Welcome to our Summer 2026 newsletter.

Interest in the wider Italian campaign continues to grow among members old and new since we expanded the scope of the society to include a programme of Battlefield Study Tours, and those completed so far this year to the Sangro and Cassino/Camino have been a great success, with many participants expressing an interest in further studies. The two study tours arranged for October this year, to Salerno and the Gothic Line are already fully subscribed, but details of 3 new tours for 2027 are given in this issue. Please contact Frank de Planta if you are interested in participating in any of these.

The society held three Remembrance events on Saturday May 16th to commemorate the battles for Cassino 82 years ago. The tour group of 22 conducted our own service at the CWGC cemetery in Cassino, while thirty attended the annual MCS service at the National Memorial Arboretum (NMA), and a full congregation, including representatives from several Consulates, supported the service (also live-streamed online) led by the Rev Fergus Cook at Blackhall St Columba's Church in Edinburgh.

It is worth noting that the service at the NMA (soon to be re-named to reference a new alliance with the Royal British Legion) is the most costly for the Monte Cassino Society to arrange. Every item and detail must be pre-ordered and paid for, including chairs for attendees to sit on, and it is for this reason that we ask members to notify Lesley if they intend to be at the service. It is such an important event in the Society's calendar, and this would help us to budget accordingly and keep running costs and membership fees to a minimum. We have managed to keep membership fees the same for some years, but additional donations are always very welcome.

We congratulate two of our MCS members whose volunteering in the cause of Remembrance has recently been acknowledged by their respective organisations, Lorna Muir by the Royal British Legion and Karen Czernik by the National Memorial Arboretum. Reports are in this issue, along with more personal accounts of the Italian Campaign.

With the passing of the veterans' generation, it really is up to the rest of us to record the experiences of those who served before they are lost forever. Letters and documents are still emerging from attics and cupboards, and the story of one such discovery features in these pages. But as time passes these finds are inevitably fewer and further between, so do contact us if you have anything for the newsletter or Recollections section on the MCS website, and please continue to post on our MCS Facebook page.

With all good wishes for a sunny and peaceful summer,

Helen James, Editor

Membership Renewals.

Following the most recent Committee meeting, we would like to update the position regarding membership renewal.

Henceforth, Membership of the Society will be 'per Calendar year' and the renewal subscription will therefore fall due on the 1st January each year, the only exception to this being someone who joined the Society after the publication of the 'Summer' Newsletter at the end of June, when their first renewal wouldn't be due until the following January.

For example, if you joined the society between January and June 2025, your first renewal would be due on the 1st Jan 2026, however if you joined between July and December 2025, your first renewal won't be due until the 1st Jan 2027.

By making all the renewals due on the same date, this reduces the administrative burden on our Treasurer and Secretary, who previously have been dealing with this matter across the whole year. The easiest way to organise your Membership Subscription is to set up a Standing Order to the Society for £15, paid on the 1st January each year. If you have any questions please contact Lesley via e-mail, her details are at the end of the Newsletter.

November Ceremonies 2026

Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph – Sunday 08th November 2026.

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 Friday 18th September - Please note that due to the wider security issues, we can only apply for tickets on behalf of current (i.e. paid up) Members of the Society.

Once your application has been received by the RBL, you will receive an email acknowledging this, sent to the email address you specified on the form. The tickets will then be sent to the same email on the 30th or 31st 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 – 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, please send the details to Lesley Teasdale, who will collate them ready for November.

Liz Longman liz.longman@hotmail.co.uk Lesley Teasdale lesleytea.lt@gmail.com

Thank you, Lesley & Liz

MCS Battlefield Study Tours for 2027, guided by Frank de Planta.

Sangro 23 -27 April 2027

Anzio 9 -12 May 2027

Cassino, Garigliano and Camino 12-16 May 27

Please contact Frank de Planta for details if you are interested in joining any of these study tours. See Contacts at the end of the newsletter.

MCS Service of Remembrance at the National Memorial Arboretum, 16th May 2026

by Des James

Thirty members and friends gathered by the Monte Cassino memorial in the National Memorial Arboretum (NMA) for the annual service of Remembrance. Although it had rained earlier, the weather held for the duration of the service, which was slightly delayed due to a booking oversight by the chaplain. However, the Reverend Victor M Van Den Bergh arrived soon after 2.00pm and welcomed everyone, to begin the service. Michael Wilson read one of the lessons, and Judith Coote gave a moving account of 'The Cherry Tree Incident' written by Frank Grant of Lothians & Border Horse. Robert Deakin was the Standard bearer. The bugler, Antonio Socci, sounded the Last Post to herald the two minutes silence, and the service finished with the National Anthem played over speakers by The Band of the Coldstream Guards.

As we ended our service, we could hear delightful singing coming from an adjacent area, which we were told was being performed by the Military Wives Choir. Afterwards, most of us returned to the café for refreshments, and to catch up with old friends.

Service of Commemoration, St Columba's Church, Edinburgh, Saturday 16th May 2026

by Sheila Wurr

On Saturday 16th May we gathered at St Columba's Church in Edinburgh for a Commemoration of the Italian Campaign, especially remembering the battles in and around Cassino town and the Monastery on Monte Cassino. We were lucky with the weather, and as I waited outside, passers-by were asking what was going on. As I explained I intimated that all were welcome to the service, so we added one or two to the congregation.

Rev. Fergus Cook led the Service, reminding us that like all campaigns, the Italian Campaign was much bigger than one battle, and we later discussed how often Italy is overshadowed by D-Day, much as the fighting in Burma is by the Pacific Campaign. For those new at the service, Fergus explained the significance of the wooden cross made during the campaign, and which is the centrepiece of the Altar on these occasions.

