

## *Invasion of Italy*

*Landing at Reggio, landmine death of a child, saved from the Far East, disorganisation, problems with lorries – not enough vehicles, too many types, engines burning out and an arrogant US Major, on to Naples, conned over underwear, more problems with Americans, attacked by planes and injured again, Monte Cassino, leave and Vesuvius erupting*

### **Sep 1943 to Apr 1944**

We move the advance unit to the embarkation area and make final checks on the vehicles. Allied forces had invaded Salerno on the west coast of Italy several days before with gliders, parachutists and sea-borne troops and we were going to enter at Reggio, on the 'toe' of Italy. We boarded the L.S.T. again and left at 4.20pm on a perfectly calm sea, except for a slight swell. Although it was only a four-mile trip, the rolling made me seasick again.

With so many ships at the landing zone, we landed near the mouth of the estuary but when we disembarked, we found that we were on the wrong side of the river so because the river was just a trickle, we took all of the vehicles across the river to the other side. There was a fairly large beach on that side of the river so we decided to park up for the night and leave early the next day. During the evening, quite a few local inhabitants kept shouting at us and making gestures to get out off this site. Because none of us could speak Italian, we thought they wanted us to go away and leave them alone, so we took no notice of them.

We rose early next day but instead of the sunny day of the previous day, it was now overcast and a strong wind blowing. We left the site at about 8 am, and after travelling about 2 hours, we were running alongside the river when a loud roaring sound came from ahead, and suddenly what was a small stream, now turned into a raging torrent with a wave about six feet high dashing down to the sea. It appeared that on the previous day, a severe storm had taken place up in the hills about fifty miles away and a 'flash flood' was on it's way to where we were camped the previous night.

It was a good job that we did not over sleep that day. We know now why the locals were trying to get us to move.

We made slow progress to Tarranta, where in one difficult mountain road, the retreating German army had blown up the road on a hairpin and we had to wait until the army had built a Bailey Bridge to cross to the other side. Having very little room to make the fifty feet bridge, it was amazing to see the counterbalancing which took place to get the bridge across. We camped just a short way from the bridge and setting off early next day, we made our way north to Foggia. In some places we were welcomed and in others there was distinct hostility.

## **Foggia**

However, we set up camp just outside Foggia, where the entrance to the site had been heavily mined and the army had cleared a path about twenty feet wide, and marked it with the white tape. A few days later, some young children had been caught stealing from one of our food wagons, and were being escorted to the Guard Room, when one of them escaped and when he was chased, he decided to take a short cut under the tape to the road. He only went about four paces when he hit a mine and was killed. We had the Mayor and the local police at the camp, and we couldn't even get the body until the mine disposal engineers came to clear a path, but the locals blamed us for his death, and we didn't even lay the mines. We could not have avoided this tragedy, but it made life difficult with the local people.

During the next week we lost two more pilots and planes and there were rumours that we were going to be disbanded. With two other squadrons carrying out reconnaissance in the Group, our unit was the obvious one to go. Having gone through the Desert campaign, the invasion of Sicily and Italy and the hope that we were really on our way home, none of us liked the idea of starting with a new unit again. Our closure was announced three days later and we then began the procedure of sending all vehicles and equipment back to base. All the vehicles were sent to the Motor Pool. A lot of my workshop equipment I gave to the Sergeant of the Vehicle Light Repair Unit and also my workshop lorry.

## **New posting**

My posting to a new unit came through and I was horrified to see that it was to the Far East. Having spent three years in the Middle East, the last place I wanted to go was there. However, my Adjutant called me to his office and told me that he was being posted to an Air Stores Park at Bari, and having checked my records and found that I had been Overseas for three years and also, that I had served on an Air Stores Park before, he asked if I would like to join him by being posted there instead. I jumped at the chance because I had heard that this unit was originally going to Yugoslavia, but it had been cancelled and that it would take part in the Italian campaign instead.

The Adjutant then said that when his posting came through, he was asked if a Sergeant Fitter was available because their present Sergeant was an aero fitter who was sent to them in disgrace and he just did not care. He also asked if we had any good trucks left to take us to Bari, and I told him that we had kept our last new Ford four wheel drive back for use at our own camp so that would be available for our journey. Our new postings came through and two of our storekeepers were also posted to this unit so on the appointed day, we set off for Bari in miserable weather, wind rain and some snow and we reached the site in some woods just outside Bari at about six pm.

On the way down, the adjutant gave me more details of the new unit. It was a 'First Army' unit, having come in at the Algiers landings and come through to Tunis from the West. There was always bitter rivalry between the First Army and the Eighth Army because each said that they should have been the first to enter Tunis.

The unit was a mainly Spitfire supply unit and when he was talking to Headquarters about his own posting the subject of the transport serviceability came up and he asked what it was like on his old unit. He replied that there was never any problem and then my name came up and then their Sergeant was sent to the Far East and I was able to take his place.

