

COMPANY A, 48TH ENGINEERS AT CASSINO

PART II

By Orville O. Munson

Someone once said in battle, he found a fine line between courage and cowardice that could be crossed many times. He said it was easy to freeze occasionally and fight tenaciously later and it was common valor to save lives without recognition. He said saving lives was expected of you.

What the infantry Sgt did for me in a combat situation at the Rapido River was true valor far beyond expectation. It is why I like to say I fought at Cassino because that battle did not just last four days or even four weeks; it lasted four months and there were many nationalities and thousands of very courageous soldiers who died in its proximity. Too many died unceremoniously while others died just trying to save someone else. Too bad heroic achievements often went unheralded when recognition by gratitude among your comrades would have been the greatest tribute of all.

The effort made by the 34th Infantry Division during their initial attempt to capture Cassino should go down as one of the most heroic. They did it without any armor support. It was not the intent that the Division should storm Cassino without the support of armored vehicles but before tanks could be inserted into the fight the German's released a dam and flooded the Cassino Valley to the right of Highway 6. Every effort made by exposed corps engineer units to get tanks involved eventually ended in complete failure. The flooding along with the natural obstacle that the Rapido River added made tanks worthless as an attack weapon. In one incident with many tanks already bogged down in mud because corduroy and land mats failed they eventually did get four tanks to the far side of the river. The four tanks never became a factor because they were very quickly destroyed by enemy fire.

The 235th and the 48th Engineers of the 1108th Engineer Group constantly looked and strived for ways to get armor involved. Even Look magazine carried a story playing up my very good friend Captain Walker Sorrell of the 235th Engineers as he strived to get tanks into Cassino. My very personal friend Captain Mark Reardon actually entered Cassino with an engineer patrol for the sole purpose of determining if tanks could traverse the rubble while Lt. Dallas Lynch also a good friend did the same in an area outside of Cassino. All of us were classmates in OCS at Belvoir. Dallas lost a part of his foot for his effort but his reconnaissance was successfully completed. Both Dallas Lynch and Walker Sorrell received deserving Distinguished Service Crosses for their effort. With that background, maybe it is easier for the reader to understand why my reconnaissance of the Rapido in the outskirts of Cassino caused such a stir. The possibility of carefully blowing the banks of the Rapido River where Highway 6 crossed became reality for tanks in large quantities to enter Cassino proper. It gave new hope for infantry units needing armor support.

Fifth Army became the home for two new divisions in early February. The divisions were the 2nd Infantry from New Zealand and the 4th Infantry from India. A Polish Corps was added to Eighth Army so at this juncture the Fifth and Eighth Armies were composed of Americans, British, Italians, Poles, French, Indians, New Zealanders and Canadians. The Indian and the New Zealand divisions were formed into the 2nd New Zealand Corps under Lieutenant General Sir Bernard Freyberg, V.C. One of Freyberg's initial responsibilities was to stand ready to exploit any possible successes of the 34th American Division.

When members of the New Zealand Corps, specifically the 4th Indian Division, relieved the 34th there were fifty enlisted men of the 34th that had held on to the very last against heavy odds. They were too numbed by the cold and exhausted to move. They could man their positions but they could not move out of them unassisted. They had to be carried out on stretchers with some of them killed by artillery fire on the way to safety.

My diary dated 1 February states, "Today we again waited for the signal to blow the banks of the Rapido River. The Infantry doesn't cherish the idea of the machine gun nest we found -- we believe they will have a nest on each side of the road. An infantry unit hit Cassino from the east TODAY and it seems they progressed well -- supposedly many prisoners have been taken. This morning a jeep with two sailor officers ran into the German machine gun nest that I ran into. The sailors had been informed that Cassino had been captured -- they were going to Casino to look over the ruins. They got to within 50 feet of the river but did not have as good luck as I did -- the driver was killed and one sailor officer wounded -- the other guy was practically scared to death. I was informed today that the infantry sent a 22-man patrol to the river TO LOCATE the machine gun nest. A Tank unit commander came to my CP today wanting to know if someone would lead one of his officers down to the river. He wanted to see by the light of day if they could maneuver on the soft ground to the left of Highway 6. I volunteered to go. It was a bold move on their part to go down in broad daylight. We went straight down Highway 6 to about 100 yards of the river -- the commander drew his own conclusions without getting off the road -- without stopping he turned right off Highway 6 at the dirt road just short of the river and we soon became hidden in some tree coverage. This happened without a shot being fired at us. I can't imagine what the Germans were thinking -- they must have thought it was some kind of a trick to locate their anti-tank guns.

So the reader will know what my World War II diary notes actually looked like, eight pages for 2 February were copied and are attached.