Wreath layers included representatives from Poland, Ludwig Jaszczur and Polish Veterans along with those of Sikorski Polish Memorial House, Canada, New Zealand and India. Regiments were

represented by Seaforth Highlanders, Cameron Highlanders, Queen's Own Highlanders, Scots Guards and Edinburgh Garrison and Royal Artillery. Royal British Legion of Scotland were also represented. The Chaplaincy was represented by Fergus, and I laid the wreath on behalf of the Monte Cassino Society. My wording on our wreath was as follows:

“To those who paid the price
To those who bore the scars
From we who speak your name and remember the sacrifice.”

Having laid the wreaths at the altar we proceeded outside to lay them again at the War Memorial, led by our Standard Bearer of the day Brian Gibson, and piped out by Pipe Major MacRae.

I thanked Fergus for his part, and the ladies of the church for the refreshments after the service. The same ladies, who look after the garden, have put planters at either side of the Memorial Bench, enhancing its appearance, and where they intend to sow poppy seeds similar to those deep red poppies that grow all around Cassino. We look forward to next May when we see, weather and good fortune allowing, poppies in the garden by the War Memorial as a fitting tribute and reminder of the heavy losses during the Italian Campaign.

We remember the fallen from all nations both military and civilian, and towns like Cassino utterly destroyed but rebuilt in the aftermath. We need no reminder these men are not merely numbers on a roll call, but someone's son, husband, father, brother, uncle, nephew and Brother in Arms.

Sangro Battlefield Study tour, March 2026

The first Italian Campaign study for 2026 took place in Mar 26. Eight members, guided by Frank de Planta, spent four days looking at the advance north from Taranto of 8th Indian Division on the Adriatic side of Italy from Nov-Dec 43.

Their task over that period, starting out from Taranto, was to cross four rivers - the Biferno, the Trigno, the Sangro and the Moro. In awful winter weather that created quagmire conditions everywhere, men and machines steadily advanced towards their final objective - Pescara.

We saw for ourselves what horrors the 8th Indian Division endured crossing those four rivers and marvelled at how everyone coped. As part of the study, and in tribute to the fallen, we visited the Sangro CWGC cemetery and the Canadian Moro CWGC cemetery. As always, they were both beautifully maintained.

Amongst the horror, we saw the Impossible Bridge on the Moro - a Bailey bridge built backwards from the German side. We saw the 78th Infantry Division wrestle the hills overlooking Sangro from the Germans, 2nd New Zealand Division’s bruising battle for Orsogna and the 5 Essex struggle for the tiny village of Monte Grande.

We stayed in a hotel for the first night in Montefalcone, the second night in Atessa, the third night in Lanciano and the last in Nemi.

This early part of the Italian Campaign is sadly overlooked - largely because it is so far from the more well known Cassino, Salerno and Anzio battlefields, but it is no less fascinating. Those Divisions involved in the brutal actions on the Adriatic side of Italy all went on to be involved at some point in the Fourth Battle of Cassino.

The important lessons that these Divisions learnt whilst on the Adriatic in Nov-Dec 44 went on to stand them in good stead for what they were asked to do at Cassino.

All in all, it was a cracking four days and a chance for some members to understand more of what battles were fought in Italy in the build up to Cassino. As the Society seeks to broaden the interest of its members in many more parts of the Italian Campaign - and there are quite a few, this four-day study supported that aim.

Frank de Planta

Steep valley below Orsogna

Pavement footprint memorial to an executed Italian Partisan, Lanciano

<u>The MCS Monte Camino, Garigliano and Cassino Battlefield study, 13TH – 17TH May 2026</u>.
Report by Simon Roots

MCS members arrived by train, plane, automobile, and motorbike to participate in the Monte Camino, Garigliano and Monte Cassino Battlefield study, guided by Frank de Planta. A mixed group of 21, we had various reasons for interest in the Campaign; military history, and those whose relatives had served and survived, or were Killed in Action in Italy.

Based for three days in Piedmonte San Germano, a short drive from Cassino, we were to learn in detail about the events of 1943 and 44 which would enable the Allies to take Rome from enemy forces, the importance of Cassino as an obstacle, and the significance of route 6, the only practical direct route for men and heavy machinery as they pushed towards Rome. We heard how dubious decisions by some Allied military leaders, weather and mountain terrain provided the perfect defensive advantage and would cause huge Allied losses. Dominating the skyline for miles around, the imposing Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino was believed by many to be occupied by German forces, and we learned of its negative impact on the psyche of the Allied soldiers, and why the requests by Freyburg and Tuker, endorsed by General Sir Harold Alexander, led to the contentious bombing of the Abbey on 15th February 1944.

A Memorial to the Battle for Monte Camino

On our first evening a fascinating presentation by Frank set the scene and background to the Italian Campaign and the four battles of Cassino from January to May 1944, and our comprehensive study packs helped us to understand particular aspects of the battle at each of the locations of interest.

After an early breakfast we travelled to the relevant 'Stands' for that day, where Frank would unravel the aspects of the battles, aided by the information pack, his unbelievable knowledge, a genuine passion for the subject, and the skill to hold our attention and concentration all day. His ability to explain tactics, command decisions, anecdotes and the different influences which affected the results of various battles, enabled us to build an understanding of the campaign. Fortified by coffee and lunch stops (including one in a downpour at probably the best ice cream shop I've ever visited) and despite changing weather conditions, the group remained enthusiastic throughout.