## **Bari and snow**

After reporting to the Orderly Room and the Sergeants Mess, I was told that I could share a tent with the two Warrant Officers. After being

introduced to the two W.O.'s, I found that one was the Chief Storekeeper, and the other one was in charge of the transport, a driver and not a technician. We had our meal and we discussed the transport and my predecessor and it seemed that anything more strenuous than an oil change, the vehicle was sent to the Light vehicle repair unit. I pointed out that my policy of Servicing was to do all except major repairs in our own workshops. I then heard that there were several vehicles already in the L.R.U. and because our stores lorries were 'binned out' to take all the spares, it meant someone going to the L.R.U. to get the spares and bring them back to our unit. Also, it meant that the L.R.U. had to be near us all of the time. As I was tired I turned in early that night, and my appointment with the C.O. was for 11 am next morning.

The next morning there was about six inches of snow around the camp and everything looked very dismal. After almost 3 years of sunshine, this was a real culture shock although there were many times on the desert I would have loved a little snow to cool things down. I introduced myself to the Corporal and the three mechanics and had a good look around, and saw a disorganised mess. I told them what I intended to do, and I asked where the workshop lorry was. I was told that they did not have one but they did have a small trailer where they kept the spares for the lorries. There was no protection from the weather, heavy articles were put on top of fragile ones and gaskets were ruined. By the time my appointment with the C.O. came, I had a pretty good idea of the state of the workshop repair section.

The C.O. welcomed me to the unit and said that, as I knew the Adjutant, no formal introduction was necessary. Although my Service record was in front of him, he asked me to give him a resume of my time in the R.A.F. When I had finished, he then outlined the operation of the unit. At present there were sixty five vehicles involved, but these would be increased to ninety within a short time, with many of the being binned out and would remain static on the sites, and because we would shortly be invading Yugoslavia, an advanced unit would be needed of the best lorries available.

After outlining my duties and responsibilities, he asked me if I wanted to ask any questions. I told him that I considered it essential that the workshops had a 'workshop lorry', one which could be binned out to take

the lorry spares, a work-bench inside to enable the fitters to work in the dry, and if the generating trailer was placed alongside, about twelve feet away from the lorry, a tarpaulin could be draped over the two and lorries could then be serviced in all weathers. In this way, we would not lose time when bad weather would prevent us from carrying out repairs. Also, when travelling from one site to another, repairs could be carried out on the road. The C.O. agreed in principal, but said that all lorries were urgently needed, and because of the shortage of vehicles, no lorry could be spared for this purpose.

I did point out that we had brought a new Ford from our old unit, but I was told that this vehicle had already been put to work. I was told that the next batch of twelve lorries would be arriving within the next two weeks and he would see what could be done then. I returned to the M.T. Section very disappointed. I had a word with the W.O. in charge of the drivers and he had no objections to one of the lorries in the next batch being used providing the C.O. gave his permission. I did suggest that we try to get an enemy vehicle for our use, but I was told that the C.O. was against this.

I then travelled to the L.R.U. and discussed our problems with them and found that at least four lorries should have been repaired by our mechanics, so I arranged for them to be returned, one at a time for repair by my own staff. Our mechanics seemed to be lifted out of their state of lethargy as soon as I told them what I was going to do, and they set about the repairs as soon as they realised that I would be working alongside.

### **Problems with organisation, lorries and servicing**

Our Thorneycroft five-ton lorries had a design fault where the axle was fitted above the springs and all the weight of the lorry and the load was taken on the bolts securing the axle to the springs. Normally, the axle would be below the spring, and the weight of the load would keep the two units together, but on these lorries all the strain was taken on the bolts and when they stretched, the axle became loose and would move forwards and backwards, causing the vehicle to 'crab'.

I then gave instructions that after every move, these lorries had to be checked by putting the hydraulic jack under the spring and lifting the wheel off the road, thus making sure that there was no strain on the bolts, and then tightening the nuts as tight as possible. The brakes also had a

fault where it was possible for the wheel cylinder piston to travel to the end of the cylinder without applying the brakes if the brakes had not been adjusted. The brakes were a combination of a Bendix mechanical system and a Lockheed hydraulic system.

It was common policy by some mechanics to adjust the handbrake cable to adjust the brakes and this caused the piston to go to the end of its travel. I spent lot of time telling the mechanics how this check should be carried out in future and it seemed to me that previously they had just been told to 'get on with it' when a job had to be done. I made it clear that if they were not sure about anything, they only had to ask.

Although the snow had disappeared, the ground was still damp under foot and when I returned to the workshop area, I found that the mechanics had found an old tarpaulin, and they were already tightening the bolts on the axles of a Thorneycroft. I stayed with them to make sure that they had checked to make sure that the spring was seated properly and checked that the brakes were properly adjusted. Someone had adjusted the hand brake cable so I told them to disconnect it completely, adjust the main brake, and then adjust the cable to the lever in the brake drum. I also showed them a quick way to check if the axle had moved on the spring.

Somehow, the powers that be, always seem to supply all units with as many different types of lorry as possible, instead of standardising to two or three types, making the maintenance and servicing so much easier. We had an old Crossley six-wheel Oxygen Plant and trailer for producing the oxygen for the fighter aircraft. The lorry contained two huge compressors, one four stage compressor to compress the air to separate the oxygen from the nitrogen and a three stage compressor to pump the gas into the large oxygen cylinders, (about ten feet long and six inches in diameter). The trailer contained all of the laboratory equipment to filter the liquid oxygen, the huge balloon to store the oxygen and all of the pipe-work needed for the production of the gas. The lorry ran for fourteen days and nights and then stopped for one day in order to service the engine and to replace the caustic soda filters and clean out the oxygen system.

