most unpleasant of the whole campaign and everyone was most relieved when the Armies started to regroup again in March 1945, for the final battle on Bologna. The Divisions we had supported departed for the Eighth Army, and some newly formed Italian Groups took over the sector.

21 Pack Group moved westward this time to support 6 South African Armoured Division under command of the II (US) Corps located between Routes 64 and 65, Florence to Bologna. There was now a definite feeling of "this is the end", and after a short, sharp battle in which we supplied mostly mortar bombs to the fighting troops, the break-through to Bologna was achieved. We followed the Division to the River Po

but by then it was all over and in the midst of the confusion I received a signal offering me a trip home by air and fourteen days' leave.

After over three years abroad without a break one does not hesitate, and I was away in a flash before anyone could change their mind! Except for stops to refuel, my driver and I drove non-stop from Creda, just short of Bologna to Naples, 404 miles in a jeep. Arriving at 0500, I emplaned at 0800. and arrived in beautiful green England at 1400. Only twenty-four hours after leaving the dust of the Italian battlefield I was standing in an orderly queue at Paddington Station waiting for a taxi, and not at all sure if it wasn't all a dream!



The Animals in War memorial in London's Park Lane

## Two Soldiers' experiences of V E Day 1945

For many soldiers in Italy, VE Day did not mark the end of the fighting, as shown in this letter written to his family by Bombardier Alan Bidgood, 75<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment RA, Shropshire Yeomanry, while en route to the Trieste area to "keep the peace" between Italian and Yugoslav partisans. Here he describes his experience of the end of the war in Italy.

11.5.45

Dear everyone,

We had to leave on the evening of the 7<sup>th</sup> *and at 9 o'clock we vamooshed!* The announcement of the signing of the armistice had been made, and cheering crowds had assembled at points all along the roads - they were shouting and waving and standing as near to the passing column, trying to touch hands with us as we passed. Seemingly childish, but the civilians seemed to enjoy it and took it as a show of common joy at the ending of the war.



At one minute past midnight - the first minute of the 8<sup>th</sup> we were passing through Padova (Padua). The bells were pealing forth from all directions, people were dancing, accordionists were playing, everything was on the go. Our convoy kept steadily on, great as the temptation was to stage a breakdown in the city. The countryside around was alight from the glare of parachute flares of different colours, with the crimson glow of tracer bullets being fired into the heavens. There were heavier explosions also - goodness only knows how they were caused.

Still we went on - passing hundreds of transport en route for Austria or the large towns in this area. After one or two more halts at diversions where single line traffic was enforced we crossed the Adige River and made for Bardia and out to our position in the countryside nearby. The time when we settled down was about 4.30 in the morning - we were supposed to have twelve hours rest but it was too hot to sleep after about 8 o'clock. That evening we moved off at five o'clock in a convoy with all our equipment and guns which we had left behind on the first journey. At five the next morning we arrived in the hills somewhere between Venice and Trieste. There were several accidents, fortunately none serious, which were caused by men falling asleep at the wheel. Those drivers certainly did some hard work in those few days. All the time I was having a "smashing" time on that first mission near Dolo they were making long tiring journeys on dusty roads, carrying ammunition, food and stores up forward. Here we are today - still in action, ready to plaster certain areas when called on, so to do. Some of these so-called Allies don't know where or when to stop, and don't believe in talking things over. A certain General thinks he has a large army - we'll show him, if he doesn't give up his rough, brigandish ways.

VE Day in Europe is over - we like many others cannot celebrate yet as we are still at it.....

Alan



*This piece was sent in by Jeanie Owen, about her father Sergeant Walter Valentine Cowland (Wally), who served as Officer in charge of 2nd Echelon Central Mediterranean Force, Light Aircraft Artillery, Royal Artillery, Italy and prior to that in North Africa:*

Dad fought in the Battle for Monte Cassino in Italy. He was the Chief Clerk in the Artillery Regiment and looked after 1,000 men - their movement in and out of hospital, to and from the UK, punishment for desertion, and in and out of the regiment. There were over one million personnel in Italy, including ladies in admin and hospitals.

De-mob wasn't to come for several months after VE Day, because High Command didn't want nearly two million troops all arriving at once and at a loose end back in Britain, many with no jobs and nowhere to live. So they were kept on active

service to keep them occupied with work after VE Day including the clearing of roads and bombed buildings, bridge building and guarding prisoners of war, all with associated admin. The troops were therefore given leeway to do some exploring.



"At the donkey race meeting with Helen, one of our ATS friends"

## **BOOKS and PODCASTS**

### **The Fourth Division's Assault on the Gustav Line, May 1944**

Booklet by George Cowie BEM

George has written a book on the Fourth Division's Assault on the Gustav Line, which will be on sale at

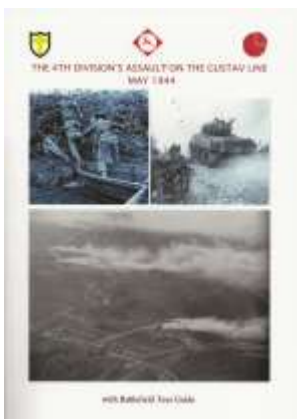
Cassino Adventureland to help cover the memorials' maintenance costs and promote the history of XIII Corps at Cassino.