Three of the more poignant visits were to the War Cemeteries; the CWGC cemeteries at Minturno (the final resting place for 1954 Commonwealth servicemen), and Cassino, which holds 3992 Commonwealth graves, 289 of which are of soldiers with no known name. The Cassino Memorial in the cemetery also names 4000 missing with no known grave. At the Polish Cemetery we saw the graves of 1072 Polish soldiers from the 2nd Polish Corps and General Wladyslaw Anders, their Commander who died in exile in London in 1970.

The MCS group at Point 593

On arrival at Cassino Cemetery, those in the group with relatives buried there were able to spend a few minutes in quiet reflection at the grave side, before a short and moving service of Remembrance conducted by members of the group, during which we each read out the name on a chosen grave in a Roll of Honour. Those graves, selected at random, were marked with a small card explaining the role of MCS in remembering the Italian Campaign. The two-minute silence was interrupted only by the sound of birdsong, and two wreaths were laid at the Sword of Peace.
Constantly changing weather, with thunderstorms, mist and sunshine, did nothing to spoil the experience. In a very small way, the occasional spell of rain reinforced what those men must have endured in the first months of 1944.

Calling at the Velletri Gap en route, we moved to a hotel closer to Rome for our final night and shared a convivial evening meal before departing the following day. It was an excellent four days of insightful study of one of the more contentious campaigns of WW2, and I would highly recommend anyone thinking of joining one of Frank de Planta's Battlefield studies, to do so.

Bare Arse Ridge, Monte Camino

Will Hughes lays the wreath at Cassino Cemetery

Lt William Alexander Reid and Sergeant Thomas Wain MM, 214 Field Company, Royal Engineers.

While visiting the Sangro River Cemetery in March with the MCS Sangro battlefield study tour, members of the group placed a cross and dedication at the grave of Lt William "Billy" Reid, a Glaswegian, who died on 19th October 1943 aged 20 years.

This dedication was made at the request of MCS member Doreen Belcher, the daughter of Sgt Thomas Wain. Sgt Wain, who thought of his young Lieutenant as a son, had returned to Italy after the war to find Billy's grave, but he looked in the wrong cemetery, Cassino, and it was only some years later that Doreen and her brother were able to locate the grave in the Sangro River CWGC Cemetery. They left a wreath with the *message "He never forgot*

Sgt Thomas Wain

you Billy, he came back to look for you. We, his children complete his pilgrimage." The same message was restated on the card left in 2026.

Sgt Wain was awarded the Military Medal for courage shown in the action in which Lt Reid lost his life on 19th October 1943. His citation reads:

No.2025113 Sergeant Thomas James Wain, 214 Field Company, Royal Engineers

On the night of 18th/19th October 1943 Sgt Wain, under his Platoon Officer was controlling mine-sweeping parties up the Termoli - Petacciato Road. Throughout the whole operation this was done immediately behind the infantry and under shell and mortar fire. They were proceeding up the Secondary Road which leads off from road junction 7478 to the left and at approximately 7278 they came up against a minefield. On attempting to approach this field, they came under sharp M. G. fire from two posts about twenty yards away on either side of the road.

The grave of Lt William Reid

While Sergeant Wain was in this position he came under our own shell fire which was attempting to knock out the M.G. posts. Orders had been received from Battalion Commander that the Sappers must push ahead at all costs, to clear a way for the tanks to get through.

At about this time his Platoon Officer was killed but Sergeant Wain, who was then in command, swept a passage under M.G. fire and mortar fire, which the enemy was then bringing down. The tanks got through and the M.G. posts were silenced, allowing our troops to advance into Petacciato.

Sgt Wain, by his inspiring leadership, determination and courage held his men together and completed an extremely dangerous job, in face of what at first appeared impossible odds.

Mark Smith - my life with Medals

My fascination with medals started in 1969 when my Nan gave me my Dad's medals from World War Two. My Dad was a Wireless Operator Snr Gunner with 240 Squadron RAF flying in Catalina Flying Boats with Coastal Command and then moving to the Far East to fly Special Duties flights delivering Force 136 Special Operations Executive (SOE) agents into occupied Japanese Territory. My bedtime stories were of his Operational

Sorties - as stories they were magnificent, as bedtime stories they were awful.... I never went to sleep!!

After the War Dad became a schoolteacher, headmaster and finally a Reader and Professor at the London University, Goldsmiths College, running the Education Department. Dad was an amazing teacher, holding you in rapt attention without you ever noticing he was actually teaching you. When I liked medals, we started on a journey together and he bought me a poster, every British Medal from 1793 to 1973, 95 medals, our goal was to collect them all. *

On acquiring a new medal, we would log it in our stock book, locate the area of action on a map and then discuss the weather, the altitude, the logistical problems and who the enemy were. From our front room in Walthamstow, Dad and I travelled the world of Battles and Military History.

Medals became real when Dad said one day "Why do you think this man joined the Army?" I said "Well, to be a soldier, have a gun, travel the world." Dad said "Yes, perhaps, but maybe he was just hungry and this was the only job he could get."
That was when, for me, medals stopped being medals and started being people. I was fascinated by who they were, where they came from, and what happened to them. In those days with no internet, my time was spent in the local library reading avidly about the Battles represented by the Medals that I owned. As time went on and the internet opened up a world of information about the person, I now have not only the Battle details but a file about the man or woman whose medals I own, all fascinating insights into lives, actions, tragedies and courage. Medal collecting really is an incredible hobby.

My appearances, regular now, on the Antiques Roadshow enable me to bring to the viewers the stories of ordinary men and women who did extraordinary things. I do get emotional because they are real people, they were someone's son, father, brother or husband, and the families left at home waiting are just as much a part of the story as the man running up a beach on D-day.