## **American petrol, and an arrogant US Major**

The American Petroleum Company now took over the supply of petrol to the forces and had raised the octane level from sixty-three octane to

seventy-two and this was causing the exhaust valves to burn out on the Bedford and Crossley lorries. We found that the Crossley would only run continuously for three days after being serviced, so a ruling was made to replace the exhaust valves on every fourteen-day service. A letter was sent to Headquarters advising them of this condition and we waited for their reply.

A few days after servicing the Crossley we received orders to move to Foggia in central Italy. The proposed invasion of Yugoslavia had been cancelled and we were now part of the Italian campaign. We were advised that we would be having a team from the American Petro Chemical Dept coming to see why our lorries were having problems with their petrol. They arrived with a six-wheel G.M.C. lorry, fully equipped as a mobile workshop, with a Major, a Master Sergeant and two Sergeant Technicians and that they would show us how to service our vehicles.

The Major immediately pointed out that our facilities were hopeless and that the only way to keep the vehicles running was with perfect engineering. He got me very annoyed by continually referring to me as 'Bud' or 'Buddy'. However, the two Sergeants dismantled the engine and because of its age, the cylinder head and cylinder block were cast as one unit, and access to the side valves was through screwed inserts in the head. As soon as the Major saw the burnt valves he said, "See Bud, these valves have a seat as wide as a park bench, no wonder the damn things burn out. Look at the valve guides, as sloppy as hell, and look at the heads on the tappet adjusting screws".

I pointed out that we were fighting a war, not running a Technical College. I supplied him with new valve guides, new valves and only four of the tappet adjusting screws (my only stock). The valve seat in the cylinders were refaced and undercut to make a narrow seat, the new valves were ground in and they used blue marker dye to ensure that the seats were perfectly fitted. The tappets were adjusted with feeler gauges but I advised the major that the engine would be noisy because of the worn recesses in the old four tappet adjusting screws. but he dismissed this and said he could do nothing about it.

We are now in the second day of the servicing and there is still the carburettor to be dismantled, cleaned and serviced and also the magneto. With a new air filter, new plug-leads and plugs, the engine was started

and rattled like some nails in an empty drum. I told the major, "I said that the engine would rattle but you decided to ignore it, but it's strange that when we service the lorry, we don't have a noisy engine and we haven't got your expensive equipment."

My C.O. had just arrived as I said this and the Major said it was not possible to get the engine quiet with those worn screws. I told him that I could do it and he sneered and said, "Well, put your money where your mouth is then". I asked the Sergeants to remove the manifold and the screwed inserts, then I got out a special bracket I had made to clamp on to the body of the tappet, leaving the adjusting screws clear, got my 'dial test indicator' (a gauge that measures distances in one thousands of an inch) and clamped it to the engine block and adjusted the tappets. The new valves had a slight chamfer on the ends that allowed the valve to go up into the worn recess in the tappet adjusting screws and therefore I was able to get the correct clearance for the valves. The Sergeants re-assembled the engine and when it started, it was perfectly quiet.

I said to the Major, "We may not have your sophisticated equipment, but we do know how to service our vehicles and we only take one day to do this and not three as your technicians have taken." He was fuming and then said, "Do you think your technicians could use this equipment if it was available?" I told him that we all used it during our apprenticeships, but we have been fighting a war for the last four and half years, and we cannot afford to spend this sort of money in the field. Also, it is a good job we are advancing and not retreating, otherwise we would have had the lot captured by now." The major left me to talk to my C.O. and then said that he only wanted us to change the engine oil on the next service in fourteen days time and then run it until the valves burnt out.

We kept the engine running after the next service but just as we were starting our last seven days, the engine began to misfire again so we sent for the major and his team. When the engine was dismantled the valves were burnt as before. I was in my element and said to the Major, "Well Major, with all of your technology we have been able to get another twenty five per cent out of the engine, but it took you three times as long to do the job. Now do you think your technicians could keep your transport running with the equipment that we have and only have one man to do the job and not three as you had when you serviced this vehicle?" He became



very annoyed and stamped off. My C.O. who had been in the background, said he thought that I was a bit hard on the Major. "I replied that he had really annoyed me with his snide remarks and calling me 'Bud' all the time, plus the fact that he thought we were a lot of 'Hilly Billies.'

## **Still in Bari in winter**

A few days later, we were advised that we would be getting the first of two of the new A.E.C. six wheel diesel plants which would solve the problems of burnt out exhaust valves. It would be self contained but would not have facilities for the balloon to store the oxygen, so our 'Oxygen' staff were able to get a new balloon, and asked the M.T. workshops if we could make up a swinging arm which they could attach the balloon to when they were producing the gas. We made up the necessary brackets and we were able to get the flexible rubber hoses to connect up to the outlet from the laboratory and this saved the running of the three-stage compressor when we had very little oxygen to pump out. Also it saved wear on the engine and compressor. This vehicle was a thirty ton vehicle, six wheel drive, with sixteen inch wide tyres on a twenty inch wheel. The second A.E.C. came about four weeks later.

