

Cassino Revisited

by

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“Andiamo. Vieni qua,” the farmer called to us. “Come to my casa.”

We followed him to his farmhouse. I had been at this spot on the globe some twenty years earlier, but this was no déjà vu. Surely I could never have seen this before.

It was 1964. My wife Dibs and I were enjoying a holiday in Europe. While in Italy, I wanted to see if I could discover my B Troop, gun position at the foot of Monte Cassino. I had my old war map marking precisely the location where, as Gun Position Officer, I had a dug-in Command Post. From this pit I made the necessary line, range and angle-of-sight calculations and with the aid of a wired Tannoy speaker system, directed the fire of four 25-pounder field guns in their nearby gun pits.

From Rome, we drove south down the Liri Valley. Passing the foot of Monte Cassino, a country lane led us to the bank of a stream across from which was the point marked as my gun position. As I looked at the smooth green field, I wondered – could this really be the place? After stumbling across the stream with Dibs on my back, I called out to a fellow in the field and using my crude Italian, asked if he knew if this had been the location of canons “durante la guerra”. He answered “Si Si” and beckoned us to follow him. We did.

In the early spring of 1944, my artillery regiment, the 11th Canadian Army Field Regiment, had moved across Italy to the Cassino area from being in action on the east coast. As well as enemy shell fire, we had endured a winter of miserable weather conditions. “Sunny Italy” was an old expression my men and I had come to deride. My diary – yes, despite forbidding regulations, while in action I kept a well preserved diary – has the following typical entries written that winter.

“Weather continues cold and wet.”

“Rained and snowed most of last night. Woke up to find our gun area a sea of mud and water. I couldn’t conceive how we were going to make a gun position out of it.”

“Two quads mired. We get one out but give a second one up after breaking the winch and snatch block.”

"This is a very tough break for the boys as conditions are worse than ever they have had – very chilly and wet and MUD! Command post an appalling mess of slush and mud. All soaked to the skin. Nowhere for men to put their beds. I produce a bottle of cognac that I have been hoarding for just such an occasion and manage to bring Command Post staff back to life. But the poor gunners – 3 at each gun have to be on the gun – standing ankle-deep in mud and water all night. Those that aren't on duty can't sleep anywhere anyway. A night none of us shall forget."

Later that year, we might not have minded this cold weather so much. August 24, 1944 diary entry reads:

"I am writing this sitting in our slit trench C.P. We are all feeling the heat more than any day yet. Sweat dripping off my face though I am sitting perfectly still and am half in the shade. Major MacIntosh (our battery commander) killed by shrapnel."

But by late September – mud again and often at the worst time. September 28 diary entry:

"Am woken at 0030 hrs by a peculiar crash and a yelling 'Someone's hurt. It's at #2 gun, sir, man's leg off.' Christ, what a night for this to happen. The mud is ankle-deep and the wind is lashing the rain down in a stinging fury. Get to #2 gun and find the boys putting Collins on a stretcher."

Back in mid-March the weather had become almost pleasant, but enemy shelling continued unpleasant as can be seen from diary entries such as the following:

"At 1845 hrs, Jerry plops rounds smack on our gun position. One landed on the edge of L/Bdr Haines' bivouac and three around #4 gun. I dash out to #2 gun and find Haines lying in the bottom of his smashed dug-out. We get him away quickly by stretcher to vehicle."

"Jerry has been very lucky with seven rounds on the battery. He has got three men today."

Now, about Cassino. In early April, after weeks of continuous action on the Adriatic coast, we occupy a gun position on the west side at the foot of the 5,000 ft. Monte Cassino, atop which sat the fortress-like monastery founded in 524 AD by Saint Benedict.

April 11, 1944. After referring to some early casualties I explain:

"We are in an exposed position so that Jerry can look down at us from his mountain O.Ps and pot away at us. Cannot move about during the day except to fire."

A few examples of our vulnerability and the unpleasantness of our many weeks' visit to Cassino in the same beaten-up gun position:

"Shoot just finishes at 4 p.m. when Jerry really lets us have it. I was at #4 gun when the first round came down. We all dove for slit trenches and dug-outs. Before I got in, another had landed very close. Got nicked slightly in the leg – my first wound – Ha! Then he dropped them all over the gun position. When things quietened down, I returned to the C.P. He started again, dropping about a dozen rounds on all sides of the C.P. knocking out all our lines. Two rounds fell within three yards of my bivouac. After another lull, he had another go at us. I realize now why they call this "Death Valley".