Never just think of a medal as a thing, always remember it is a huge, emotional roller-coaster of memories. They are amazing things, time machines, that will take you from today to a Battlefield long ago.

I am privileged to be able to, really, just bring my life-long hobby to the viewing public. It’s a great privilege and a job I thoroughly enjoy.

Mark Smith MA
Military Historian often seen on the Antiques Roadshow

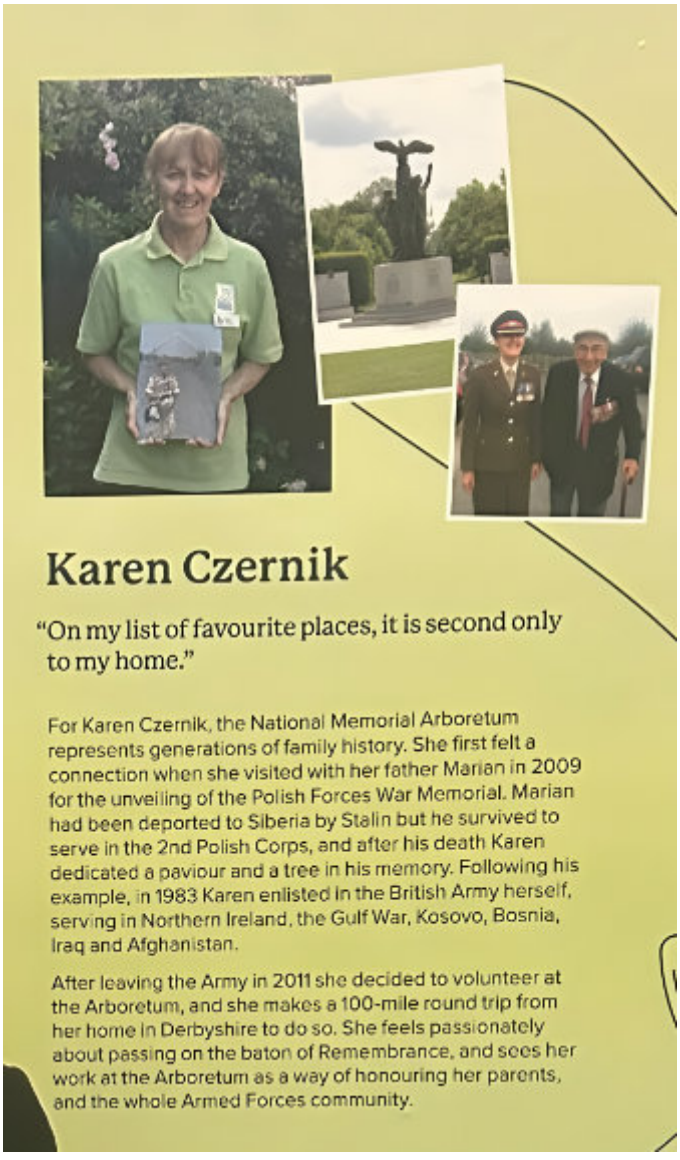
*PS I did collect all 95 medals on the poster - it took me 47 years!!

If you want to know more about Mark, his autobiography "Medal Man" published by Penguin Books is on sale now. ISBN: 9780241738108, £20.00

Mark is a very engaging speaker, and his current UK lecture tour, combined with "Meet and Greet" events, is titled "For Valour, the story of the Victoria Cross".
Details on Mark's website www.marksmithmedals.com

