

THE BREAKTHROUGH TO ROME

The Mussolini Canal

More than fifty yards wide, with high levees on either side but only a small stream of water at its lowest level, the grass-lined Mussolini Canal was an imposing man-made structure built to drain the Pontine marshes and to create the vast farm lands of Anzio. It stretched for miles, and a portion of it formed the front lines, the antagonists each occupying a levee and the canal between being "no man's land."

The 100th was held in reserve for the initial assault to break out of the beachhead. Company A relieved another outfit and took over its positions on the outer side of the levee. There were numerous foxholes which became our shelter for the night.

Early the next morning a Canadian-American Special Forces unit moved through us to make the initial assault or attack in our sector. American artillery laid a heavy barrage on the enemy lines, and soon a heavy blanket of dust rose over the bombarded area. Our position received some return shellfire from enemy guns, and we dived into the nearest foxholes, in some cases two men ending up in the same hole in the scramble for cover. The only casualty this time was a Special Forces man who took a near direct hit.

We could hear periodic machine gun fire from the front but were not in position to see what was happening.

Robert Karasaki, one of the original 100th guys, was firing a machine gun from atop the levee, giving covering fire to the attacking unit, and narrowly missed getting killed. An enemy bullet hit the top of his helmet and knocked it off, but he was otherwise unhurt, the bullet barely having grazed the top of his head.

Seeing the bullet's entry and exit holes in the top of his helmet, it was obvious that the helmet could not stop a rifle bullet or machine gun bullet and actually offered little or no protection from such. Still, we had heard of cases in which someone who had been shot through the helmet had not been killed because the bullet had been deflected and followed the inside of the helmet either at the side or over the top before exiting out the back end. There were a very few brave souls who disdained the use of a steel helmet, but for the rest it gave a measure of security, particularly when under artillery or mortar fire.

Later that day we moved across the canal and along the opposite levee, which had been taken by the attacking forces, who had now moved farther ahead. We had been cautioned not to stray off the path because of the possible presence of mines.

As we moved along in single file a few feet apart, I was startled to see a dead German, the first I had seen. He looked to be about my age, nineteen. The lips were somewhat drawn back and his teeth showing. His eyes may have been open and there were bluish spots on his face. I did not notice any wound, and he was lying with his back against the sloping bank, his legs below the knee folded under him. It was a sight to remain forever etched in my mind.

Further down the canal, in the tall grass near the water flowing at the bottom, lay another dead soldier, this one of our own. We didn't know for certain, but we heard he had tripped a mine while attempting to get some water.

There was another dead, one of the Special Forces men, alongside the path near the top of the levee. The body lay face down in the grass, and it was obvious that he had been killed by a burst of machine gun fire right in the heart area. There were

several closely spaced bullet exit holes in the back of his jacket. A bullet-wide strip of fabric about three inches long dangled from each hole.

Some Germans must have surrendered or been captured in the area because we came across a number of discarded Mauser rifles. There was also a Bergman submachine gun which I picked up and fired into a vacant foxhole just for the hell of it. It fired nicely and handled well, but I think I startled and irritated some of the guys though no one said anything.

Heading for Rome

The next day we followed the road that led through the town of Cisterna. It had been pounded into nothing but rubble. Not a single building remained standing. We camped that night very close to three burned-out tanks. Two were American. The third, a smaller one, did not look familiar. Spud Munemori, an affable kotonk who had recently joined our squad as a replacement, climbed on top of one, peered inside through the open turret, and exclaimed,

"Jesus Christ."

The burned body of the driver sat at the controls. The top of the skull was exposed and a half-inch crack ran its length from front to back. In the other tank sat the lower half of the remains of one of the crew. What appeared to be a severed head lay on the floor, and arm or leg bones bereft of flesh lay scattered outside.

There was a neat round hole about two inches in diameter in the middle of the three-inch-thick gun turret, but strangely, the metal around the hole flared outward, as if the hole had been made by a shell fired from inside the turret itself. It all made me wonder who was better off in war, infantry or tank soldiers.

As we moved further up the Alban Hills, the next day I found myself walking alongside a very amiable fellow. We exchanged names and chatted as we walked, and I thought,

"He sure is a friendly guy."

In the short time since we'd met, I felt like he was an old friend, a real nice friend. We separated when our squad moved off to the right and started to dig in along a grove of trees separating adjoining fields. Working in pairs, we had dug our slit trenches about eight inches deep when we were hit by an artillery barrage. The barrage covered a wide area. I do not know how many shells hit near us.

We had gone through light shelling a few times before, but this was the first real barrage we took and it was terrifying. My partner and I both hugged the ground in our shallow shelter, our bodies touching side by side. Most of the shells were landing a short distance behind or to either side of us, sometimes showering us with dust and dirt. The shells that approached and passed directly over us with a sharp, shrill, piercing whine and whoosh that I can't really describe sounded to us like they would fall directly on us.

As scared as I was, it comforted me somewhat to realize that my partner was equally if not more frightened. Each time a shell screamed and whooshed over us, I could feel him tighten up and shudder convulsively. But we were unhurt. (Lucky Number 3.)

When the barrage lifted, word was passed along to move out and we did so, quickly gathering our gear. At least one casualty with a bad leg wound was being administered first aid. I did not know if any others had been hit.

As we moved along an unpaved road with high vertical banks ten feet or so on either side, I could see the still figure of one of our guys who had been killed. He had dug a little into the bank for protection and was huddled against the earth in a kneeling-sitting position, arms about chest high. As I got closer, the figure began to look familiar and I thought,

"Oh, no!"

But my heart sank, for yes, it was indeed my new-found friend whom I had been so glad to meet and chat with just short hours ago.

The days blended one into another, and I don't recall for how many days, but we walked and walked. Enemy resistance had evaporated, at least where we were.

Near a farmhouse a small group of civilians, the first we had seen, waved to us. Being low on water, I gathered a few canteens and asked them for water, "aqua." Smiling and jabbering happily, they took and returned the filled canteens shortly. We thanked them and continued on our way and did not learn until we next tried to drink that they had gratefully filled our canteens with wine instead. Not being wine drinkers, we were dismayed. Fortunately, we were encountering more civilians, and this time we were emphatic, with gestures,

"Aqua, no vino!"

A couple of fairly deep gullies had to be crossed the hard way as the bridges spanning them had been bombed or blasted away. After these we were on a flat highway, walking, walking.

One family pulled some of us aside as we walked by their home to show us a grave. We gathered that they had buried an American airman who had parachuted out but had not survived whatever happened in his aircraft.

American troops on trucks began passing us, and finally after nightfall we also boarded trucks to head for Rome. It was night, and I do not recall anything about our entry or passage through Rome. Indeed, I might have been sleeping, tired out from all that walking that day.

Later, as we traveled north from Rome by truck on the Autostrada, or superhighway, through great farm lands, passing mile after mile of toppled concrete utility poles, I couldn't help but think that if the Mussolini government had built this highway, erected all these utility poles and brought electricity to the countryside, and drained the marshes to create farm land at Anzio, plus Lord knows what else, then it couldn't have been all bad.

All that we had read and learned of Mussolini had been negative, including the Ethiopia episode and the alliance with the Germans.