The winter weather was coming in with a vengeance now and when I next saw the C.O., he told me that he was being posted and that he had arranged for me to have one of the new Bedford Q.L's for a workshop lorry. Having seen the American set-up, he realised just how essential it was. As soon as the vehicle arrived, we set about fitting the bench and the bins for the spares and then scrounging around for various bits of equipment.

Our 'Magpie' went looking for bits for the workshop lorry and found a small air compressor and brake air receivers and these were fitted, a welding plant was fitted to the rear of the body and we put the generating trailer alongside and covered it with a tarpaulin. The signals dept objected to the trailer being out of their control, but as it was a petrol-driven generator, it was our responsibility, and because we had many waterproof junction boxes, the cables could be run to them without any trouble. I fitted a six-way junction box to the lorry and it was a simple matter to run a cable from the generator to this box, and then I had a power source for all of my electrical tools.

## Improvements

The mechanics were impressed with their new working conditions, and we were able to get some spare cylinder heads for our three models of Bedford lorries. Although it was raining practically every day, the mechanics stripped the heads, decarbonised them, fitted new valves and seals, and greased them ready for fitting when required. The heads had a colour code marked on them for easy identification, and it was agreed that the mechanic who changed a cylinder head, was the one who serviced the faulty one removed. After a short while, they found that they could change a head at the roadside in about forty minutes. We ran cables from the generator to the mess tents so we had reasonable lighting for meals and in the evenings. In the evenings, the duty fitter stayed by the generator in order to turn off the main switch in case of an air raid. A new spirit of enthusiasm entered the M.T dept and the drivers kept their lorries cleaner and even put their pet names on them

Due to the armed forces from Salerno meeting up with the forces from Tarranta and Foggia, the war had become static, and the continual rain had prevented most planes from flying. Our new Commanding Officer had arrived, and he was an ex eighth Army/Desert Air Force Officer who had been at el Alemein. His first job was to get the fabric worker to cut out the best parts of the tents being returned as damaged, and making 'half tents to be sewn on to the canvas 'tilts' on each side of the static lorries. These 'half tents' could be rolled down from the side of the lorries in minutes by one man, and the stores staff were then in business straight away. Two men could roll them up again to the side of the lorry, and this would save time and space in the lorries. A 'fly sheet' was sewn on to the inside of the tent to form the inside wall and the floor and it was proved to be as warm as a normal tent.. Some of our staff had made charcoal stoves to enable them to heat the normal tents, but in some cases they had forgotten to ventilate the tent and they were overcome by fumes. These heating systems were banned after that.

## On to Naples

Naples had fallen and the weather was improving for a short time, which allowed the army to march towards Monte Cassino where there was a natural defence with the mountain range that stretched from the west coast to the Adriatic, and was almost impossible to scale. The Germans

called it the 'Gustav Line.' We are now told to move to Naples, and with a convoy of about one hundred vehicles, we divided them up into six sections. I now have six mechanics and a Corporal fitter so we can put one mechanic with each section, the Corporal with the third section and I would be at the end, to make sure that all was going to plan.

Going over one of the mountain roads, one of our Thorneycroft lorries towing a trailer loaded with fifteen oxygen cylinders, ran away going down the steep road. Fortunately for him, the convoy had gone ahead because he was slow getting to the top of the road and there was no traffic in front of him. He was a new driver and had ignored instructions that when going down very steep hills, he had to engage his four-wheel drive gear, which also gave him a reduced gear ratio. I also found out the mechanic who had checked the lorry before leaving, had failed to adjust the brakes. These two had extra guard duties when we reached our destination.

We reached an assembly area on the outskirts of Naples and the Military Police escorted us to our new site above the town where we could see the Bay of Naples on one side of the road and the Isle of Nessida on the other. The site is a four-lane road, where the bridge over another road had been blown up and was lined with very large houses on each side of the road.. There was a twenty-foot wide grass verge with two lines of trees and a ten-foot wide pavement beyond that. We were able to park our lorries under the trees and be hidden from the air, and three of the large houses were commandeered for the messes. All of the furniture had been taken upstairs and a locked door prevented anyone going above the ground floor. Tarpaulins had been laid on the floors to avoid any damage, and by removing the main fuses from the electricity supply, our electricians connected a supply from our generator. We now felt that the war was not so bad after all.

There are now many more Spitfire squadrons in the area now that the first army and the desert squadrons have met up, and we find that our 'customers can now drive right up to the vehicle they need for their spares.

It is now early December, and we occasionally have 'Liberty' wagons to take us down into the town centre. The main street, the Via Roma, is very similar to Oxford Street in London, with all of the multiple stores and a fair amount of goods.

## Underwear and a con

On one of my trips, I purchased a quilted satin dressing gown in azure blue with navy motifs and because of the shortage of coupons in the U.K. I decided to send some underwear to my fiancé, feeling that I couldn't make a mistake with that. I converted the measurements from 36-25-34 inches to 90-62-85 cms and I asked for some bras in the size 90cm. The assistant was not convinced that the size was correct and seeing that she was approximately the same size figure as my fiancé, I borrowed her tape measure and took her vital statistics. This was followed by some amused chatter between the sales assistants, and I was taken to the fitting room where the assistant had collected two bras, one size 90 and one in her own size. She took off her white blouse and fitted the 90 cms bra over her own, and it looked like a sack, but when she fitted her own size, it fitted perfectly. She refitted her blouse and returned to the counter. She explained in sign language, that continental sizes are measured differently. The measurement is taken under the bust and then the 'cup' size is added. I bought two bras and two pairs of pants and left with a very red face. I could not see an assistant in Harrods being so helpful in London.

