

## My Great-Grandfather and the Italian Campaign

I've always known my Great-Grandfather fought in the Second World War, but never like this. When he left the army, he never talked about the war to anyone. He never claimed his medals and his memories died with him. I only knew half of his story. But now I know why he never wanted to remember it.

Before the war, Arthur Barker was coal miner and a keen sportsman. In the army, he had his officers bet on him to win races or competitions. In 1939, I know he was conscripted into the territorial army under the King's Own Light Yorkshire infantry division, and he trained at Pontefract barracks. He served with the Royal Artillery in Aberdeenshire and Northumberland, until moving to the Shetlands in October 1941. However, after the British defeat at Hong Kong and the destruction of a Royal Scots battalion, the army council decided the battalion should be reformed. He and his comrades transferred to 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion Royal Scots to fight in Italy. The move happened formally on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 1942. The 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion spent the rest of 1942 on territorial duties and training, until they set sail to Gibraltar in April 1944 - where they would spend 15 months at their garrison.



*Arthur Barker in his Royal Artillery uniform, worn during his time in the territorial army.*

### The Italian Campaign

The whole idea of the Italian Campaign was to exploit the "soft underbelly of Europe". Optimists on high command dreamed of the blitzkrieg-like victories of 1940. It also was intended to relieve pressure off Russia in the east: as at the height of operation Barbarossa, the Germans had advanced to as close as 20 miles from Moscow, and the fighting wouldn't get easier from there. Even though the Germans had lost its 6<sup>th</sup> army at Stalingrad in early 1943, they still launched a major offensive at Kursk in July 1943 that the soviets would need to deal with. Moreover, this would be the biggest tank battle of the war and utilising the famous Tiger tank. The inaction from the allies infuriated Stalin on not opening a new front, believing his people were the only one's suffering. However, the allies were at an impasse. The Americans wanted to take Normandy believing that they had the resources and manpower, but Churchill objected. He took a more methodical approach claiming if rushed, it might lead to another Dieppe raid-like disaster. \*The Dieppe raids being a complete failure by the British at an attempt on an amphibious landing in 1942\*

When the allies landed in Italy, especially during the German occupation, Italy became a defensive masterpiece: All with thanks to the endless rivers, steep valleys, and the treacherous Apennines Mountain range. The Apennines stretching southwards across Italy, it proved to be the worst obstacle for the allied soldiers to manoeuvre. The Germans knew they were in luck, and unsurprisingly their objective was to make the advance as slow and bloody as they could. To further torment the allies, they also had snipers and minefields and key tactical areas were demolished. Also, German forced labour, numbering 15,000,

constructed dozens of defensive lines to halt the allies from key objectives. For this reason, the allies never fully took Italy before the end of the war - the Gothic Line only fell when Berlin did, and after the invasion of Normandy, the campaign was strategically pointless. It did, however, tie down the few German divisions and stop the flow of goods from Bologna and Milan, but nevertheless another 40,000 estimated casualties for the allies to grieve upon.

### **Advance in the South**

The allies had a slow and painful advance in the South of Italy with operation Avalanche, the landing of troops onto mainland Italy: Most notably, the allies had been ignorant at the Salerno landings and had sent troops ashore to German fire after believing they had the element of surprise; despite multiple Luftwaffe reconnaissance planes having been sighted. Moreover, turning for the worst, Mussolini was deposed and had been imprisoned. German forces then occupied Italy. Interestingly, Mussolini was later rescued at Gran Sasso by the Fallschirmjager (German paratroopers) and the SS, the operation lead by Otto Skorzeny, a fierce Austrian commando who once captured, escaped and fled to Madrid until his death. Interestingly, he also had a large scar on his face from medieval duelling. After the rescue, Mussolini was later put in place as a puppet dictator, under his new “Italian Social Republic” but he only served the commands of Berlin. Now the experienced general Albert Kesselring was now the commander of all forces. He was a master of defensive warfare and a veteran of the first world war. The cost to take Rome for the allies would be astronomical.



