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Ringside Seat at the Bombing of Monte Cassino

by JOHN LARDNER



This was Monte Cassino abbey

WITH THE FIFTH ARMY NEAR CASSINO—Three of us were driving up route six through Cassino Valley with a square, plain view of Monte Cassino and its abbey when a flight of B-17s dropped their stuff at exactly 11 a.m. Black plumes—bomb smoke is always dark—wreathed the big, neat, white building on the hilltop. Everybody waited for the smoke to clear so everybody could see what had happened.

I say everybody advisedly because everybody within 5 miles of Monte Cassino was watching. This was the most widely advertised single bombing in history. Soldiers alongside the road were staring upward. Soldiers on the hillsides were pointing like bird dogs. Gunners behind big guns had stopped working to look.

When the black smoke rose and thinned and faded, everybody saw the bombs had hit home and the bombardiers were on the target to stay. From where we were, all you could tell was that the big holy rectangle had changed shape. You had to be closer to see exactly what way. But everyone knew for sure now and with a feeling of easing tension that this tiny local battle decision which had become a major world decision was taken and sealed.

How many soldiers in this valley had heard of Monte Cassino abbey before they came here? It would be easy to say one in 5,000 but GIs are growing leery of "polls" which misrepresent them and I can only say that no enlisted man, British or American, I talked to this week knew what the hell Monte Cassino was about. Until the bombing it was just an obstacle and everybody was mad at it. Then we bombed it in a blaze of publicity and men paused, suddenly impressed

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Monte Cassino

by implications they had never thought of, and looked and breathed deeply while this strange combination of shrine and German weapon broke up like a string of little firecrackers.

The hell of it was this bombing did not win Rome or the war for us. Just possibly it helped us win a position and again a few miles. Just possibly the Germans, who are slick as snails in the special dirty art of war, managed to elude this bombing and its immediate effects. But all this was an afterthought, not a corollary. Now they will have to elude something else. If we do nothing, if we let them cuff us with our own handcuffs, then the special dirty art of war prevails.

There were lots of arguments and bets in the valley about the abbey once we decided what to do about it.

"All I know about this place is what I read in Baedeker," said a colonel. "The Germans know that much too, but so long as they are sure we read Baedeker ourselves and take it to heart, they don't care about anything else."

All most of us knew was what we read in Baedeker. The monastery was first built in 529. St. Benedict is buried there. It once had a great leader named Abbé Desiderius. He built up its library and its interest in culture and science. The Roman writer, Varro, whom some of us read in school, was a specialty of the house. It was big and thick and long and sacred and full of precious things. It held first rank among all the monasteries of Europe by its age and learned influence.

As an up-to-date foot note to Baedeker we knew that the Germans used it to kill American and British soldiers and to this injury they added the compliment of using what we called our better feelings against us.

The most spectacular bombings were the ones at 1:20 and 1:35 p.m. These were raids by mediums but there were twenty in each shift and they flew pretty low. This time from a good observation post we saw the abbey crumble in detail and other bombs snap over the whole top of the hill and plow through the emplacements.