

## **COMPANY A, 48<sup>th</sup> ENGINEERS AT CASSINO**

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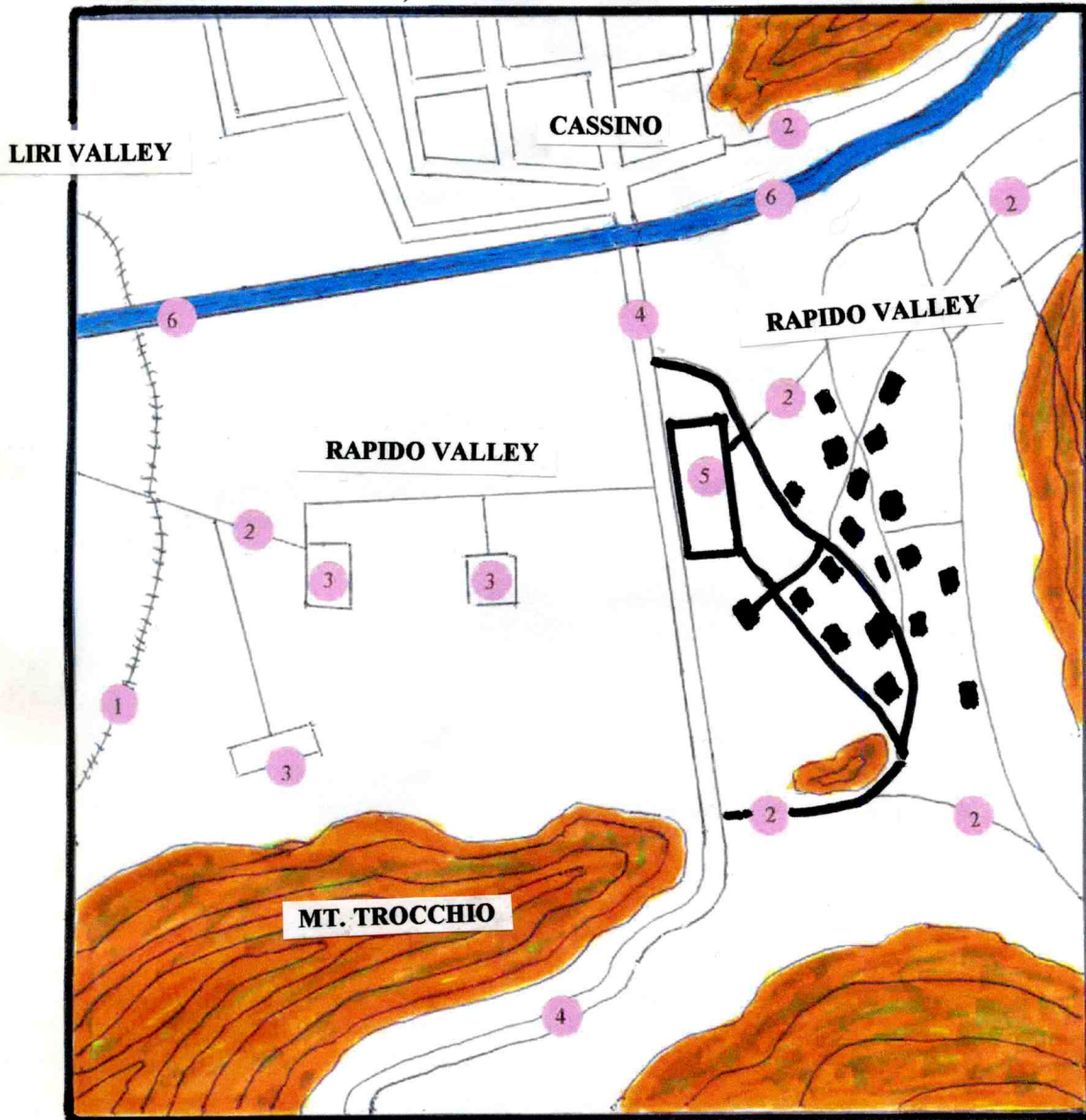
The word Cassino resounds loudly in my memory bank of the war. Just Cassino alone means more to me than any other location or any other period in my life as a soldier. It came along at just the right time for me because I was commanding a company of engineers and our Corps battalion was locked into supporting 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 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the British 46<sup>th</sup> 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 34<sup>th</sup> 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 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry, eventually had to stop because there were no fresh troops to replace their losses. After the 34<sup>th</sup> 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 235<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, our sister battalion, had actively supported the 34<sup>th</sup> in Cassino and the French in the mountains. The commander of the 235<sup>th</sup>, 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 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry was attacking Cassino, the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 31<sup>st</sup> 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 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had numerous foxholes dug into the ditches and along the cemetery wall. The wall obviously played an

