

COMPANY A, 48th ENGINEERS AT CASSINO

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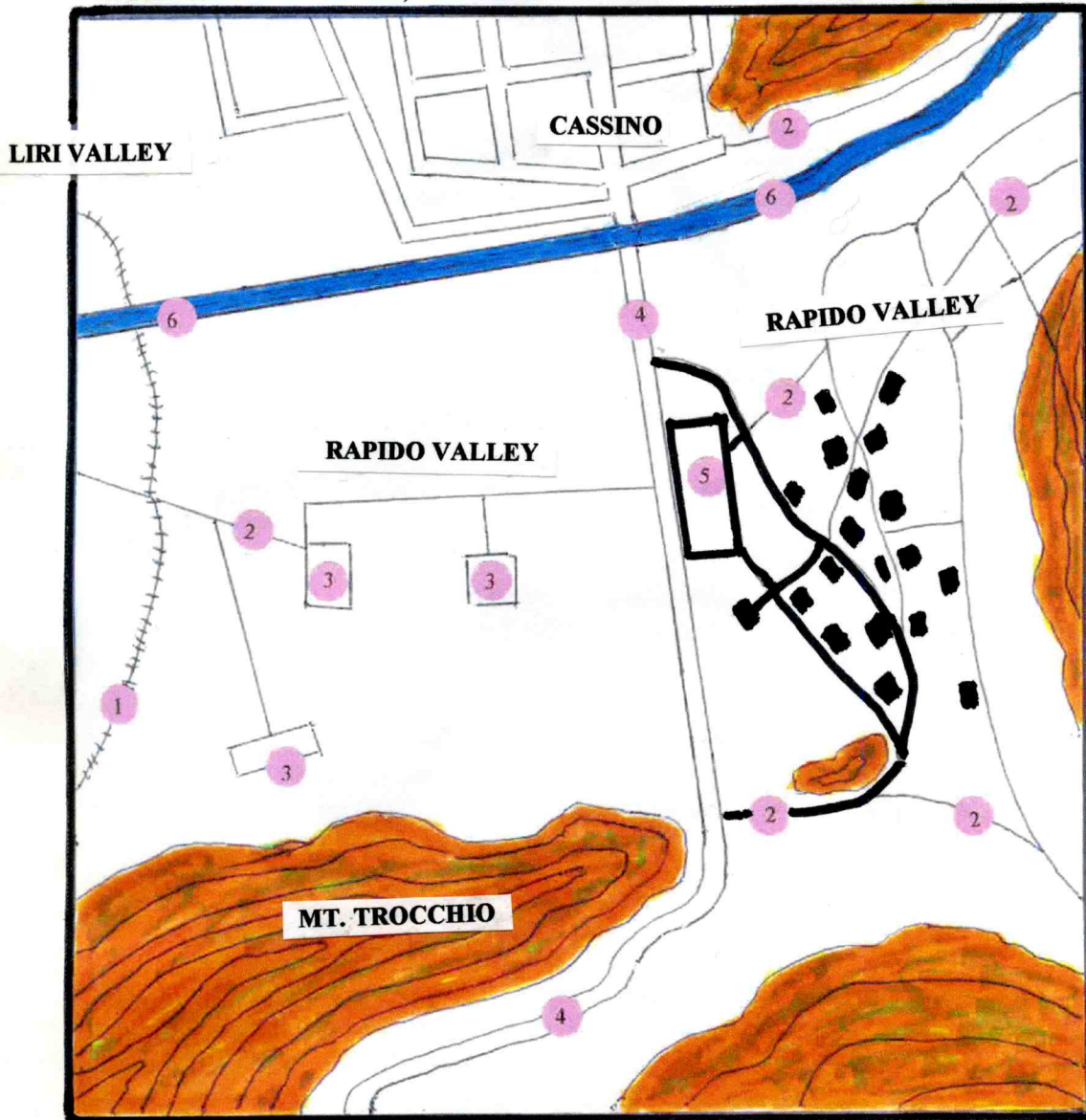
The word Cassino resounds loudly in my memory bank of the war. Just Cassino alone means more to me than any other location or any other period in my life as a soldier. It came along at just the right time for me because I was commanding a company of engineers and our Corps battalion was locked into supporting Infantry units from around the world in an attempt to rid this typical Italian town of German Troops. I loved being a company commander and am truly grateful for the good fortune to have survived the odds. My experiences were next to unbelievable and my survival was being lucky.

To be a successful Company commander, Lieutenants and noncommissioned officers that are loyal team members are needed. Those in key positions have to be dedicated to put their best foot forward. I had just what the doctor ordered -- an outstanding company of men and officers. The men reacted courageously and gave unselfishly. They never asked for anything in return. When I think back, I am disappointed for not spontaneously giving them the total recognition they so justly deserved. When I attempted later on to explain to myself why they did not get more recognition, my explanations were like an excuse.