After leaving the Via Roma, I wandered around the side streets and I was amazed at the squalor in the very narrow streets behind the Via Roma and it made me feel that I was back in the days of Dickens. My experience at this store made me think of the time when I was stuck in Cairo in 1942. I visited a lingerie shop and I bought a 'Honeymoon' nightdress. It was a shortie nightie, the type the cartoon character Jane in the Daily Mirror wore during the war. It was made of a diaphanous material which was almost transparent, and the type I called a barbed wire article because it was 'dangerous to touch, but it protected the property without obstructing the view'.

I was wondering how I could send it home because I had used my 'green label' for that period and my companion had also used his, and the assistant, who was French and could speak a little English, said that she could send it to the U.K. I just had to sign a form and give the contents and the value and then it would be all right.

Usually when I sent things home, my fiancé told me right away but this time there was no news, so I asked if the parcel of the nightdress had

arrived. My next letter in reply enclosed a photo wearing this item. It was not the item I had purchased but it looked worse than a sack. It had a ruff collar, was completely shapeless, and with sleeves down to the wrist and the material was as stiff as a board. I was mortified. I realised that I had been 'had'. That assistant was now sporting a very nice 'shortie' that had cost her peanuts. I never made that mistake again. The trouble was that Duty had to be paid in the U.K. at the value I had given on the form.

## **Trouble with Americans**

One night Paddy and I went into the town and visited one of the clubs and as we were having a drink, we saw a group of American Servicemen talking to a couple of American girl Reporters. I recognised one from her photo in her Publication, either Picture Post or Time Magazine, and it was Margaret Burke-White whose hair had turned white as a result of her experiences at the Algiers Invasion. Looking around, I also saw three of the Navigators from my old recce unit and we went along to meet them. They were surprised to hear that the unit had been disbanded and also to learn of the loss of aircrew.

They had flown with three of the pilots. They told me that they had been posted to a Dakota (D.C.3) squadron, towing gliders and taking paratroops into Sicily and Salerno. They also said that the attack on Salerno had been very severe and they went in with the Americans towing gliders, and that the Americans cut their gliders adrift some miles out at sea and returned home as quickly as possible to avoid the anti-aircraft fire. It meant that the British crews bore the brunt of the flak and they had little time for the Yanks.

Some of our airmen had gone down the steps to the street below and had found a very nice snack bar with a dance hall attached and had been able to get their feet' under the table' On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, when we were preparing for the Christmas festivities, an airman came to the Sergeants Mess to say that one of his pals had just been slashed across the face with a very sharp knife by an American soldier who had prevented him from entering the café. Another of his friends had picked up a Sten gun and gone down to the café to sort them out. The 'discip' Sergeant, two other Sergeants and myself, dashed down to find out what was going on and we were met with a burst of Sten gun fire in the air.

It took about half an hour to out-manoeuvre the Corporal and he was disarmed and escorted back to our site under 'Close arrest' Paddy (the discip Sergeant) and I went to the café and we were met by the man on the door who said that we could not enter because the Americans had taken over the café for their Christmas Party. There were no notices advertising this outside, so we asked to meet the Officer in charge. A captain came out and wanted to know what we were doing there because it was a private party so I told him that one of his doorkeepers had slashed one of our airmen across the face and at the moment our Medical Officer was stitching him up. There was every chance that the man would lose the sight of his eye, and that there were no signs outside to advise anyone that it was a private party.

The Officer told us that several British Servicemen had tried to gatecrash the party and instructions were given by the American C.O. to prevent any other people entering. I asked for the name of the unit and where there were sited, because our Adjutant would be calling on them to protest at this attitude on the following day. Anglo-American relations were not at their best at that time and this did not improve matters.

Our Medical Officer was still stitching up the injured man when we returned, and everyone then had to report to the C.O. He was so annoyed that he confined everyone to camp until the New Year, and the Corporal who had taken his sten gun down to sort it out, would probably face a Court Martial.

## **Fourth Christmas away**

Christmas Day was a very subdued affair and there was none of the usual banter when the Officers and Sergeants served the men's meals. It was usually, "Waiter, I can't eat this meal" and the reply "and why not, sir?" " I haven't got a knife and fork". Stupid but it did ease the tension a bit.. This was my fourth Christmas away from home and I began to wonder if I would be home for the next one. I was getting very depressed at the time, because I had heard that Bristol and Bath were being bombed frequently and Malmesbury, where my fiancé was working in a factory producing the radios for the military, was quite nearby. The fact that I may not even get home at all never entered my head, because my fiancé and I had been making plans for our wedding as soon as I returned to the U.K.

The C.O. relaxed the confined to camp order on Boxing Day, but he dared anyone to get into any trouble during the holiday period. The American C.O. had apologised for the injury to our airman and stated that the original trouble had been caused by the Commonwealth troops and not the British. Even so, this did not justify the use of a knife to tell someone he could not enter. We saw the New Year in with the usual high jinks and one of the Sergeants had been able to purchase a wind-up gramophone and several records of Bing Crosby, Vera Lynn, Rosemary Clooney, the Andrews Sisters and The Ink Spots. These records were played so often that I am sure the needles came through to the other side of the record. Someone else had bought a small radio and we could still hear Lord Haw-Haw telling us to surrender because it was all part of the general plan. The only good thing about his broadcasts was that they played 'Lily Marlene' at the beginning and end of his broadcast.