The book covers the 4th Division's assault on the Gustav Line in the Fourth Battle of Monte Cassino from the start to the finish (11 May to 20 May 1944).

Copies of the book are £12 each and are available from George. Please email him at [georgecowie103@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:georgecowie103@yahoo.co.uk)

All profits go to the maintenance of the 4th Division memorials and promoting their history at Cassino.

George and his colleagues are also raising funds to install a 4th Division memorial to honour all those who fought at Cassino. This will be installed near the Amazon Bridge memorial.



### **'My War, My Mules and Me' by Major Charles Tennant.**

Published by Albyn Press Ltd, ISBN: 0 284 98668 2

### **The Battle for Monte Natale by John Strafford**

The Battle for Monte Natale was part of the first Battle for Monte Cassino – the bloodiest battle of the Italian Campaign. By extensive use of War Diaries, missing person reports, awards for valour, and personal accounts including those of German soldiers, this is the story of those individuals who fought and died in the Battle for Monte Natale. All the action takes place in an area of just nine square kilometres. It is a unique glimpse of an important battle from both sides of the conflict.

Published by Pen and Sword Books Ltd.



### **Podcasts**

“Wojtek, The Bear who Beat the Nazis”.

The story of Wojtek the Bear was broadcast on the Rest is History Podcast on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2025 and is available until March 2026.

### **Corrections**

The following are corrections and additions to the Winter 2024 newsletter:-

#### Page 5: Remembrance Day commemorations 2024

We incorrectly stated that the Society had not been represented before at the Albert Hall. The Society has been represented before at this event by Mike Anslow, who paraded the MCS standard on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Monte Cassino.

#### Page 11: Remembrance Day in the Lakeland Fells. This short biography of his father should have been included in the article sent in by MCS member Vincent Jones.

My father, Corporal Norman Jones, served in the 78th Division with the 2nd Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers. I don't have any good photographs of him, unfortunately. He landed in Algiers, fought in Africa, Sicily and Italy and was badly injured for the third time in a battle that took place between San Clemente and Borgo Tossignano, to the south of Bologna in December 1944. He'd already been injured on two other occasions badly enough to be given last rites. And all before he was 23.

#### Page 14, 4th paragraph:

*'Sometime in 1943 they were captured by the Allies and taken to a camp at Rimini called Barletta. Polish General Wladyslaw Anders came to this camp late in 1943 or early 1944 and addressed these young men, saying he understood some were Polish and asking if they would like to join him in the battle for Monte Cassino. Ludwik volunteered.....'*

Correction, Rimini was not in Allied hands until September 1944, so it is likely that Ludwig was in the Polish camp at Trani, 15km down the coast from Barletta, which is where he would have been paraded in front of General Anders.

### New members

**Stephanie Cruse** – Daughter of Gordon Denis Cruse, 132 (Welsh) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, 78<sup>th</sup> (Battleaxe) infantry Division

**Correction:** In our last newsletter we listed **Jim Maitland's** Father, Staff Sgt James Maitland, as having served with the RASC when he was actually in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Many apologies.

### In Memoriam

**Pat McGeever** – Daughter of James Harold Howe Dale, originally 51st Leeds Rifles then transferred to Royal Tank Regiment whilst in Italy. KIA on 23rd May 1944 (aged 24) at Cassino.

### Information for paying by BACS.

The membership of £15 per annum can be made by bank transfer, which saves the Society bank charges. Or fees can be paid by cheque, made payable to 'The Monte Cassino Society' and sent to Lesley. If you wish to pay by BACS, please email Diane (our treasurer) for Bank details, and to let her know you have made the payment. Her email is [dianesoady@gmail.com](mailto:dianesoady@gmail.com)

### Contact us:

**Lesley Teasdale, Hon. Secretary** : [lesleytea.lt@gmail.com](mailto:lesleytea.lt@gmail.com) ; 01752 492799

**Diane Soady, Treasurer** : [dianesoady@gmail.com](mailto:dianesoady@gmail.com) ; 01760 722590

**Helen James, Newsletter Editor**: [helenconrad@btconnect.com](mailto:helenconrad@btconnect.com)

**Sue Hughes, Liaison officer** : [suehughes4@icloud.com](mailto:suehughes4@icloud.com)

**Des James, Website and Facebook Coordinator** : [desjames@btconnect.com](mailto:desjames@btconnect.com)

**Michael Wilson, Committee member** : [mwilson827@btinternet.com](mailto:mwilson827@btinternet.com)

**Frank de Planta, Committee member** : [f.deplanta@btinternet.com](mailto:f.deplanta@btinternet.com); [www.cassinobattlefields.co.uk](http://www.cassinobattlefields.co.uk)

**John Leach, Committee member** : [johnleachportloe@gmail.com](mailto:johnleachportloe@gmail.com)

Website : [www.montecassinociety.co.uk](http://www.montecassinociety.co.uk)

Facebook : **The Monte Cassino Society** and **The Monte Cassino Society Group**

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