*British soldiers advancing in the Apennines, throughout the campaign soldiers would have had to manoeuvre on terrain like this.*

### **Breakthrough at the Gustav line**

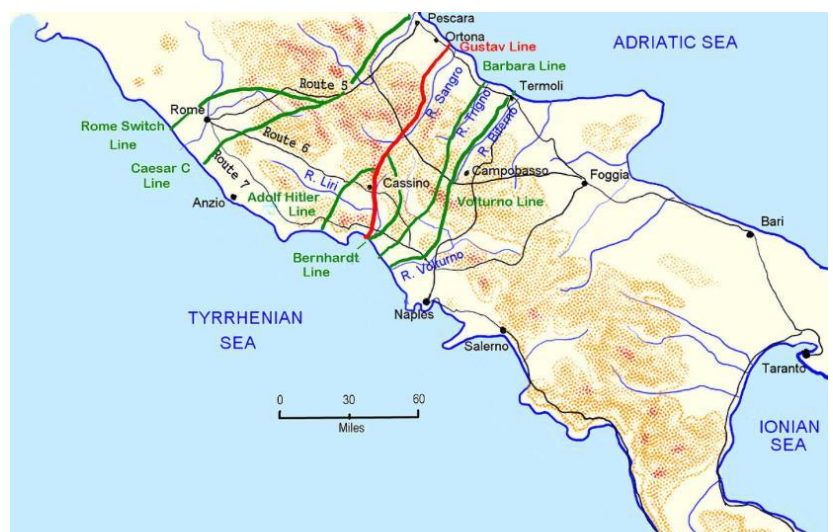
The Gustav line was the key to Rome for the allies, with the precious Highway 6 leading straight to Rome. Before reaching the main Gustav line, the first major obstacle was the Volturno Line, running parallel to two main rivers it was impossible for any infantry assault. Therefore, the SAS were tasked with raiding and holding the village until reinforcements arrived. This would threaten an encirclement of the German forces. The raid was extremely successful and forced the Germans to retreat. However, the river crossings were a strenuous affair, as engineers had to make bridges that would withstand the weight of their Sherman tanks. Then the allies had to break Barbara Line. The Germans would try to hold it as long as possible to prepare defences on the main line but on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1943, the allies broke it and could advance to the Gustav line.

On the Gustav line, Germans had placed another two lines to defend Highway 6, the Bernhard line - a frontal bulge of defences. When the allies came to take them, foul weather engulfed tanks and supply trucks. A British Stalingrad? Vehicles became more of a hindrance to men and morale sunk with them. Then, if all else fails, the Adolf Hitler Line - no doubt named to spur troops on, but it was re-named after it was objected that if it fell it would prove to be an embarrassment to the Germans. The allies knew a frontal assault of the Gothic Line would be suicide, so the US Fifth Army landed on Anzio above the Gustav Line to flank the enemy. The landings quickly failed, after the decision to dig in and create defences, instead of pressing forwards and encircling the enemy. Churchill stated, "I had hoped we were hurling a wildcat onto shore, but all we got was a stranded whale." Kesselring couldn't believe his luck and dug his troops in too, only intending to halt the allies and launched the occasional counterattack. In the meanwhile, the Luftwaffe's strafing dive bombers made quick work of oncoming ships trying to land on the beachhead. The US Fifth Army lost 11,200 men and 18,000 wounded, malaria and trench foot were rampant- Reminiscent of the Great War.

Next, the 1st Canadian division and the British Eighth Army attacked Ortona and Orsogna in an attempt to break the line in December 1943. The Canadians eventually took Ortona, after heavy street fighting like that seen at Stalingrad. Meanwhile, the British were completely repulsed by the stern and elite German paratroopers. The battles near the Adriatic would be deemed as "Bloody December" for the allies. If you were wondering why German paratroopers (FJs) were fighting on land, they were re-instated as infantry units as they had taken too many losses in the battle of Crete earlier on in the war. Many FJ units fought on the Western front too and are distinguishable by their specialised streamlined helmets (as the normal Stahlhelm design wasn't ideal in the slightest for airborne use.) Although they were successful at Crete, they took too much time and resources for the Germans to handle.

The Gustav Line was anchored by a town called Casino, where a medieval monastery was located on top of its imposing hill. The allies Eighth Army launched three all-out assaults, all resulting in defeat, and suffering 80% losses in the process. The allies thought that the monastery was being used as an artillery observation post by the Germans, and the cause of the defeats. It was bombed in operation Avenger, but as a result led to German units occupying the rubble which made perfect machine gun nests. The bombings were highly controversial, as Kesselring had declared it to the Vatican that hadn't occupied it for strategic gain, and no German casualties were taken.

There wasn't any time for politics for the allies, back at Casino the



Map of the Gustav line. It shows the extra 2 defensive lines near route 6. Also, Ortona can be seen where the Canadians attacked.

battle turned into one of nutrition, operation Diadem, or also called the 4<sup>th</sup> battle of Monte Casino, on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1944 was launched. The US Fifth Army at Anzio and the British eight attacked at once, with crucial air support and the help of commonwealth troops: an Indian, New Zealand, Polish and spectacularly a Brazilian division also fought too. The Gustav line was finally broken after 6 months of siege by these heroes.