## **Another move and Monte Cassino**

In the middle of January 1944, we were told that we would be moving to a site on the edge of a great plain about twenty miles south of Monte Cassino, where all of the Spitfire squadrons would be stationed and several American Mustang Fighters as well.

We arrived at a very wet site, although it was not raining at the time. The 'half tents' on the sides of the lorries proved a 'godsend' because they only needed a few tent pegs to keep them securely fixed. Slit trenches were dug and once again we are back to the primitive life. As soon as we had settled in, the Luftwaffe decided to use us for target practice and we would be strafed during the day and bombed at night. We were luckier than the squadrons because we were on the edge of the plain, but we had very little sleep at night because of the bombing.

There was not a lot of damage and casualties were light, because the new anti-aircraft unit was doing an excellent job. Trying to get our work done was proving to be difficult. After a week of this our C.O. decided that we would make up our advance unit in preparation for the invasion of Sardinia or Corsica and send it to a site on the top of the mountain overlooking the Monastery. Many of our new advance party were new to active service and as the new unit would be the main supply for the fighters, any discrepancies could be rectified before we went on the invasion. Our main base would stay put and be our 'warehouse'.

As usual, I was picked to lead the senior N.C.O.'s on this trip, because having been on two previous invasions, I was now a seasoned 'invader' and I would know what to do in an emergency. Our unit is made up of the C.O. a Flight Lieutenant, a Flying Officer Adjutant, a Flying Officer Equipment Officer and a Pilot Officer Cipher Officer. Four senior N.C.O.'s and about forty 'other ranks' completed the unit. We got the necessary vehicles ready and prepared to move in three days time. That was the signal for torrential rain to fall, twenty-four hours before we moved, and our present site is like a quagmire. We should have left camp at 8 am but it was 10 am before we could get all of the vehicles out on to the main road.

This site was at the top of the mountain, just four kilometres from Monte Cassino and we arrived at a large quarry at the base of the mountain. The C.O. led four trucks to the site but found that the whole of the entrance was flooded to a depth of two feet and none of our normal vehicles could go in, caused by the previous tenants, the Wehrmacht, blocking up the drainage ditch with their rubbish. When I was advised of this, I took the A.E.C oxygen plant and a Thorneycroft five ton lorry to the entrance and used the A.E.C. to tow the lorries to an area clear of water and then let the other lorry tow them to their appointed site.

We would be able to dry out the ignition systems at a later date. Both towing lorries had a ground clearance of thirty inches and were not affected. The rest of the lorries were brought up and then put in their appointed places. After six trips, two trenches appeared where the A.E.C. was towing the lorries and the driver no longer needed to steer. The trenches were about one foot deep and two feet wide.

The site had been previously used as an observation point because it overlooked the plain where all of the allied forces were sited, and by tying the tops of some trees to the trees on each side of them, the trunks could be cut off and a small covered space could be created to house a large signalling lamp that could be aimed at a site on Monte Cassino, directly above the monastery, and then the German artillery could be directed at any movement by our troops on the plain.

We could see the Monastery clearly from the centre of our camp and it appeared to be on the side of the mountain, but this was an optical illusion. It was on the top of a mountain, but a higher mountain was



behind it. These mountain ranges were very high and almost vertical and were continuous from west to east. It looked as if a giant knife had cut a vertical line across the country and even experienced rock climbers would have difficulty climbing them. Troops with their equipment would have no chance. Many attempts had been made to climb the mountains further east but as soon as they drew near to the monastery, they were defeated.

## **Attacked by enemy planes**

The rain had stopped and we returned to our tents in order to put on dry uniforms before going to the Sergeants mess for our meal. The roads in the camp were the thirty metre wide fire breaks in this fir forest and as we were walking across the firebreak, we heard the sound of approaching aircraft engines at low level. The American Air Force had been sending their eight Mustangs to Cassino, dropping their two one thousand bombs and returning as quickly as possible to their base. We looked out to see Eight fighters coming in line abreast and Paddy, who was leading said "they are Mustangs" and carried on across the road. The engine note changed and I saw that they were coming in line astern and it was then that I saw the Black crosses under the wings. I shouted out, "Paddy, hit the deck" and I dived into one of the trenches left by the A.E.C.

There was about three inches of water in the trench but I didn't care, it was some little bit of shelter. I struggled to get my steel helmet off my respirator and on to my head and said, "they are not Mustangs, they are bloody one-o-nines", as the first of the planes came in firing his twenty millimetre cannon and his machine guns "brump-brump-brump and rat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat". As each plane passed overhead, the shells and bullets appeared to be getting closer. When the eighth plane passed overhead, I lifted my head to see if anyone was injured and I saw that the planes were preparing to come in again. I counted the planes as they passed overhead, 'one, two, three, four, five.....'. Jesus, That was bloody close' and the sound of the canon shell exploding nearby was deafening. I felt a hefty blow to the back of my head and then oblivion.