As a Corps Engineer Battalion in December, we had been a part of the initial battle for Cassino but we were on the west extreme of Mt. Trocchio giving support to the American 36th Infantry and the British 46th Infantry Divisions. Now, just days later I am facing Cassino from the extreme east base of Mt. Trocchio. The battalion's new responsibility is maintaining a portion of the main supply route that feeds units fighting Cassino head on and on the right flank. I remember standing there on highway 6 at the east edge of Mt. Trocchio looking directly into Cassino. I was not alone because Pojho my jeep driver, protected by the ominous Mt. Trocchio, was patiently waiting some twenty to thirty paces back down the road. I stood there initially not really believing a small painted sign. It was held in position by a single stake that was driven into the right shoulder of the road. The small sign simply said, "Stop, Front lines." At that moment there were no shells exploding and no dust clouds from churning tanks and halftracks. The calm of the day gave absolutely no indication that large numbers of serious minded men were faced off in crude emplacements for the sole purpose of killing one another. Though I did not see any of them, the mile long Mt. Trocchio had to be well inhabited with friendly troops. It was the Allie's front line directly in front of Cassino. From my vantage point I saw Highway 6 as straight as an arrow as it aimed for the heart of Cassino. I could tell the highway was elevated some two plus feet above the normal ground level, and that the road elevation increased to its maximum of five to six feet as it approached a river that bordered on the southern extreme of the town. Close observation made out man-made banks that contained the narrow river. There also was some visual evidence of previous skirmishes when I took time to focus on the damaged trees that were evenly spaced on the wide shoulders of Highway 6.

(A sketch of the area has been prepared and made a permanent part of this writing to help the reader.)

A CLOSE LOOK AT THE RAPIDO VALLEY IN FRONT OF CASSINO WHERE THE RAPIDO RIVER (6) CROSSES HIGHWAY 6 (4). THE RAPIDO VALLEY RIGHT OF HIGHWAY 6 HAS COVER, SEVERAL DIRT ROADS AND A NUMBER OF HOMES.



- HIGHWAY 48 ----- 1
- DIRT ROADS ----- 2
- FARM HOMES ----- 3
- HIGHWAY 6 ----- 4
- CEMETERY ----- 5
- RAPIDO RIVER ----- 6

Note where Highway 6 rounds Mt. Trocchio for Cassino there is a dirt road (2) that goes to the backside of a small knoll and then turns left. This is the route we used to get into the Rapido Valley to the right of Highway 6 (4). The right valley afforded considerable cover.

Left of Highway 6 the Cassino valley was painfully void of meaningful cover. Only small splotches of orchard growths accompanied some of the damaged homes that dotted the otherwise flat tabletop landscape of pasture and farmland. With the exception of hundreds of dead British and American missing in action from the first attempt to capture Cassino, it truly was no-man's-land.

To the right of Highway 6, the valley in front of Cassino after some 400 yards disappeared into the prevalent and rugged core of mountains that ran predominately north and south through Italy. This valley right of Highway 6 had considerable tree coverage and small dirt roads that funneled into the valley from the mountain range. One dirt road actually came off of Highway 6 shortly after rounding the base of Mt. Trocchio. This valley to the right thusly had several small roads that even occasionally crisscrossed. The valley held out as the best means for Allied patrols and attack units to get a closer look at Cassino. It was in this area where small units of the 34th Infantry Division dug in after the division failed in their attempt to capture Cassino. After some required slight withdrawals, many of their missing was rotting north and south of the river and in the town of Cassino itself.

The first battle for Cassino proved very positive for Germany. The Gustav Line held firm. The most appreciable gain for the Allies was in the mountains just right of Cassino by the French Corps. However, the French, like the 34th Infantry, eventually had to stop because there were no fresh troops to replace their losses. After the 34th Division and the French lost four thousand eight hundred troops, consolidation of their positions became the order of the day.

At this particular time there was a certain amount of satisfaction knowing that the 235th Engineer Battalion, our sister battalion, had actively supported the 34th in Cassino and the French in the mountains. The commander of the 235th, Lt. Col. Polich, wanted so badly to support the forward units he moved so close to the front that he unnecessarily jeopardized his forward CP. On one special occasion he had his men disassemble a 37 mm antitank gun and then carry it up the steep forward slope of Mt. Trocchio in order to fire directly into Cassino. It proved to be no match for the German 88 so its lasting qualities paled in comparison.

The narrow dirt road that interested me the most was the one that turned right off Highway 6 and quickly wrapped around a small knoll before disappearing into adequate coverage. The importance of this road hinged on the fact that this was the way my engineers had to get into the valley to maintain some of those dirt roads. The bad part of it was that a vehicle needing to get from Highway 6 into the valley to the right became briefly exposed to enemy observation when it left the protection of Mt. Trocchio. For an alert enemy anti-tank gunner, this exposure of a vehicle as it left Trocchio heading for the protection of the small knoll was like a moving target at the shooting gallery. Engineers, more than any other branch, had to run this gauntlet often during daylight hours.

In The Rapido River chapter of my personal history, I included several entries pertaining to a diary I kept during the War. A part of my 28 January 1944 entry states; "This evening we were pulled off of the San Pietro to San Vittore road and assigned the maintenance of a one-way road near

Cassino.” The one-way road near Cassino I was referring to in my diary on 28 January was in the Rapido Valley to the right of Highway 6.