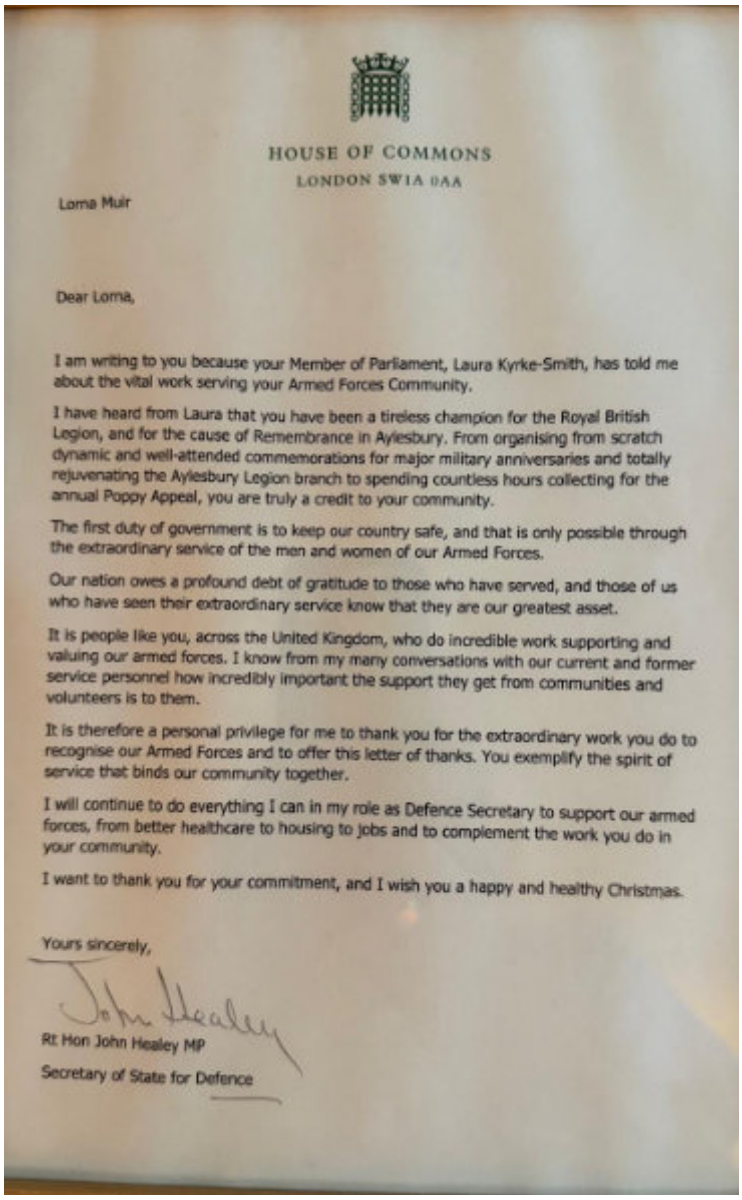
Karen Czernik

As the National Memorial Arboretum celebrates 25 years since its opening, the stories behind some of its most dedicated volunteers, including MCS member Karen Czernik, are featured in a special exhibition at the Arboretum centre. Karen is a keen supporter of the Monte Cassino Society and a participant in our battlefield tours and the annual gathering at the NMA, and we offer her our warmest congratulations.



Lorna Muir

Congratulations to long-standing MCS member and devoted Royal British Legion volunteer Lorna Muir, the proud recipient of this letter of thanks from Rt Hon John Healey MP, Secretary of State for Defence, for her work on behalf of the RBL Aylesbury branch. Lorna's is a familiar face to those of our supporters who meet to march at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day, and it is good to know that her valuable work on behalf of the RBL and Poppy Appeal has been recognised.



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Lorna Muir

Dear Lorna,

I am writing to you because your Member of Parliament, Laura Kyrke-Smith, has told me about the vital work serving your Armed Forces Community.

I have heard from Laura that you have been a tireless champion for the Royal British Legion, and for the cause of Remembrance in Aylesbury. From organising from scratch dynamic and well-attended commemorations for major military anniversaries and totally rejuvenating the Aylesbury Legion branch to spending countless hours collecting for the annual Poppy Appeal, you are truly a credit to your community.

The first duty of government is to keep our country safe, and that is only possible through the extraordinary service of the men and women of our Armed Forces.

Our nation owes a profound debt of gratitude to those who have served, and those of us who have seen their extraordinary service know that they are our greatest asset.

It is people like you, across the United Kingdom, who do incredible work supporting and valuing our armed forces. I know from my many conversations with our current and former service personnel how incredibly important the support they get from communities and volunteers is to them.

It is therefore a personal privilege for me to thank you for the extraordinary work you do to recognise our Armed Forces and to offer this letter of thanks. You exemplify the spirit of service that binds our community together.

I will continue to do everything I can in my role as Defence Secretary to support our armed forces, from better healthcare to housing to jobs and to complement the work you do in your community.

I want to thank you for your commitment, and I wish you a happy and healthy Christmas.

Yours sincerely,

John Healey

Rt Hon John Healey MP

Secretary of State for Defence

6982488 Corporal Frank Rowley, 1st Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers

"I had to be awkward and got hit in the place I usually reserve for sitting on…"

by Helen James

A few months ago and wearing my hat as editor of the MCS newsletter, I tried a small experiment in my search for unrecorded accounts of veterans of the Italian Campaign. Recognising that like me, most fellow members of our local U3A are of the 'certain age' with reference to immediate descendants of those veterans, I addressed the gathering at our monthly meeting, briefly outlining my purpose and asking anyone who may have information about a family connection to the Italian Campaign to contact me afterwards.

It was interesting that out of a hall of 60 people, no less than 6 (10%) approached me afterwards with anecdotes, including the amazing offer from a lady called Carolyn to lend me a package containing all the letters written by her uncle to his family while he was a Prisoner of War (PW) in Italy.

For 80 years the letters had remained unread, eventually being discovered while clearing her parents' attic, and Carolyn had grown up believing the family story that this uncle she knew well, but who never talked of his wartime experiences, had been a PW.

Reading through the letters for the first time before she passed them on to me, she was shocked to discover that this was never the case, and a very different story has emerged, which I have since pieced together from his letters home:

Frank Rowley was born in 1913 in Gedling, Nottinghamshire, and worked at his brother-in-law's box factory before being conscripted in 1940, when he joined the Royal Irish Fusiliers. After two years of training at various camps in Wales, Frank was posted to the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers (1 RIrF) and left Liverpool on 22nd November 1942 aboard Ship No P3, eventually disembarking in Egypt on 11th December 42, where he wrote:

"I have my feet on good earth again and very thankful for it…I am in North Africa, that is all we can say…"

Frank wrote home regularly, but Army routine, boredom and heavy censorship of correspondence meant that most of his letters were inevitably filled with family chat, talk of food, weather and other mundane things. But on 6th May 43 he wrote from 95 General Hospital British North African Force (BNAF) that he had been in hospital for a month after receiving what was clearly a substantial wound, almost certainly sustained during 78 Infantry Division's operation to clear the enemy from high ground north of the Beja-Medjez el Bab road in Tunisia on 7th April 43. He wrote:

"I had to be awkward and got hit in the place I usually reserve for sitting on. Still, I have my tummy and one side left to lie on, so really can't grumble."