I awoke later on a bed in the Casualty Clearing Station, with a head that felt as if it had a kettledrum banging away inside. The Medical orderly came along and told me I had a big gash at the back of my neck, caused by something hitting my steel helmet and forcing the edge of the rim into my neck. I had about six stitches and that I should consider myself lucky.

I was glad that I did not have the chinstrap on, otherwise it could have broken my neck. I was given the usual painkillers and I was assured that only one of the other Sergeants had a flesh wound on his arm, and he was still in camp. I was returned to sick quarters in camp the next day and after three days I was discharged. The stitches were removed the next week and I returned to light duty.

The reason we were strafed was that there was signalling lamp and generator under the trees and several forty five gallon drums filled with fuel for the generator and the fighters were trying to set light to them to set the fir trees on fire and make us go away from the site, They had forgotten that the engine was a diesel, and although several drums were punctured they did not ignite, and the undergrowth was soaking wet, so their efforts were in vain. Maybe the Germans were not so clever after all.

Although I was on light duties, I called in at the M.T. Workshops and found everything running smoothly. Back at the tent, I realised just how lucky we were. A Messerschmidt 109 usually strafes at one hundred and eighty miles per hour, and he fires six hundred rounds of his cannons per minute. This works out one shell every eight point eight yards between rounds. Therefore, the furthest anyone can be from a direct hit is four point four yards. A really sobering thought!

Although all senior N.C.O.'s are specialists in their own field, it is often necessary to undertake work of another kind when their rank is required, and this has happened to me on several occasions in the past. I was still having bad headaches and blurring of vision and the M.O. would not sign me off light duties so I was ordered to call at the main unit and take an Equipment Officer to the docks just above Naples to identify some stores that had gone adrift. We set off in a Bedford 15 cwt pick-up and travelled west until we came to a large six-road junction and then turned south towards the docks.

As soon as we cleared the junction, we came into a small village that the war had apparently missed. The single street was flanked by colour washed houses, all with their walled patios and decorative gates and the inevitable vine growing around the walls of the house. Some houses were pink, some white and some in a pastel shade of blue. The streets were very clean, and although it was only February, some of the flowers were already out in bloom. Only two buildings did not conform to this idyllic

setting, the local Police station and the 'town hall'. We arrived at the docks and the Officer soon sorted out the stores from the equipment for other units, and we arranged for our lorries to collect within the next few days.

We returned to base and I returned to full duty. My department was working well and because all of our vehicles were well serviced before we moved, there was very little to do, except to make sure that everything was in its proper place when the time came to move. I received a call from our main unit saying that one of the lorries going to the docks had gone off the road and down an embankment, and although the crane and another lorry had been sent, they were unable to get the lorry back on the road. I took a Q.L. Bedford and arrived at the six road junction and as I came to the village, I was horrified to see that it had been bombed to the ground. Sadly I proceeded to the accident site and I was surprised that no one had removed the crates from the crashed lorry and they were trying to pull it back up the bank fully laden.

Setting up a traffic control system, we unloaded the damaged lorry and put the stores on to the spare lorry, and then I disconnected the pulley block from the jib of the crane and moving the crane about twenty feet from the edge we were able to get a direct pull on the lorry, and get it over the edge of the bank and then pull it further along the road before disconnecting. It seemed to be the only way to do it and yet it seemed impossible to the others. The cable was fitted back on to the crane and as soon as the damaged lorry was lifted on to the lorry for a front lift tow, I set off back to base with my 'look out' .

## **Wrong turning**

Somehow, I appeared to have missed the correct road back and instead of going east on the six-road junction, I found myself going north. Approaching a wooded area, I was about to turn around when an army Corporal came out and told me to get off the road. As soon as I had stopped, a Lieutenant approached and asked "What the bloody hell do you think you are doing here." I explained that I must have taken the wrong turning at the last junction, and realising it, I was about to turn around and get on the right road.

He then told me that I was at the most forward part of the front line and that a German tank was on the other side of the estuary, about to open fire on them and if the enemy could get rid of this unit, there would be a clear road for them to make a counter attack. I said that I thought the front line was thirty miles north of this point and he said that it was until the Americans had bombed the wrong village two nights ago just past the six-road junction. They were supposed to bomb the village thirty miles north.

As I looked across the estuary, I could see the German Tank trying to get through the trees on the other side of the river, and I jumped in my lorry and left the area as quickly as I could. The sides of the cliffs on both sides of the estuary were sheer and one hundred feet high so that it was impossible try to get across.

When I turned on to the correct road, we had only travelled a mile or so before the battle started at the place I had just left. A few miles along the road, the Salvation Army had a caravan and a tent and they were supplying hot tea and cakes so we went in to have a rest and refreshment. It was nearly closing time and the Officer said that he would be having a prayer when he closed. This was the signal for everybody to prepare to leave, so I said "Hold it every-one, you have all enjoyed the facilities of the 'Sally Ally'. You will always find them at the front line on every invasion, giving out their tea and cakes, it's the least that you can do and listen to a prayer of thanks. I'm not a Bible Puncher, but a few weeks I was almost killed in an air raid, today we took the wrong road and finished up at the front where the guns are now firing, I'll bet there are many of the fellows up there would be very willing to change places with you. If the Padre wants us to kneel to hear a prayer, then I will be the first to go down on my knees." The Officer said " thank you Sergeant, but there is no need to kneel, but if you will bow your heads, I will give a Prayer of thanks for this day." I was proud to see that none of the troops left the tent. As I was leaving, the Padre came across to see me and we had a long talk. It appears that he was at el Alemein and had come all of the way to this site,

On my return to camp, I asked to be taken off light duties, and we were now getting very busy, getting all the stores requests from the squadrons and our lorries were needing frequent servicing.