important part in their protection from the enemy. It was along the concrete wall, between the wall and the ditch to the dirt road that we encountered an officer of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I explained to the officer what our intentions were and asked him if he knew how to get to the river without stepping on a mine. He said getting to the river was very risky during daylight hours but his men patrolled to the river several times every night.

Finding someone who was familiar with the path they took to the river was easy. He turned out to be an Infantry Sergeant who had played an important role in their previous attempt to capture Cassino. The Sgt gave the appearance of a very positive individual so I gladly followed him as he headed for Highway 6. It was not my intent that any 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry individual go with me to the river, but his unwavering willingness to lead the way left me with no other choice.

About thirty feet before closing on Highway 6 our cover disappeared and the Sgt started crawling his way to the highway taking advantage of the ditch on the left side of the road. Never having been to the river I was surprised when the Sgt wasted no time racing across Highway 6 to get into the ditch on the left side of the road. I had actually thought ahead of time that we would be going down the right hand ditch of Highway 6. When I got to the highway, it was easy to see where Highway 6 tied into the bank of the Rapido River so I told Carter and Finnegan they should remain at this point and give me protective cover if it should become necessary. Naturally, I followed the Sgt and found the road level on the far side to be some three plus feet above the valley floor. The Sgt. was about thirty yards short of the river when I got across the road. He was in the prone position waving me on by.

The incline of the highway gradually increased as I worked my way to the river. However, before I got to the river I came upon a significant number of disarrayed dead Americans. They obviously had been there for several days preserved by the very cold days and nights of January. There were so many you had to zig and zag your way through. One of them was a Captain. He was wearing a light coverall over his normal army winter uniform. I knew he was an engineer and a Captain because he was wearing his insignia and rank. With his helmet still on he was lying on his back looking up at the sky. He was armed with a 45-caliber army pistol that was still holstered. There were no weapons visible near the other dead so it made me suspicious that the Germans had booby-trapped the Captain. I did not count the dead but there must have been at least a dozen.

The dirt bank that contained the river was at least five feet above the ground level. To see the river I was going to have to mount the bank. Since I was carrying a stick several feet long, a special effort was required on my part to get on top of the bank. (NOTE: The purpose of the stick was to measure the depth of the river.) The bank of compacted soil that contained the river was a good four to five feet thick. Once on the bank, I became immediately interested in a vehicle that was nose down into the river. It was a jeep that apparently became lost. Its' front wheels and much of the motor was covered by a fast flowing river. It undoubtedly belonged to the French forces that were fighting to the right of Cassino. I knew it was French because of the marking on the right rear bumper. There was a

dead Frenchman draped over the hood and one laying up against the vehicle on the right side. It appeared that the river's current was what was holding the Frenchman against the vehicle. A third dead body, obviously an American, was so completely submerged on the left side of the jeep that only his legs were sticking out. Once again it must have been the jeep that played an important part in keeping the current from washing the body down stream. With so much to see I was rather distracted.

When I remembered why I was there, it was the stick I wanted to get rid of first so an effort was made to measure the river's depth. I initially had to slide to the left several feet to get safely past the blow and then I had to extend myself precariously in order to reach the bedrock of the river.

Suddenly, with shear fright, I heard this short burst from an unmistakable German submachine gun. The burst of fire caused me to look up from my extremely extended position of attempting to measure the river and there was this German firing point blank at me from the opposite side of the river. Since he was so close and it was a burst of rounds it was impossible to believe he had missed me. There was no place for me to go but straight down into the river. The Sgt who accompanied me to the river fired several rounds at the German who in turn threw at least two grenades into the water. Luckily, my head apparently was above water when the grenades exploded.

