CAMERAMAN IN CASSINO

By Sgt. GEORGE AARONS
YANK Staff Photographer

A YANK photographer crawls through the wreckage in the ruined Italian mountain town where the Allies are still locked with the Germans in one of the war's longest battles and brings back some remarkable pictures.

OldMagazineArticles.com

correspondents. They'd had the bottle for a week but there was still some Scotch left. "We're saving it for a tough spot," they said. These boys have been fighting the war for three years now, so I reckon it's going to be a pretty tough spot.

While we were eating supper the Kraut threw over some stuff. "Here comes his iron rations," one soldier said to me, looking up from his stew. "He puts over a stonk every day at this time."

By this time mortar fire sounded as commonplace to me as an auto horn on a street back home. I felt perfectly safe in this temporary home.

Time wore on after supper and there was nothing to do except wait for the ration party. I sat at the entrance and made conversation with the guard. "The ration party is our only link with the outside world," he said. "They bring us our letters every day and anything we want. They had a tough job getting some rat poison we asked for."

Since the bombing of Cassino, the rats have increased in number and boldness. They feed on the dead lying in the shell holes and run all over the place at night.

I looked out the entrance and couldn't see a hundred yards in front of me. We seemed to be an island in a sea of smoke. The guard was increased; this was the time of day when most of the attacks came. Soon it was dark. There was nothing to do, so I went back in to catch a nap.

I WAS awakened by the noise of the entrance of the ration party. Now that the time had come, I was afraid to leave this safe house. I could understand now why the men never liked to go outside. We said the usual "good lucks," shook hands all around and stepped out into the darkness. The Germans had just finished a barrage, so this was the best time to leave.

Most of the men had loads of salvage on the return trip, but there was nothing for me to carry. As we were leaving the town, we heard some machine-gun fire. Looking back, I could see the faces of the men behind me reflecting the light of flares. There was mortar fire, but none came near us. I was glad I had changed my helmet; we were certainly visible to British snipers.

It had rained during the day but the sky was clear now. We kept moving, hugging the walls. In the distance the flashes of our big guns lit the sky at intervals. When we passed the spot where we had hit the dirt the previous night, the captain dropped back and showed me where a shell had landed right in the path. "It came only a few yards from the last man," he said.

The captain walked quietly beside me. Then he asked: "Do you get this kind of training in America?" The big guns were splashing the sky with angry dabs of flame. I looked back at the town, still lit by the flares, listened to the mortar shells exploding and the machine guns playing, studied the valley that the Americans had so appropriately named the Valley of the Purple Heart, and turned back to the captain.

"They didn't when I was there," I said, shaking my head, "but I sure hope they do now."

OldMagazineArticles.com

WITH THE FIFTH ARMY IN ITALY—They gave me a Tommy bowler and a leather jerkin and made me take off my combat suit. Otherwise, they said, the British snipers might shoot at my American helmet because it looked like the German one. The captain briefed us, explaining that our load would be rations and barbed wire. He gave us the password and checked to see if everyone knew the rendezvous at the edge of town.

There were 11 in our party: eight of the men carrying rations; the captain, another man and myself carrying wire. The moon had come up by this time, bringing the slopes of Montecassino out of the darkness.

The captain, the wireman and I started off in a jeep, sitting all three in the front; the back was loaded with the five reels of barbed wire. The windshield was down, so I got the full benefit of the cold night air. It seemed as if we were the only mechanized travel. Soon we began to pass long, slow lines of mules, heavily laden and led by soldiers. The mule lines turned and wound with the road into the valley.

The soldiers leading them were evidently of several nationalities, because whenever our jeep turned a corner and came up unexpectedly on the rear of a column, we heard voices cry out warnings in French and English and sometimes in Italian.

When the mule trains became scarcer, we caught up with jeeps pulling loaded trailers. Occasionally we passed companies of Infantry replacements moving up.

The driver was familiar with the road and he began to speed up, never lingering long on the high points or crossroads because, he said, "they have those spots zeroed in." Although the flats in front of the town were occasionally shelled, nothing fell near us.

I noticed that smoke shells were being put down in front of the town, blocking out the lower slopes but leaving the monastery clearly visible above.

We passed a few dead mules by the side of the road and then a Bren-gun carrier lying in a ditch. There was a heavy smell in the air, a mixture of dead mules and the bright yellow flowers patching the flats in the valley.