One of the most interesting stories of Monte Cassino that is rarely talked about, is the story of Wojtek the bear. Wojtek was presented to the men of the Polish 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion artillery during the North African campaign. When the men were deployed to Italy to break the Gustav Line, the men signed Wojtek to be a private in the army as he couldn't travel across seas. He was given a service number and a paybook - despite never using them. When at Monte Cassino, Wojtek copied his comrades and picked artillery shells up and placed them near the guns to help. The soldiers honoured Wojtek by changing their insignia and many visited him in his Zoo in Scotland after the war.

### Victory

Once the allies had broken the Stenger line (this is the re-named version of the Adolf Hitler Line) the German 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> divisions were in full retreat. They could be pursued and wiped out or General Mark Clark could go and take Rome for himself. The Fifth US Army quickly found themselves in Rome on 4<sup>th</sup> June, only to be overshadowed by the Normandy landings 2 days later. The German troops retreated unscathed and returned to another defensive line, called the Gothic Line.

### Arthur Barker and the deployment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Scots

The battalion moved to Italy in June of 1944, as units were being transferred for operation Overlord, or D-Day. I've tracked my Great-Grandfather to the 1<sup>st</sup> British infantry division, a part of the US Fifth Army. His units were supposed to undergo three months of intensive training, but if they were to break the Gothic Line before the Autumn storms they'd have to attack immediately. Moreover, with the allies lacking strength in Italy, the Germans could reinforce and wrestle back the initiative. Most of my Great-Grandfather's fighting occurred in September 1944, during Operation Olive. The operation was that the Eighth Army would advance on the Adriatic again, where they came across heavy resistance at the town of Rimini. Described as one of the bloodiest of the campaign by the Eighth's Commander Oliver Leese. This move was intended so that Kesselring would move divisions from his middle to address the attack, then the US Fifth would punch through the middle. The allies lost 14,000 men during this period between August.



Map of the Gothic line, the last line of defence for the Germans in the north.

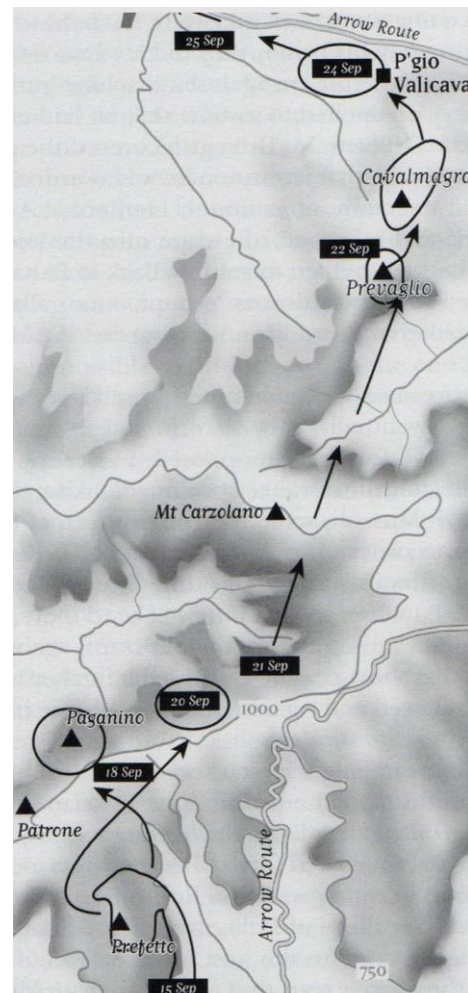
What he experienced as a soldier during operation Olive was truly horrendous. He was a part of the US Fifth, advancing

through the middle of the line. His first main action was the capture of Monte Paganio. The mountain lay next the Arrow Route - a potential supply route for the allies. But by this time, and unluckily for the Scots, the dreaded autumn weather made the battlefield like the Great War: soldiers had to crawl through deep mud, carry all the equipment needed for prolonged combat or track the steep Apennines. Also, to their delight, ran into two machine gun bunkers en-route, and near the summit sustained continuous mortar fire. Progress was bloody and drove the inexperienced soldiers to breaking point. The soldiers dug in on the mountain until dawn, then fighting yard by yard to the reach summit. The battle lasted 24 hours without end, but finally after suffering heavy casualty's 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion had breached the Gothic Line.

