

A STAFF
CORRESPONDENT
WROTE

BILL MUNSON WITH REAL VICTORS OF CASSINO

There were plenty of gallant tries and "near misses" in the latest battle of Cassino, but just about the only real victors on the Allied side were Bill Munson's engineers, according to Graham Hovey, International News Service staff correspondent in a delayed dispatch from Cassino with the Fifth Army in April. The dispatch continues as follows:

Allied artillery hurled thousands of projectiles at the fortress of rubble and ghost buildings, but German paratroopers, willing to fight, were still there when the infantry attacked. New Zealand and Indian foot soldiers fought heroically under trying conditions but failed to clear the town or capture the abbey.

Only the engineers commanded by the stocky, good-natured captain from Wessington Springs, S. D., who once lugged a football for the University of Idaho, completed successfully the job assigned to them by the Allied high command.

Bill Munson's company was ordered to build a Bailey bridge across the raging Rapido river 300 yards east of Cassino; they did—on the darkest night in months, under showers of both rain and enemy shells.

Then they were ordered to build a second bridge over the river at a by-pass of Italian Highway No. 6, the same distance from town. They did that too, under constant shelling and despite the fact that they had to do their construction originally on trucks.

Putting a Bailey bridge together in daylight is difficult enough, but in the middle of a black night without even a flashlight to work by, it becomes a giant jigsaw puzzle.

The Germans demonstrated the importance they attached to Munson's job by repeatedly shelling the area in a desperate effort to knock out the sturdy spans over which some tanks rolled into the sniper-ridden city.

There was considerably more to the assignment than just the construction work. It involved a dangerous daylight reconnaissance by Munson and four of his officers—Lts. Mike Finnegan, Waterloo, Ia.; William O. Snyder, Spartansburg, S. C.; George T. Carter, Lowell, N. C.; and Courtney Hellar, Shippenburg, Pa.—at a time when the Rapido was more than a mile in front of our most advanced infantry outposts.

It involved an equally dangerous job of filling in bomb craters all over the bridge area, left by American bombers after the blitz of March 15. The detail was directed by Sgt. Joseph Goetz, jr., of Milwaukee, Wisc., before any Allied forces had moved into the zone involved.

"The men worked like dogs," said Munson, whose real first name is Orville, as he summed up the tale of two bridges in his command tent. "I'm prejudiced, I guess, but I think they surely did a fine job."

So did everyone else along the Cassino front.

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FROM THE BOOK
CALLED
"THE BATTALIONS"

1945 14 MARCH 1944 MSG FROM NZ CORPS TO 1108 ENGR GROUP: DICKENS IS ON TOMORROW.

1950 14 MARCH 1944 FIELD MSG TO CO'S 48TH & 235TH ENGR BNS: DICKENS IS ON TOMORROW.

"Dickens" was the code word for the big day. All the air power in the Mediterranean Theater was to be unleashed against Cassino in an attempt to soften up one of the great holdouts of the war. A vicious bombing a month before had done the defenders no apparent harm, and now all along the front the war on the ground paused and cast its eyes upward. This was the Great Experiment. On the one hand the classic defense of commanding terrain, seemingly impregnable to ground attack. On the other, the greatest massed air onslaught of the war in direct tactical support of ground forces against one position. The proponents of both sides of the controversy should have been there. They could have set aside their pens, typewriters, graphs, photos, charts, figures and arguments. Today they would use only their eyes, their ears and their backs, propped against a rock on the Cervaro hillside.

Doughboys waited hopefully; artillerymen, ammunition piled high beside their pieces, anticipated their turn; engineers on the muddy roads laid down their tools and halted the dump trucks. Every ear in the valley was cocked to catch the sound. When it came it was like the drone of locusts from afar off, an uncertain murmur swelling gradually to a steady pulsing throb as from the south the specks began to appear, high and small against the March sky. First the mediums, E25's, in flights of a dozen or more. High above them the fighters flashed across the blue like quicksilver, trailing vapor. Now the bombers were over target and the flights turned left. Bellies open, the planes dropped their loads, then wheeled south once more and were gone, only to be replaced by another flight, and more, and more again. There was a good deal of the smoke of battle in the valley already, but the monastery and the town could still be seen before the first bombs struck, not afterward for a long while. After the mediums came the heavies, the Fortresses, and around and through them pierced the endless stream of dive bombers, each bearing a single deadly message. All morning the hill and the town across the river were livid with the bright orange of bursting explosive. The strike of the first bomb was visible, but those that followed merely slashed the billowing smoke with a brilliant knife, then settled back in the ocean of grey and white. There were, it was said, more than 3000 sorties that morning, and it was hard to believe that any living thing could survive such punishment and retain sanity. But there was more to come. The cannonade had not even begun.

Every field piece in the valley—American, British, New Zealand, French—ranging in caliber from 75's to 240's, joined in the greatest concentration of firepower on one target in the history of military action. For sheer intensity, the barrage surpassed El Alamein, Sevastopol, Stalingrad. It was an artilleryman's dream. The target was in plain view, the range point blank, the calibration exact, the registration perfect. For over an hour they poured it on until the gunners dripped sweat in the chill air and the tubes had had all they could stand at one time. Monastery Hill seemed to jump with the terrible detonation and writhe as if under the blows of a massive club. Great holes appeared in the 16-foot-thick walls of the Abbey; its towers crumbled and huge chunks of masonry flew through the shrapnel-laden air. Every foot of the town and the great hill was pulverized until the houses and the buildings of what was once a pleasant community had passed from the earth leaving no recognizable trace. When the barrage ceased at noon the quiet of the grave hung over the place. The only smell was of cordite, that instant klaxon of danger and death known to every soldier's instinct.

The doughboys moved in again with everything they had. Surely there were no defenders left with any fight in them; surely it would be but a question of bodies and prisoners, perhaps very few of either.

Everyone was wrong. There were plenty of defenders, plenty of fight, plenty of guns, ammunition, OP's, perseverance and fanaticism.