Frank clearly made light of the seriousness of the action and his resulting injury, writing on 24th May 43:

"I have unfortunately received no permanent disability, so shall be OK to continue the fight…Glad you got my Field Card (posted on 5th April 43), as you say, it was posted two days before I was smacked, I knew we were going into a pretty big show and I didn't have a chance to write…and wanted you to know that I was OK up to April 5th, still…I was lucky and have suffered no serious harm… but at the moment I am afraid I should just jump out of my skin at the noise of the bombs, I think if I ever see a Stuka again I should pass out with fright…"

The injury to Frank's thigh was to see him out of action for several months, and in a letter written on 11th July 43 from 8 Convalescent Depot BNAF, he wrote:

"*… I am about OK now, just a question of getting the muscles in the bottom of my back and my leg working again, I had a good slice carved out of me, I still marvel that it hit me where it did, about the only place I could stand a flesh wound of any description...*
… As you know, I was almost 4 months in the fighting here, and in that time never came out for rest, it was a horrible experience, and one that I hate to think I shall have to repeat. The news of the Allied landings in Sicily makes it almost certain that I shall see action again in the near future … I have been lucky once and come through, but realize (sic) that it can't always be "the other fellow" that gets it. I hope that for my sake and my people at home that I am as lucky again …"

The letters from 8 Convalescent Depot BNAF convey some of his feelings and misgivings, combined with a certain air of resignation about returning to the conflict.

6th August 43. "*… I do not suppose I shall be here much more than about a fortnight now, so hope the boys have made a job of Sicily before I go from here, I had a tummy full of this lot. Still, I suppose I have a lot more of it to see in some country or other. I only know that I never felt less warlike than I do now."*

18th August 43. "… *the news seems to be very good just lately, the Sicily show is nearly over and old Joe Stalin is showing them the way home. It may be the beginning of the end, or is that wishful thinking?... touch wood I am now completely healed up, hope it doesn't break out again..."*

30th August 43. "… *as you say, I shall soon be going back to the mob….The war seems to be doing pretty well now, I think if I can keep on top of the ground for about 12 months, I shall about see the end of it; he is certainly taking a bashing from the Russians now, and every one they knock off is one less for us…*
… Everyone is wondering what now? ..."

4th October 43. *"… There are a couple of friends of mine in the camp here, both Cpls from the Battalion ... one of them was hit the same day as me but recovered and went back to the mob just before Sicily, where he caught another one, not bad, just enough to put him in dock awhile. The other bloke is really lucky, he has hardly any use in his left hand and is waiting to go home, needless to say either of us would change places with him were it possible …"*

Frank spent eight months recovering from injury, but on 11th December 43 he wrote that he was back with C Company, 1 RIfF and now in Italy. The 1 RIrF War Diary records that October had seen them involved in heavy fighting at Termoli and on the River Trigno, but he doesn't mention this, preferring instead to write about his billeting situation:

10th January 44. "*… Italy isn't a bit like I thought it would be, at least this part of Italy. At the moment we are back for a rest, and I along with 3 other fellows are billeted in an Italian house. Try and imagine it, the room downstairs is about 8' wide at the most, the room upstairs must be the same, I have not been up to have a look as the pink-cheeked Signora might object. The floor is*

Artist's impression of Frank's billet

rough broken stones, all rough and uneven like a crazy paving, the only light that comes in is through the open door, this has of course to be open all day, there are umpteen feet of snow outside, which adds as you may guess to the cozyness (sic) of the room, the floor is all wet and muddy. All morning over the wood fire, there has been brewing a big copper pot, into which from time to time many strange things have gone. I was able to identify small potatoes, onions, spaghetti and some form of beans, the rest of the things were strange to me. The brew is ready, it is all stewed up in a big pot dish and placed on a table about 1'6" by 2'0", chairs are placed at and near the table, 4 women, 1 man and 2 small children, all are armed with forks, I and the other 3 fellows are offered forks, which as you can imagine are politely declined (we having watched this pot all morning), smiles and a lot of sign language are exchanged, the family feed all dipping their forks in the one pot. The stuff when finished is stiff, enabling it to be eaten by a fork. Sanitation is non-existent, and the women draw water from the centre of the village. I suppose it is a spring piped into big troughs. The sheep, the goats, cattle and mules are all taken there to be watered, the women also wash clothes there, and the army or at least C Company wash and shave there. It is surprising how clean the women get the clothes in the cold water, but I think they use some form of strong bleach, at least at Xmas I had a drink from a bottle (taken by mistake) which I was told next morning contained spirits for washing clothes, I know I nearly choked…"

27th January 44. *"… I am writing again from the civvy house I described to you before, the only difference is that this time there are 5 of us billeted here, this is the second time I have been billeted here and we look forward to these rests, it enables us to get our clothes washed, etc…"*

The early months of 1944 were taken up with occasional rest, and intensive training for battle and river crossings on the Volturno in preparation for an eventual Allied breakthrough into the Liri valley. 36 Infantry Brigade moved down from the high Apennines in early February 44, and by April 44 1 RIrF were positioned on the lower slopes of Monte Castellone, near the village of Caira, on the Gustav Line at Cassino.

On 6th May 44, five days before the Fourth Battle of Cassino, Frank wrote:

"… *we are back again resting and the weather is lovely, we have gone into K.D. (khaki drill) again, shirts and shorts, and are getting sunburnt. We are in a lovely spot, everything is very green and I think it must be the first time troops have camped around here, everything is very fresh…"*

This rest time was short-lived, for the massive build-up to the Fourth Battle of Cassino was well under way, and on 16th May 44 - while the battle was raging, Frank's words, while putting a somewhat sardonic spin on the situation, could not hide the sheer horror of what he must have been experiencing:

"*My beginning is very realistic, the sun is beating down in my particular hole like all hell, and for the last 1½ hours going over my head has been a barrage from 700 guns, mingling with the Organ like sound coming from his lordship's famous (or infamous) Nebelwerfers, Sobbing Sisters, or Moaning Minnies from the British or American Armies. So all things being considered it's a lovely spring morning… it is pretty rough going out here, and we are all hoping that it will make him (the Germans) pull out of here, I could then settle down in comfort to enjoy this lovely Italian summer…" "... the next one (newspaper) will include Termoli, Trigno, Sangro, etc. Names that I think will be famous in this Regiment for all time, and from the look of things we have still a long way to go…You will see that I have now been made a full Sgt…"*