It should be definitely understood that this potential tank crossing my diary talks about was not an 'engineer' show. In other words it was someone from a tank battalion or an infantry unit that was pulling the strings. My main and only initial significant responsibility was to blow the banks of the Rapido so tanks could cross. The infantry in this case were the first ones to get the show on the road. They had the responsibility to cross over the blow to seek and eliminate any close enemy emplacements. Their bridgehead was to make sure no enemy patrols or enemy small arms and hand grenades could interfere with the work of the engineers placing the explosives. They had no control, naturally, over the enemy's use of mortars, artillery pieces, and direct fire of anti-tank weapons. However, they normally did have radio communications to their own mortar units to counter certain potential enemy actions.

Once the explosives are in place, the infantry unit furnishing the security is withdrawn from the bridgehead and only one or two of the engineers remain to detonate the charge or charges. In situations like the Rapido crossing, once the detonation is made, the engineer in charge normally goes back to the site one more time to check out his handy work. No combat engineer would want to jeopardize an attack unit by approving the attack to continue if he knew his explosives failed to accomplish the job.

The initial intent was to blow the banks during the morning hours. This would give the tanks several daylight hours to race into Cassino and raise havoc with the defenders. However, blowing the banks in daylight hours, when the area is completely and helplessly under enemy observation, was

expecting a lot. Direct fire on the site by enemy anti-tank weapons alone would have negated any chance we had placing the explosives. In retrospect it was fortunate for the engineers when the crossing was delayed until after it became dark. When I reported to Colonel Goodpaster that the operation was delayed, he indicated the tanks were not going to be in position to make the attack until much later in the day so that may have been a good reason to delay the blowing of the banks.

Goodpaster told me that clearing a way for the tanks in Cassino was now my responsibility once the tanks crossed. I gave the job of clearing paths in Cassino to Lt. Hollar and his second platoon. Late that afternoon Hollar moved his platoon and some dozers close to Mt. Trocchio in preparation for the new task. I moved the demolition team and my CP in the general area of Hollar's platoon in preparation to later join the infantry when they were ready to establish the bridgehead. The infantry's final assembly point for moving out to establish the bridgehead was the Cemetery near Highway 6.

The protective backside of Mt. Trocchio became a popular place for units preparing to enter Cassino. The most forward tip of Trocchio was reserved for the tank battalion. Their tanks started to move into position in twos and threes just before it got dark. It was at the tip of Trocchio where I was to report once the banks were blown.

It was about 6pm when the infantry told me they definitely were going to establish the bridgehead. My team with required explosives joined them at the cemetery. Before they moved out, I was told they planned to tie a rope to the jeep that was in the water and then somehow secure the rope on the far bank. It was something they had done a night or two earlier when they crossed and it helped them to counteract the river's current and it facilitated their getting up the far bank. They suggested my engineers could use the rope to get to the far side.

When the infantry security force moved out, we followed them to within a hundred yards of the intended blow; where we waited for them to cross the river. There was some early small arms fire and enemy mortars exploding soon after the infantry left for the river and it continued becoming a factor as we waited. It was about an hour when a runner reported that the machinegun nest had been silenced and seven of their group was securing the site. We moved in fast only to get initially involved with the many dead that were scattered around the site. We were especially concerned about those on the bank and in the water where we were going to place our explosives. Some of the dead seemed to be individuals that were added to those I saw when I made the initial reconnaissance. I say that because this time there was dead up on the road. We were not able to move many of the dead because too many of them had been there so long they came apart when we grabbed a leg or an arm. It was not uncommon for a leg to come off at the knee and then separate at the hip as well. While working with the dead someone noted that one of the casualties was still alive. He was breathing and he moaned occasionally. Three of us removed our field jackets and with rifles a stretcher was improvised so the man could be evacuated before we blew the banks.

Staff Sgt. Joseph Goetz from the first platoon and I were the ones responsible for deciding on what type of explosive and what type of a firing system to use. I was to be the one responsible for the overall supervision at the site and he would take command only if something happened to me. Our choice of composition C4 as the explosive and detonating cord as the firing system was primarily because they were very water resistant. Our fuse was to be short and it was to be fired by a fuse lighter.

Speaking of being water resistant, Goetz and I believed the depth of the river had to have been affected when the Germans used the Rapido to flood the Cassino Valley. We further believed the depth would be at its minimum directly beneath where the original bridge had been and that would be where we would be crossing back and forth several time. Believing this to be true, we decided to wear hip boots. At the river we were surprised to find the depth to be more than we planned but with care the boots served us well. When the early ones initially entered the water, small quarter inch rope was used to tie one person to another. We did this to preclude anyone from being washed down stream. One or two of the early members ventured a bit too far left and found themselves in water to their armpits.

Mainly because the French jeep was still centered in the river, we chose to blow the banks of the Rapido on the left hand side of Highway 6. Placement of the explosives went rather rapidly -- it was the tying together of the detonating cords from each separate charge that took considerable time. It was important to us that all the separate charges go at the same time. We knew there would be no second chance because many German mortar shells and ammo from direct fire weapons would rain down from above soon after the slightest explosion.