Then we came to the flats flooded by the Germans. We made the turn at Hell's Fire Corner, clearly marked by strips of mine tape strung on two shot-up six-by-sixes and two wrecked ambulances.

The driver stepped on the gas, and we raced across the Rapido, bounced past a couple of knocked-out tanks and came to an intersection. The inevitable MP stood there, directing traffic. We turned left at a barracks, and it was then that we began to see the first effects of the terrific shelling and bombardment the town had received. Only a few pillars remained standing above the debris of the barracks on the outskirts. Here and there were dead Shermans, which had thrown their treads as a snake sheds its skin.

Pulling up in front of our meeting place, we quickly unloaded the wire. Before we could acknowledge the hurried "Bye, Yank, see you

OldMagazineArticles.com

tomorrow night," the driver raced away, leaving the captain and me alone with our reels of barbed wire.

I'd expected the worst during the ride but nothing had happened, and now I remarked to the captain: "It's pretty quiet tonight." He turned and said quietly that there was an understanding among the men never to mention things like that on these trips. He told me he made a trip like this one every night.

While we waited for the truck to arrive, he demonstrated how to carry a coil of barbed wire. You stand inside the coil and then grab hold of the looped pieces of insulated wire on each side.

SOON there was a terrific clanking down the road, and I was sure every German in Cassino could hear the truck coming. The noise was made by chains carried over the truck's bumper.

The men scrambled out and the captain checked to see that each man had his proper load. The rations were carried in pairs of sandbags tied together at the mouth and then slung over the men's shoulders. Each man also carried a small bag in each hand.

While the captain was attending to the final details, the Germans started. There's a funny thing about mortars: when they're going to miss you they can be heard, but the closer they get the quieter they sound.

There would be a swish-swish, a burst of flame and then a loud explosion. I felt very uneasy. The shells were exploding in the very path we were traveling, and I whispered to the New Zealander behind me: "It's getting kind of noisy." He whispered back: "Jerry's having his bit of hate."

When we moved off, the captain placed me behind him and explained that we must keep five yards between us. He picked up his coil and started off, hugging the bank alongside the road. Picking up my coil, I noticed that it was off balance but decided there was no time to do anything about it now and took up the trail right behind the captain. I heard the man behind me do the same.

Everything was still all around us. Suddenly a burst of machine-gun fire shattered the silence, synchronized with a single tracer that lazily arched its way across us toward our lines. This was followed by a couple of mortars, and then all was quiet again.

It was a beautiful night, filled with all the signs of an awakening spring. A lonely night bird was sounding off over in Purple Heart Valley, and the sting had gone out of the breeze coming down off the mountain.

When we got to the edge of the town, the captain set his coil down near an overturned Sherman and stopped. I was puffing hard and was grateful for this chance to rest. In the distance we could hear the sound of long-range shelling. Occasionally the tanks bedded down in the flats would fire a mission, and then all would be quiet again.

The captain asked me how I was doing and then said that we didn't have much farther to go, but that it would be rougher now; we were coming to the rubble. "I hope Spandau Alley is quiet tonight," a Kiwi whispered in my ear,

OldMagazineArticles.com

RUBBLE EVERYWHERE, AND STICKING UP IN THE BACK A CASTLE—THAT IS, ITS REMAINS—NOW IN OUR HANDS.

explaining that it was a spot along our route that the Kraut sprayed every so often in the hope of catching just such a party as ours. "We've been pretty lucky so far," he said. "He's just missed every time."

As we started off again, I hoped silently that he would continue to miss. In a few minutes we were in the rubble, and when someone stepped on a tin can my heart seemed to stop. As it resumed its normal beat, I could see that we were walking on what had once been a street; we were trying to hug the stumps of walls of houses. It was so quiet that I could hear a cat crying.

There was actually no shape to the road as we climbed over heaps of rubble covering the first floor of what had once been a house, down the other side into a bomb crater and then around a tank that lay on its side. I had no idea at times whether we were going up or down a slope and just followed the man in front of me.

Suddenly the near quiet was broken by a very sharp swish, then by the crash of a mortar. The captain shouted: "Take cover, blokes." Everybody dropped what he was carrying, stretched out flat and tried to crawl to some hole or to get behind a heavy wall that was still standing.