My diary for 29 January includes two comments that I wish to re-emphasize. One of the comments is; “At two I went out to check on the work site and got there in time to see one of our trucks destroyed by direct fire.”

The truck that was hit by direct fire was attempting to traverse this short distance mentioned above -- moving from the protection of Mt. Trocchio to the knoll near the entrance to the Rapido Valley to the right of Highway 6.

A second comment made on 29 January speaks of getting the truck off the road and going up front to contact one of my platoons leaders and on the way encountering Captain Schowalter and Lt. Col. Goodpaster. It was then when Goodpaster told me that my company was going to build the Bailey bridge on Highway 6 over the Rapido River during the next attack on Cassino. (NOTE: At that time Goodpaster was the acting Group Commander in the temporary absence of Colonel Andersson.)

When Goodpaster said my company was going to build the bridge across the Rapido, it was obvious to me the first battle for Cassino was over and a new plan of attack was in the making. I remember being especially proud that Goodpaster had chosen my Company for this obviously important task even though Cassino, a battlefield of the enemy's choosing, so protected on its' backside by endless mountains, already had impacted against Fifth Army in bloody failures. I knew from fellow officers that bitter fighting in the outskirts of the town along the Rapido had yielded very little ground.

It was painstakingly certain this required bridge was going to be a very important part of the next attack on Cassino. As I weighed the task of building the bridge, a number of question marks started punctuating my many thoughts. The range of my thoughts left somewhat frightening potentials, such as; known enemy observation that existed over the entire valley, need for construction silence once construction begins because of the closeness of the bridge site to known prepared enemy positions, enemy direct fire capabilities, the likelihood of booby trapped approaches with the inevitable enemy mines for both personnel and vehicles, and their known pre-registering of mortar fire on important sites. The one thing I knew for certain was that the openness of the crossing point dictated that any engineer work at the site could only be done at night.

The Battalion S-3, Capt. Schowalter, told me, while the 34th Infantry was attacking Cassino, the 19th Engineer Regiment sent a large engineer reconnaissance team to the bridge crossing site over the Rapido. The S-3 claimed only one man from the reconnaissance team returned, and he had no information of the blown bridge because he did not make it to the river.

I told S-3 an early personal reconnaissance of the bridge site was needed immediately since Corps could call for the construction of a bridge at any time. S-3 didn't tell me not to do it.

My diary dated 31 January starts with my saying -- "Jan 31st and what a day. My luckiest since hitting Italy. First -- the company being temporarily relieved of roadwork was assigned some corduroy building. (NOTE: Corduroy was being built in anticipation of supporting a tank attack into Cassino. With the Cassino Valley flooded, corduroy was going to be needed to get the tanks to the Rapido.)

Then -- the importance of a bridge at Cassino made it unwise to not have an engineer reconnaissance of the construction site. So -- I decided since my company was going to build the darn thing then I should make the recon myself." (NOTE: My diary comments went on for eleven pages. Without the diary I never would have been able to remember everything that happened on 31 January 1944.)

Once my company officers were informed that I was going to make a reconnaissance of the Rapido River at Cassino, Lt. Finnegan, a platoon leader, volunteered to go along. Finnegan had not been with the company very long and he had received special Bailey Bridge training in Africa so he was anxious to get his feet wet with the company. When S-3 was told that I was going, Lt. Carter, an assistant S-3 of the Battalion, said he would also like to go. Carter wanting to go along did not completely surprise me. He was not completely satisfied being an assistant to some staff officer while most of his contemporaries were at least platoon leaders. I did not discourage the officers from going mainly because it was not my intention that all three of us go to the blow itself. Getting daylight information on the blow was the most essential task -- but getting to and from the site was also important so there were things other trained eyes could see that might help in the long run.

The three of us left our bivouac area in my jeep. Besides my pistol, I carried a stick that looked a lot like a long broom handle. I had insisted the other officers be armed with carbines. The jeep driver was told to take us to the Cassino Valley to the right of highway 6.

Having been in the area several times we knew about these dirt roads to the right of Highway 6. We knew once inside the valley one of the dirt roads angled back across the valley and tied back into Highway 6 about 100 yards from the Rapido River. The tie-back, as well as the Rapido River, was in no-man's-land. (NOTE: See sketch already included.) None of us had ever been to where the dirt road tied back to Highway 6. It never-the-less did factor into my plans for getting to the river because I had reason to believe the tie-back was open to enemy observation. It appeared the only sparse cover at the tie-back would be the ditches alongside the roads and three or four mature trees spaced by twenty to thirty feet that lined the roads on both sides.

In my earlier entries to the valley I had seen a cemetery that lined Highway 6 and at one point it appeared to butt up against the dirt road -- so we headed for the cemetery. We found the cemetery and learned it was enclosed on three sides by a six-foot concrete wall. The wall obviously had been the target several times for various types of explosives because sections of it had been previously damaged so it was possible to see into the cemetery at various points. The cemetery occupied a considerable area between the all important dirt road and Highway 6. Soldiers of the 34th Infantry Division had numerous foxholes dug into the ditches and along the cemetery wall. The wall obviously played an