The Benedictine Monastery at Cassino was occupied by the Poles on 18th May 44, and the Allies moved slowly and painfully forward up the Liri Valley against heavy opposition. 1 RIrF were engaged in action, and the war was taking its toll on Frank, for on 11th June 44 he wrote from HQ Company:

"… in Bernard's letter of 28.5.44 he tells me that this last month there have been great doings in Italy. I think most of us confirm that, I have just written to Mother for the first time since the first mad Bash almost a month ago… this last do was like nothing either on earth or in hell, and as you will see I have changed my Company and am now in HQ, the idea being to give me a rest, it was either that or leaving me a few more days when I should have been one of those poor blighters who are led away crying and screaming and shaking. In Army parlance I have definitely "had it" and it will be a while before my nerves settle down again enough to let me have another go…"

On 11th August 44, Frank, now back to being a Corporal, wrote from HQ Company:

"…*I shall be going in Hospital, I think within the next few days, most probably a Rehabilitation place, I saw a Specialist just before I went on leave and he said my nerves were pretty bad and I needed a few weeks treatment…."*

By 18th August 44, he was writing not from 1 RIrF but from 78 Psychiatric Hospital:

"…y*ou will see that I am in Dock, nothing serious, just nerves out of sorts, but at the moment I feel pretty cheap…."*

And on 28th September 44:

"... *I saw a Bette Davis picture …all about nerves and psychiatrists, etc, a rum place this to see a film like that…I know I was a long time between letters last time, but we were having a pretty grim time and I have never been either so tired for so long or felt less like writing letters, still I survived and am once again able to enjoy life, I only hope that I never have to go through that lot again…"*

In November 44, Frank was moved to Details Company 2nd Battalion Infantry Training Depot in Egypt and wrote that he was feeling much better, hoping to be sent to Base for a job away from the front line, and wondering what Christmas 1944 would be like compared with 1943:

"... *Still, I had a good Xmas last year, we were out resting and moved back in on Boxing Day. I shall never forget the months that followed either, we were up at Cassino three times, the second time for 30 days, came out for 9 days and then went in again across the Rapido River on the big push, it's something to remember, we finished up at the top end of Lake Trasimeno, can you find it on your map, it's south of Florence…?"*

But on 29th January 45, he was writing from R Camp, Base Ordnance Depot Alexandria in Egypt:

"… I have been trying very hard to get away from this country, tried to get to Greece, Italy or India but am very much afraid that I've 'had it' and seem doomed to stagnate in Egypt until the end of the war … I am definitely feeling OK now, there was never much wrong with me, a slight halting in my speech and a bit of a shake, but I had definitely had enough…"

And on 28th March 45:

"… *have seen about every Brass Hat in this place for a move, and my application has now been forwarded to O.2.E. (General Headquarters Second Echelon) so must wait and see what happens… the war seems to be going very well, I would have liked to have been in France (not with an Infantry Battalion) …"*

Frank finally left for home at the end of 1945, writing on 4th December 45 from the same camp:

"… *Am writing this in Alexandria, just a short letter to let you know I am getting the Boat for home tomorrow morning the 5th. Shall be coming overland through France, so it should take about 10 or 12 days, anyway with average luck I should be home for Xmas."*

He returned to civilian life and work in the box factory, before moving to York in the 1950's, where he had a Newsagent's shop, and then a Post Office in Heworth. He married, rebuilt his life, and died in 1991 aged 78, but the narrative maintained by his immediate family and passed down to future generations, was that during the war he had been a PW.

It is obvious from Frank's letters that he was suffering from "shell shock", or "PTSD" as the condition is now known. Fortunately for him this was recognised, he was removed from front line action and treatment was available, but what seems incredibly sad is that for 80 years the lie had persisted that he had been a PW and not a brave veteran deserving of respect, who had fought and endured severe physical and mental harm in some of the most terrifying military engagements of the Second World War.

In his letters Frank emphasised the positives, often implying that things were not as bad as they might seem, and only occasionally revealing how frightened he really felt, in an effort to spare the feelings of those at home. It appears that on his return he must have either directed the family to adopt the PW myth or at least accepted that this was an easier way for them all to deal with any questions arising about his war service.

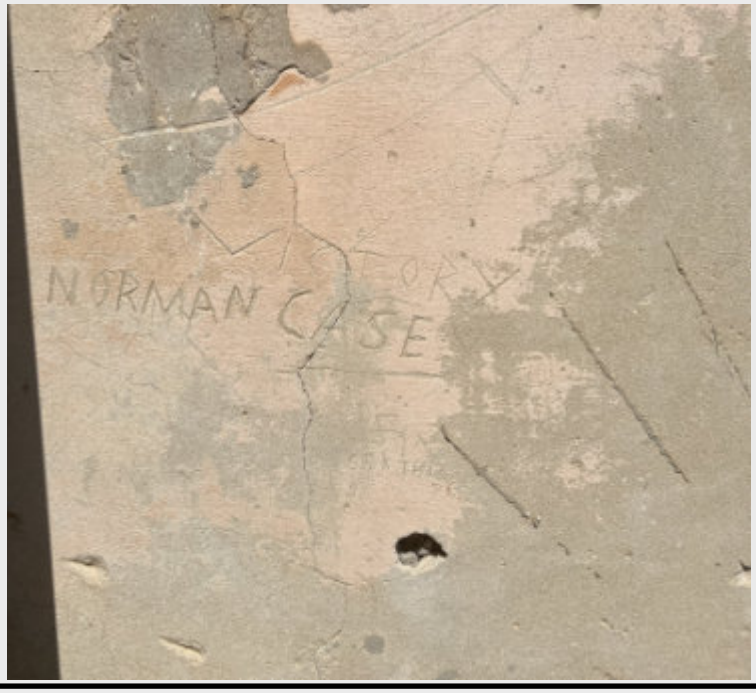
Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and we know from countless Veterans' recall of their return to civilian life and a population exhausted by war, that it was, and remains difficult (often impossible) to adjust to the 'new normal' for all concerned. Many veterans, aware of a general lack of interest in what they had experienced, remember their desire at the time 'not to talk about it', to 'put it all behind them' and 'look forward to the future'.