I could hear the captain moving about to make sure that everyone was safe. I found myself sprawled out behind a two-foot-thick wall, in the company of a Kiwi who wasn't wearing a helmet. Shivering and sweating at the same time, I whispered to him: "Isn't this a helluva place?" He whispered back: "I wish I was in the desert again." So did I.

There was another crash and a burst of flames, and the ground shook under us. The falling plaster dust tickled my nose, and I tried to get closer to the ground and curl my long legs in under me. Pieces of rubble pelted us, and a pebble hit me in the back of the neck, making me

OldMagazineArticles.com

IN A HOUSE WHERE WALLS ARE SO THICK THAT IT IS A FORTRESS, NEW ZEALANDERS INSTALL ANTITANK GUN.

wish I was wearing my deep American helmet.

After a few seconds I raised my head. There was a lot of dust, and the smell of the shell was still hanging in the air. But I could see the captain going from man to man to check whether they were all okay. He had plenty of guts.

I heard a lot of swishing in the air over our heads. Some of it was our stuff, and I remembered someone saying that we give the Kraut about seven for every one he sends over. Any other time I would have been comforted by the thought, but at the moment it wasn't very reassuring because a lot of his stuff was coming at us. We all stayed where we were, but finally no more came, and then our guns stopped firing, too. All was quiet again, but we didn't move until the captain said: "Let's get cracking, blokes."

I went back to where I had dropped the wire. "Quite close, eh, Slim?" the captain said. "Too bloody close," I mumbled.

The dust had cleared away but it was quite dark now; some clouds had blown in front of the moon. Stumbling over huge blocks of masonry, girders and bomb craters large enough to hide a six-by-six, we made our way along.

Every so often we'd pass some Infantry replacements going in, others on their way out. I could understand now why I'd had to change uniforms. Someone seeing my different rig might have thought I was a German who'd infiltrated.

COMING out of a crater behind a tank, I saw the captain step out of his coil. "We're here." he said as I came up to him. All I could see was a ruin similar to those we had passed.

The Kiwis filed in with the rations while we left the barbed wire outside. Squeezing into the entrance, I heard a voice in the dark say: "Give me your hand, Yank." I stuck my hand out, groping, and the owner of the voice grabbed it. I followed him in the dark, turned right and went down some steps into a room. It was dimly lit by a shielded candle in a box.

OldMagazineArticles.com

A KIWI, WHOSE HIGH SPIRITS EASILY COME THROUGH THE SHADOWS, CAREFULLY CLEANS HIS BREN GUN.

Coming out of the dark, I found even this light seemed bright. There were many coats and blankets lying on the floor, some American and some British. I plopped down and wiped some of the sweat off my face.

There was a double-decker bunk in one corner of the room. The Germans had built it, but none of our men was sleeping in it because it was too hard. This was company headquarters, and the bunk was serving as a set of shelves.

From here men went to various other houses to deliver the loads. I was introduced to the major in charge and to the rest of the men in the house.

A walkie-talkie was going in the corner of the house and the radioman was trying to contact a forward platoon in another house. The telephone lines were out, and headquarters was using the radio to maintain contact with this platoon.

When the men of the carrying party got back, they threw themselves down and started to light up. The major cautioned them against smoking in the outer room. One fellow lit his cigarette with a match and then passed the cigarette around so the others could light up.

The soldiers occupying the house gathered around the carrying party to get all the latest news and rumors from camp. Loud talking interfered with the radioman's reception and he shouted: "Shut up, back there!"

The captain asked if there was anything else the men wanted, but there was no answer. He picked up their letters and waited for a barrage of shelling to stop before he left. He shook hands and said that he would see me tomorrow. Then he gathered his men together and left. On the return trip they carried back salvage—broken rifles, clothing and even the dead.

The major went out to make the rounds of his forward platoons. After every barrage, the man on the phones checked to see if the wires were still in. If the platoons could not be contacted,

OldMagazineArticles.com

headquarters would try to reach them by radio until a man could be sent to repair the break.

When the major came back, he said I could take any place on the floor and handed me two blankets. I picked out an empty spot and spread them out. There was a layer of debris dust insulating the blankets from the bare floor.

The radioman left word with the sentry to call him every hour, the major snuffed out the candle and I crawled in between the blankets with all my clothes and shoes on. All through the night many shells hit near the building; occasionally one would hit the house, but this house had withstood many previous hits. Often I could hear short bursts of machine-gun fire. They say you can tell a German Spandau from our guns because it fires more rounds per minute, but to me they all sound the same.