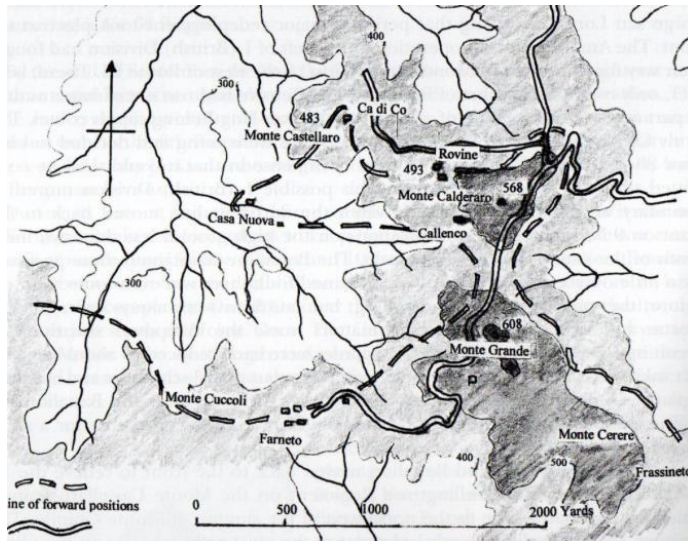
After their victory at Monte Paganio, they were moved to brigade reserve and slowly advanced with the rest of the battalions in the divisions, even in reserve, they encountered mines, mortars and more machine gun nests. The battalion then repeated taking another two steep mountains under brutal conditions. After this, they had found themselves 18 days straight in combat and next found themselves in the Monte Grande sector after a brief break where they'd suffer their first defeat. Combined with the ongoing weather, supplies were non-existent for the troops. Moreover, the shortage of replacements stretched the men thin, as the Western front took precedence. As a result, the advance was completely halted. Mules or other animals were used to carry supplies to troops during this time. The British supply pathetically lacked behind with equipment, their truck's four wheels couldn't compare to the American's six. In November, the battalion returned to the front and occupied Monte Castellaro, by this time 3 of the 5 rifle companies had lost half of its strength.

### Monte Casellaro

The Scots moved up to relieve 1<sup>st</sup> battalion Duke of Wellington, the mountain was dangerously isolated and needed to be held in the difficult climate. The mountain also provided little cover, which the Germans exploited. Mortar and artillery fire wouldn't stop throughout the day, and the Germans had plentiful supplies to assault the mountain with as their depots near the cities were only a short drive. It was recorded in the battalions records that 400 shells landed in 6 hours constantly. Casualties mounted for the British. Furthermore, mist clouded the summit, so men would've been on high alert throughout the night. Depriving themselves of rest. During the night of 28<sup>th</sup> November, the Germans launched a fast assault and forced the British lines to be outflanked and broken. Determined to re-capture the summit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion launched an assault



Map of the Paganio region, and the nearby Arrow Route. It shows in circled the areas they took and the areas they'd cleared in battalion reserve.



Map of the monte Grande sector, it shows Monte Castellaro and nearby positions the battalion would've had to take.

with led into hand-to-hand fighting but ultimately, they had to withdraw as they had taken too many casualties and couldn't hold the position. There were various other engagements along the front, and they were reinforced by another battalion but ultimately only 40 men were back in the Royal Scots lines. As a result of only being one rifle company strong, they were relieved of the campaign and shipped to Palestine in January of 1945 for rest. The 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion suffered 230 casualties and Arthur's best friend being one of them.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I believe that it was the relentless sense of danger: mines, camouflaged machine gun nests, horrific climate and the genuine fear of death that broke my Great-Grandfather. I also believe that the battle for Monte Casellaro damaged him, basically his whole division being wiped out to an ineffective strength. He also had a daughter, my Grandma, who he only saw after the war, I think if he were to die, the genuine fear of losing her would have haunted him. In my opinion, I think why he couldn't talk about the war was the genuine pointlessness of it. The allies had taken Berlin through the Western front, and at the time of his action, many Italian partisans were revolting in the North. Even more, would his suffering have been prevented if General Mark Clark hadn't gone for Rome and chased down the retreating German divisions? Did Arthur Barker fight for nothing...I think so.

## Personal Response

For this essay, I wanted to honour my Great-Grandfather's memory and that of his friends and fellow soldiers. During my research of the events, I've taken information from personal accounts, combat accounts, articles and the Royal Scots remembrance page. Although, not exactly recounting every detail of his experience, what I've written about above is he'd have been through. It's horrible to think about his experiences, the pain he went through. Especially what I've heard from my Grandma that he'd sometimes cry suddenly or was never himself again. From only 40 men having survived in his battalion, it makes me think of what if he hadn't returned from the front and how would that have affected me? How would it have affected my Grandma growing up without a father? But also, makes you think of the men that didn't return.