"One develops a very strong attachment to one's slit trench."

Mustn't bore the reader with too much of this shelling. Just one more to show what a good job my Guardian Angel was doing:

"April 25 – Get out to inspect the result of last night's shelling. Discover that the shell that woke me up had landed three feet behind our command post."

Skipping a lot of these incidentals, here is the climax of the Cassino story. It is the night of May 11th, a few days after my 24th birthday. We have been given gun programs showing the zero hour is 2300 hrs. My diary records the build-up. Then, at that special moment in time when I order "Fire" to my small troop of four guns:

"Suddenly the silence is shattered by a deafening roar and the sky is lit up by the flashes of hundreds and hundreds of artillery pieces of all sizes – our 25-pounder field guns, 4.5s, 5.5s, 105s, even American "long Toms". The pandemonium is indescribable. The valley is lit up like daylight and the air is filled with the swish and whine of shells. I know that this makes the famous barrages of El Alamein and the Sangro look like small fireworks displays."

Later that night:

"Sometime around midnight, Jerry starts to toss them over at us. At 0230 hrs, he lands a direct hit inside #2 gun pit. By an amazing stroke of luck, no casualties to either the gun or the gun crew. At that moment the gun crew were in a dugout beside their gun as they were having their hourly rest."

The gun was damaged. It was a tricky and dangerous job to replace it with a spare gun. Had to:

“Tear down the back of the gun pit to get the old gun out. The men worked splendidly. It was no picnic because by now a very dense pall of smoke caused by so many guns firing for so long had made visibility nil and at any moment we could expect Jerry to plop another round in the same place.”

“At 500 hrs we finally got ‘Stop Loading’. Am now very sleepy but manage to keep awake till 0830 hrs when Bill takes over and I turn in.”

On May 17, we move forward. Monte Cassino had finally fallen. The battle for Cassino was also the battle for Rome(the Eternal City) which the Germans gave up about two weeks later. U.S. General Mark Clark was determined that American troops would be the first to enter Rome. It was a re-enactment of the capture of Rome from southern Italy by General Belisarius of the Byzantine Empire in 533 AD. Much of Italy remained to be taken. Many pages of the diary record months of continuous action crossing the obstacles in the terrain so favourable to German defense. As we cross and re-cross the spine of Italy trailing our guns behind us, we become more familiar with Italian geography than that of our homeland. All that is another story.

Toward the end of the Italian Campaign, my Guardian Angel had to share with Pope Pious XII. the attribution of my unscathed survival You see, while on a magical week’s leave in Rome, enjoying a break from the stress of action, I along with pal Bill Hunnisett, visited the Vatican. During an awesome viewing inside St. Peter’s Cathedral, we found ourselves in an adjoining ante-room. To our amazement, we were told that the Pope would be conducting an audience. We were ushered into a room where His Holiness was seated. He spoke briefly. Then one by one, we came forward. I knelt before him. He placed his hand on my head and blessed me. The next day, I returned to my regiment which was in action in the Rimini area. Was that small act, that moment in time, a help to my Guardian Angel who had protected me so well?

Just as we are about to conquer Italy, we return to the west coast where, on February 20, 1945 at the port of Livorno (close to Pisa), we embark with our guns on an L.S.T. (Landing Ship Troops) We land at Marseilles, convoy up the Rhone valley and carry on the fighting in Holland. Again, another story.

The year and a half of tough slugging against some of Germany’s top Panzer divisions was over for the 1st and 5th Canadian Divisions. This part of WWII has been described as bloody and brutal .Cassino is considered to be one of the most difficult assignments soldiers have ever been given in the history of war. About 100,000 Canadians participated in the Italian campaign. Nearly 6,000 were killed and another 20,000 wounded. To put it mildly, the Italian campaign never had a high profile in the public knowledge of WWII. We sometimes felt like the forgotten

troops, especially after D-Day (June 6, 1944) when world attention focused on the Normandy landings and the fighting in northwest Europe. At that time, after fighting in Italy for many months, we were facing the Hitler Line and the Gustav line, two of the very tough enemy Italian defense positions. Imagine the resentment by those who survived the Italian campaign when they were later labeled the "D-Day Dodgers."