In the middle of February on one of the fine days, we heard the sound of some heavy bombers approaching and we went to have a look at them. Flying above the ridge towards the monastery, were about one hundred Fortresses and Liberators and then we saw the bombs raining down on the monastery. It was a typical American bomb attack, using many planes and dropping as many bombs as possible and you are bound to make some of them hit the target. The hillside was bare over a very large area and there were still some of the walls standing. I think that it was the most obscene thing I had ever seen. Later reports proved that it did not do what it was supposed to do, and now the Germans had a fortified site where they could defend with very few soldiers.

I had the first of my nightmares last night. It was a repeat of the actions when the M.E. 109's came and strafed our camp on our first day at the site. This scared my other Sergeants sharing the tent, because they were unable to wake me up. I felt terrible, but told them not to worry.

## **A week's leave, Pompeii and Vesuvius**

It was decided by the top brass that leave should start, because of the winter of 1943/4 had been the worst for many years, and the delay in being unable to invade Sardinia and Corsica, meant that the ground war had become static. I found myself on the list to go to on a week's holiday at the Rest Centre in Sorrento. The Military had commandeered the hotels and it just meant that we paid a nominal sum for our meals.

A Sergeant storekeeper from my unit came with me, and we decided that we would visit Pompeii and Vesuvius. I was amazed at the state of preservation of Pompeii, and to see the worn tracks of the chariots in the 'roads' and the many mosaics in each big house made you realise the luxury some of the Romans were enjoying so many years ago. We went to see many of the places that only the troops were allowed to go, and I am quite sure that they had been added at a later date. In the afternoon, we took the funicular railway to the top of the volcano where there was a huge rim of ashen lava, and inside a hard base of rock like lava with a cone of ash standing up like a large 'boil' in the centre about one hundred feet across and thirty feet high.

The mountain was covered in mist and from time to time, there would be a loud hiss coming from the crater and then a lot of ash and steam and

something like bitumen would shoot up into the air and add to the cone around the crater. We decided that we would climb to the top of the crater and look inside. Reaching the top with difficulty on the loose ash, we looked inside and all we could see was steam swirling around and a very red glow, deep inside the volcano. We took a couple of photos of each other to prove that we had been there, and still the sudden rushes of ash etc, would spit itself out, so we returned to the base of the cone looking very black, and our uniforms filthy.

We suddenly realised that we had done the most stupid thing in our lives. If the loose ash at the top of the cone had broken away, we would have dropped inside and then we would know what Hell was really like. In spite of this, we both felt that it was worth it. We brushed each other down as best we could and returned to the hotel for a bath and to try to get our uniforms clean.

The evening was spent with some Australians who were feeling very homesick. They had only been away from home for six months, so we told them to count their blessings, and when I told them that I had been away for almost three and half years, it gave them something to think about. We left them drowning their sorrows at 11 pm and had a good nights sleep.

The next day we visited Naples and this time we had plenty of time to look around the town. There were some beautiful buildings around the centre, but as soon as you left that area, you went back to the dark ages again. I must confess, I do not like Italian food, but I was able to get something a bit like home cooking, and I still don't like Naples.

The week went all too quickly and when we returned we were very busy preparing for our next move. It is now the end of March and 4 days later we hear that Vesuvius had erupted for the first time in years, and I thought that perhaps I should not have thrown those big lumps of cinders inside the crater after all. The smoke had blacked out the sky over Naples and the surrounding area, and the inhabitants of the villages below were getting very worried. The glow in the night sky reminded me of the blitz in London during 1940.

Early in April we were advised to proceed to the marshalling yards at Naples and that we are going on the invasion of Corsica on "D-Day" plus

two. On this occasion, it will be a 'dry' landing and there will be no need to waterproof our vehicles. The landing will take place at Ajaccio on the west coast of the island and we will be travelling over the mountains to a site about fifteen miles from the East Coast.

There will be about ten Spitfire squadrons taking positions along the east coast and this will mean that they will be able to disrupt the German lines of communications and give aid to the impending sea-borne landings at Anzio. This will mean another change of currency and as far as we are concerned it will be a great help. The exchange rate of the lira was four hundred to the pound, but they had small notes to the value of **one** lira. The notes were no bigger than cigarette cards and a nuisance to keep, but if you didn't keep them, you were sure to get many more on your next purchase.

With the vehicles loaded, we set off for our new country and as I looked back at Naples, I could see Vesuvius belching out the lava and the sky was as black as night. It was a frightening sight and I could imagine the feelings of the local population as the great river of red-hot lava was slowly going down the mountainside towards them. Although the lava is quite fluid when it leaves the crater, it slows down to walking pace as it cools, and it looks like a giant slug making it's way downhill.

As we get away from land the weather deteriorates and the flat-bottomed L.S.T.'s pitch and roll, and I am seasick once again. How I hate ships.