The water was five to six feet deep and extremely cold. I was immediately at the mercy of this unrelenting river as the strong current quickly washed me down stream. I was not only freezing but helpless against the current with full realization the inside banks of the river were straight up and much higher than I could reach. My concern was compounded knowing full well the further I went downstream the more risky became my presence with the enemy.

Instinctively I stayed as close to the left bank of the river as possible. I was trying to grab onto anything that might keep me from going further down the river. Just when it looked like I was a goner, after being forced down river for about two hundred yards, I spotted a small drainage ditch that emptied into the Rapido from the valley in front of Mt. Trocchio. The ditch drained heavy rainwater that fell on Mt. Trocchio. The drainage ditch had to have been man-made. It was at a height I hoped to manage. Getting into the drainage ditch became my number one priority. I do not know what it was but my aching hands grabbed something and they miraculously hung on. I was exhausted so I decided to rest for a few seconds to build up my strength.

Just when I was ready to make my first real effort to get into the drainage ditch, a face of a very friendly infantry Sgt peered down at me from the banks of the drainage ditch. He dove into the ditch and grabbed me by the arm. I couldn't believe what was happening. His immediate concern was, "Are you hurt?" He was certain I had been shot -- this final effort on his part was his hope to help. He knew the Rapido Valley like the back of his hand so he knew about the drainage ditch. He knew there was a chance I would find the ditch, and he even believed he might get to the ditch before I did. As it turned out, I possible got to the ditch just a few seconds before he did.

The Sgt pulled me out of the river and we laid there together in the drainage ditch for about a minute in the cold water that was draining into the river. The Sgt was convinced the drainage ditch gave us the best chance for survival. It was terribly cold but there was very little current in the ditch compared to the river and it was easy to touch the bottom of the ditch. We crawled for about two hundred yards before the Sgt suggested we make a run for Highway 6. By so doing we were going to chart new ground and were jeopardizing ourselves to the carpet of anti-personnel mines that were known to exist in the valley. The Sgt counted to three and he took off. I tried to follow but fell flat on my face. My thought was, "My gosh, I've been shot and I didn't know it."

My initial thought was that I had been shot and possibly the cold water negated any pain from a wound. I lay there for a short time and fell to the ground two more times before my legs stabilized. It turned out I had been in the cold water so long my legs had become numb. Half way to Highway 6 we encountered a second much smaller drainage ditch so we got into it and it took us safely back.

My Jeep with Carter and Finnegan was gone when I arrived back to Highway 6. A dump truck working in the general area just happened to be available so it was confiscated to take me back to my battalion headquarters. The good Sgt said he needed to hurry back to his unit to get dry clothes and to report that all was well. The two of us parted with me saluting the Sgt. I soon realized I did not even know the Sgt's name and he couldn't possibly know who I was. I did try to locate the Sgt soon afterwards, but my efforts failed. The 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had moved on.

At Battalion Headquarters I reported immediately and directly to S-2 and S-3 believing that it was possible Carter and Finnegan had already told them about my disappearance in the Rapido. It happened I got back just a short time before Carter and Finnegan. Someone in the S-3 section found some army blankets to cover my cold and shivering body. Lt. Col. Goodpaster was close by so he came in to hear what happened. As soon as Carter and Finnegan arrived, it was learned they saw me crawl up on the riverbank. They heard the machine gun fire but did not see the German. They did hear the Sgt fire his weapon -- it was their claim the German fired two bursts. After the hand grenade explosions, and neither the Sgt nor I returned, they believed both of us had been killed. They even claimed they saw a German run across the road like he was checking to see if we had been hit, but it happened so fast they were not able to fire at the German with any accuracy. Carter and Finnegan were delayed because they tried getting the infantry to fire mortars into the far side of the blown bridge.

Colonel Goodpaster had several questions regards blowing the banks of the Rapido so tanks could cross. He also was concerned about the soundness of the riverbed at the crossing. When he was finished, he said, "Lt. Munson, glad to have you in the Battalion." In over a year of experiences, it was the first time he said anything complimentary to me. That same afternoon S-3 informed me to prepare to blow the banks of the Rapido. I was told the Infantry would cross the river and set up a security force. With a squad size unit I moved out to an assembly area to wait for the infantry. For some unknown reason the orders were changed. Rumors had it that the big push, requiring the bailey, would happen in the morning.