How come the Allies got involved in this questionable sideshow? Not long after the September 1939 start of the war, in June 1940, about a year and a half before the U.S. entered, the Germans had driven British troops out of Europe with their backs to the sea. The heroic civilian cross channel rescue at Dunkirk is one of the extraordinary stories of the war.

As the following months and years dragged on, the Russians held back the Germans in bloody battles. Stalin became impatient. Why did we not come and help him? British leaders believed we were far from ready to go back across the Channel. U.S. generals felt strongly that this was the way to attack Europe. Russian pressure demanded action. Winston Churchill agreed we should respond by invading Europe through its Italian "soft underbelly". At the historic Casablanca Conference in January 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt met. The Americans agreed to prepare for an invasion of Sicily. On July 10, 1943, Allied troops landed in Sicily and in the first week of September, crossed the Strait of Messina into the toe of Italy.

The Italian soft underbelly turned out to have tough armour. Italy's topography, with the Appenine mountainous spine from which run rivers into both coasts, was ideal for defensive purposes. Try a river crossing, putting up a bridge or crossing in boats or wading with hidden enemy machine guns on the other side. "One more river to cross" was the order of the day. A few such rivers that my diary records as challenging were: Moro, Sangor, Rapido, Montone, Fogna, Cesano, Foglio, Lamone, Savio. The Germans destroyed all bridges after they withdrew across them.

I recall one particular river crossing. Wading across a river as a FOO (Forward Observation Officer) with a company of infantry, I got to the other side. It was pandemonium. The infantry officer yelled to me to get my guns to knock out a machine gun that was making it unpleasant. What a classic opportunity for me. I turned on my wireless set to send back orders for my guns to start ranging on the target. Oh no – no communication! Was the enemy jamming my channel? What a failure!

Soon after the Allies penetrated Italy, the Axis (Germany and Italy) broke. The Italian Grand Council had voted no-confidence in Mussolini. The King arrested him and appointed Pietro Badoglio to head the government. On September 3rd an amnesty was signed and the Italians

joined the Allies. . Now they were our friends. We became their liberators. In the end, they hanged Mussolini.

Hitler had to replace Italian divisions serving in Europe with Germans. At the same time, the invasion of Italy forced him to send troops and aircraft away from the Eastern front. We later discovered some of these troops to be the toughest Panzer divisions.

Throughout the war, Italian civilians suffered enormously. In both towns and countryside, their houses were smashed by heavy shelling in which many of them were killed. Crops and vineyards were ruined. Chickens, pigs and vino consumed. Nothing edible or portable that the "Tedesco" (Germans) had not already taken or consumed, our troops did. I have recordings and mental pictures of heart-wrenching scenes such as a woman with a baby in her arms pleading for shelter and nourishment. In a happier light, I have a photo of a woman walking through our gun position in a calm time with a basket on her head offering to pick up our laundry for a much needed washing. Another is one of my troop lining up to be fed spaghetti prepared by nearby peasant women.

"Andiamo. I show you", the farmer exclaims to Dibs and me. It is difficult to believe this is where I once directed my four guns in the desolate surroundings of gun pits, slit trenches, shattered trees and destroyed houses.

I look in vain for some evidence of these scars. When I indicate my doubts, the Italian directs us to the edge of the field. He points. What do I see? There it is – the Battery Command Post dugout and a few old near-miss shell holes. The curtain of doubt draws back. I can clearly visualize the hasty trips to this now almost intact earthy relic of a nearly unbelievable part of my life.

After a few moments of excitement at this discovery, the farmer breaks the spell saying "Come to my casa." We follow him to his nearby modest brick farmhouse. He calls together several members of his family of all ages. They are followed by a straggle of chickens and we spread out in a central room. We share the honour of a glass or two of his home vino rosa and in our joint broken tongues, talk of wartime experiences and joke and laugh. Finally, our host asks me: "Tell me, how much money you make?" After giving some thought as to how I should answer, I reply "\$15,000 a year". He jumps to his feet exclaiming to the assembly, "You see, in America they are all millionaires."

We leave our friends and return to the car, this time avoiding a stream crossing (I never did like Italian river crossings). I look back at the lush green fields, trees with leaves and birds,

undamaged houses, no sign of a trench or gun pit, and under the clear blue sky, enjoy the serenity of the scene. I think: This is beautiful. This is the way God meant the land to be. How sad man had to mess it up in such a horrible senseless way.