From the beginning it was evident that the Germans were suspicious that something unusual was happening. They kept firing several bursts of small mortar shells into the area. This obviously was the German's reaction to the Americans dislodging the machine gunners from their emplacements. The German fire initially was directed to points other than the blown bridge site. When we started to hear the distinct exchange of friendly and enemy small arms fire we knew one or more German patrol had become active. By this time we were about finished wrapping the detonating cord and it was a good thing because enemy mortar shells were starting to land close to the bridge site. We were most fortunate because the man-made banks of the river protected us from the shrapnel of the shells. To get us, the shell was going to have to land directly on the site. Even before we were ready to make the blow, I sent the infantry runner out to bring back the security force.

Engineers that were no longer needed were ordered to carry the wounded man that was found among the dead to the Italian cemetery where the infantry had stashed some medical aid personnel. Some of the new dead were also carried back to the cross road between the cemetery and us. If the infantry took a corps back as they past through, I didn't see it.

It is possible the active German patrol somehow knew the Americans that had crossed earlier were retreating back across the river because an increase in mortar activity at the bridge site was noticeable. As soon as possible after the infantry cleared, Goetz and I attempted the blow -- the fuse lighter failed. We quickly cut away the fuse and tried another lighter. We then discovered the lighters somehow had gotten wet. As fast as possible we tried one lighter after another before number five worked. We crossed the highway and hugged the ditch to get protection from the explosion. We didn't want to be too far away because we had to return to ascertain if friendly tanks could get to the far side.

The blow was like a huge bomb. Goetz and I hurried to the river knowing time was very precious. We found the near bank blown almost perfectly. The incline on the far bank was more than we wanted, but there was no reason to believe a tank couldn't make it if it was geared down and it turned to the left and went down the ditch rather than try to get back up on Highway 6.

Before we could get out of the water, several apparent pre-registered well-placed mortar shells landed. Both Goetz and I instinctively ducked down as the mortars exploded -- our hip boots immediately filled with very cold river water. Direct fire from close in machine guns crashed into the banks of the river and two fully loaded nebelwerfers fired directly over the bridge. A nebelwerfer was a six-barreled weapon that could fire six bombs simultaneously -- in this case they fired the 12 bombs in rapid fire. The nebelwerfer emits a shrieking sound that is very frightening. Prior to the detonation, Goetz and I had decided that our escape would be to run directly down the center of Highway 6. After all one straight line is the shortest distance between two points. Our destination was the Italian cemetery where my jeep was supposed to be waiting. As it happened, shells followed us clear to the cemetery as if they had eyes. We soon found running to be extremely difficult when our hip boots were full of water.

Without a covered foxhole to give us some protection, the cemetery was not a very healthy place to be. Since it was my responsibility to let the Battalion Tank Commander know the banks had been successfully blown, we jumped into my jeep and the driver headed for the tip of Mt. Trocchio. Before we got to where the tanks were supposed to be, I could see vehicles and tanks that appeared to be burning. As we closed on the site the tanks that were burning lit up the area like it was a graveyard for damaged equipment. When we drove by the damaged vehicles it was determined some of the vehicles apparently had been burning for some time because they had finished burning and just smoke was emitting. There was not a single person in the area to shed any light on what actually happened. It soon dawned on me the Germans either saw the gathering of tanks or anticipated the site could be used as a collection point for an attack and they saturated the area for some time with artillery. This had to have happened while the banks of the Rapido were being blown. I surmised the Americans left the area in fear the ammunition in the tanks might start exploding -- with that as a possibility, I didn't stay around long. We then stopped to check on Lt. Hollar and his platoon to see if they were alright. The platoon was gone. With no tank battalion to report to, I decided to go to my battalion headquarters to see if they knew what the next pending action might be.

At battalion headquarters the Officer of the Day told me the attack was called off because German artillery and mortars had landed among the tanks while they were waiting to attack. It was his belief the Battalion Tank Commander and several crew members were killed or wounded. My battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Goodpaster, and his jeep driver were present when the attack took place -- the driver for the Colonel was killed and Goodpaster was seriously wounded. The Officer of the Day suggested I call it a day and go get some sleep.

It had been a busy day. Between getting ready to blow the banks and not blowing the banks of the Rapido River and then actually blowing the banks, I had been required to report to the base of Mt. Lungo where Major General Keyes, the commander of II Corps, was presenting a number of different medals to his troops. It was a pleasure meeting General Keyes in person because he was someone I admired very much. Though I had never met him, the General talked to me like we were old friends as he pinned on a Silver Star for Gallantry in Action. The Star was for action that took place near Mignano back in late December.