We might accept that in this environment, Frank found it easier to go along with the PW story, but it is undeniable that even to this day more than 80 years later, the social stigma attached to mental illness remains a glaring issue in society as a whole, with traumatised veterans of more recent conflicts experiencing the same apathetic attitude on their return home. Frank's family, who from Carolyn's description were close and caring, may well have felt some of this 'shame' and found it more convenient to reinvent him as a PW to explain his absence from active service for months at a time.

Revisiting Frank's correspondence has been a revelation for his family. Frank and his parents' generation are long gone, taking the family secret with them, so we can only guess at the reasons behind the lie, but his story deserves to be told. It has been a privilege to read the letters with his description of service in the Tunisian and Italian Campaigns, and his personal journey through injury to recovery.

With grateful thanks to Carolyn Baines.

Helen James 2026

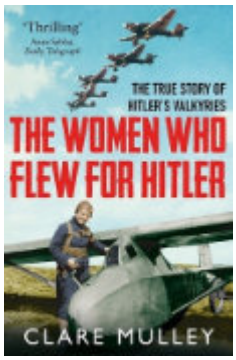


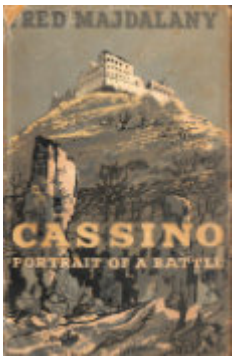
A relic of the campaign on the Sangro. Soldier's graffiti on a villa wall in Ortona

Books

Books are often a subject of discussion when members meet and share favourites. Here are a few titles chosen by our battlefield guide Frank de Planta:

'Settling the Bill.' Sir William Dugdale
'The Spy Who Loved.' Clare Mulley
'Agent ZO.' Clare Mulley
'The Women who flew for Hitler.' Clare Mulley
'Portrait of a Battle. Cassino.' Fred Majdalany
'Even the Brave Falter.' ED Smith
'Naples 1944.' Keith Lewis
'Return to Cassino.' Harold L Bond





And others:

- "One among Many, the Unforeseeable journey of one young man."
  Written by his son, Michael, this is the story of Jan Drewniak, who was a soldier in the Polish army during the Italian campaign. The book is available in two parts to read under "Jan Drewniak" in the Recollections section of our website and follows Jan's journey in great detail, from the invasion of Poland through to the end of the war and beyond.

- *Author Jak Bazino (* jak.bazino@gmail.com) *sent this information about his novel 'Breaking the Cycle', currently available on online libraries (Amazon, Barnes & Noble), and to order in bookshops.*
  The story:

  Burma, 1942. As the Japanese army invades the country, Anthony Preston, a young British archaeologist, discovers an ancient tablet revealing the location of sacred relics of the Buddha in the ruins of the legendary kingdom of Suvannabhumi. But this discovery, with its explosive political implications, becomes a deadly burden. Between betrayals, a desperate flight to Rangoon, in company of **men of the 2nd KOYLI**, and the collapse of the British Empire, Anthony must sacrifice everything he loves to survive and preserve this secret.

  Eighty-two years later, in 2024, amid the Burmese civil war, Khin Yadanar, a doctor in the Chin resistance forces, finds the tablet in the wreckage of a missing aircraft. Determined to complete Anthony's quest despite the bombings and military repression, she sets out to cross the war-torn country.

  Two eras. Two wars. One shared quest for truth and freedom.

We welcome recommendations and reviews for our Books page in the newsletter, and also on our website. If you have a favourite title we have not yet mentioned, please contact us, regardless of whether the book is currently in print, as used copies are frequently available for a reasonable price from online booksellers and second-hand book stores.

Monte Cassino Society pin badges, scarves and ties

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) 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.

New members

Joe Griffiths – Grandson of Private Jack Gascoyne, 5th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment, 11th Infantry Brigade, 78th Infantry Division.

Will Hughes – Grandson of Captain Wilfrid Henry Potter, 3rd Battalion 8th Punjab Regiment, 19th Indian Infantry Brigade, 8th Indian Division.

Anne Lewis – Daughter of Corporal Ignacy Bohowicz, 7th Horse Artillery, II Polish Corps.

Will Maciver – General interest in the Italian Campaign.

Rob Naylor – Son of Guardsman Charles William Naylor, 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards, 201st Guards Brigade.

Paul & Jackie Randall – Son & daughter in law of Rifleman Robert Eric Randall, 2nd Battalion, London Irish Rifles, 38th Infantry Brigade, 78th Infantry Division

Andy Wake – General interest in the Poles and the Italian Campaign

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(Please inform our Treasurer Diane Soady, when making payments by Bank Transfer)

The Monte Cassino Society

Account number 50016322.

Sort code 40-21-45

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Helen James