EARLY next morning we were awakened by the sound of machine-gun fire coming from every direction. The major leaped up and called out: "Take position, men." It was just beginning to get light, and someone said it was 5 o'clock.

The major called his forward platoons by radio to find out what had caused all the noise. He was told that the Germans had attacked earlier in the night with a strong patrol but had been detected. Flares were sent up, and our artillery had shelled them. The patrol had hunted around most of the night and at first light had attacked again. They had been beaten off and three prisoners taken. The major told me the Germans were just testing our strength.

I didn't feel like going back to bed and decided to look around the place. As I came up the stairs out of the cellar, I saw two Kiwis on guard at the window of a room right across the way. There were two guards at the lookout window at the opposite end of the room and two guards at the only entrance to the house. They all had tommy guns.

THIS WAY FOR THE VALLEY OF THE PURPLE HEART. IN THE CENTER: AN OVERTURNED SHERMAN TANK.

OldMagazineArticles.com

IT IS UNWISE TO WALK OUTSIDE IN DAYLIGHT, BUT SOMETIMES IT IS NECESSARY.

The walls of the house were at least a foot and a half thick, and there were two floors of fallen rubble over our heads. The only thing that could knock us out was a direct bomb hit. I could understand now how Stalingrad had held out. We and the enemy were so close that neither side could effectively use heavy artillery or bombs for fear of hitting its own men.

I peered out the lookout window but couldn't see much because of the early morning haze. The guard was reduced to one man at the lookout and one at the entrance, while the others set about preparing breakfast. The room used for a kitchen was also a combined dining room and latrine, and the odor left you in no doubt as to the latter function.

After breakfast two of the men stepped cautiously out of the house and crept to a nearby well to get water. Just as the men reached the well a barrage of mortars let go, and some of the shells hit the house, shaking up the rubble. The men at the well got back safely, though I never thought they would. It was my first lesson in the unwisdom of walking outside in daylight.

Though I spent most of the morning looking out the window with binoculars, I couldn't pick out a living thing. There must have been at least 60 houses occupied by our troops, besides those held by the Germans—more than a thousand men concealed before me. Yet I never saw a soul or heard a human sound. Nothing ever happens in Cassino in the daytime.

The day passed quickly. The men who were not on guard sat around talking sex and politics, except for the night guards who were sleeping. The telephone man was checking up to find out which wires he'd have to repair that night. He said that no repairs are ever made by day and that never a day goes by that wires aren't torn up by shell fire.

From my post at the lookout window I could see smoke shells landing on the flats. Each side uses smoke shells to hinder observation. As I looked out, Cassino reminded me of a ghost town wearing down with the years.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Above the house on a ridge sits the castle—or what's left of it—which we now occupy; and on the ridge right behind is Hangman's Hill, so called because a piece of framework that looks like a gallows stands there. The Germans, who hold Hangman's Hill, look down our backs as we use the outdoor latrine.

Later that afternoon the major asked if I'd like to go visiting. We started off for our next-door neighbor's. Although the distance between the houses was only about 25 yards, it looked like an obstacle course. As the major led the way, I sidestepped our barbed wire, jumped over a block of masonry and leaped in and out of a crater, never daring to look back. We rounded a chunk of wall, wiggled through an entrance that was nothing more than a shell hole in the wall, then slid down a pile of rubble to the main floor, where we ran smack into a Kiwi with a tommy gun. The Kiwi seemed to have heard all about the Yank with a camera, so I figured the communications system was still functioning.

We were barely inside when we heard the crash of mortar shells dropping on our recent route, as if to say: "You're not putting anything over on us."

This house was about the same as the other except that it had more armament. There were Bren guns, and the Kiwis were setting up an antitank gun, carried up during the night. I took a few pictures and then decided to go back. We made the same quick scramble between houses, and a few minutes after we got inside, the Germans loosed a burst of machine-gun fire that hit the outside of the house. "It's not good to run around like we did," the major said; "it angers the Kraut and he wakes up the men who are trying to sleep."

THERE was little doing the rest of the day, and life in a Cassino fortress seemed pretty dull. The boys had a pin-up of Marguerite Chapman, salvaged from a beat-up British magazine. They also had a bottle of Scotch, donated by some

STREET SCENE IN CASSINO

OldMagazineArticles.com