

This article was GeoSuffolk's contribution to the Geologists' Association Virtual Festival of Geology 2020.



An Interlude from Battle Casualties – Naples 1944

by Eric Griffin with 67th (Br) General Hospital

*Preface*

*We met Eric Griffin, the author of the account below, on a visit to Spitzbergen in 2001. Eric had served in the Battle of Monte Cassino in World War II and told us stories of his time in Italy as a young soldier. Free tickets to the Naples opera, (which Eric learned to love, though he often fell asleep through exhaustion) and the 1944 eruption of Vesuvius which he experienced first-hand made welcome distractions from his wartime duties. Acknowledging our interest in his memories of Vesuvius, Eric sent us this account (having referred to his diaries) plus copies of photos from his album, after our return from the north. Eric was well into his eighties by then, so what follows is the story of a young man barely in his twenties. Caroline and Bob Markham.*

The 67th General Hospital had landed in Italy and set up a working hospital in the Cavalry Barracks within the City of Naples and was handling the casualties from the 1st (24th January to 8th February) and 2nd (16th to the 18th February) battles of Cassino and those from the bridgehead at Anzio (24th January).

Here again as veterans of the 1st Army the unit once again was receiving many of our old customers from wounded of well-known regiments and corps from Brigades to Divisions used in the hard battles on the North African coast, both friendly and enemy personnel.

Having failed in the attempt to break the deadlock it was certain that another attempt would soon be made. Indeed, the British Army decided not to tempt providence. Therefore, a church parade was arranged, and every unit was expected to send a detachment to pray for a little help in the forthcoming struggle.

Whilst the opposing forces both suffered appalling weather and living conditions, aggravated by hurling tons of HE at one another, causing death and destruction it appeared that the ancient Gods were being disturbed, for early in March Vesuvius started to rumble and tremors were felt in the surrounding countryside, small flakes of red hot ash (looking like brandy snaps) would burn holes in shirts and uniforms.

At the local observatory, where a small team of specialists which monitored underground movements for the area, became aware that a serious eruption was about to occur. The senior volcanologist, Professor Imbo warned the military authorities at Caserta (A.F.H.Q.) of the imminent danger to the Naples area and that the R.A.F fighter station at Terzigno would probably be in the path of the flow.

Naturally no one in authority took any notice and on the 13th March, after much rumbling underfoot and the skies filling with ash, torrents of lava burst forth and for the next few days the troops massing for the 3rd battle of Cassino had a front seat at one of the world's greatest events. The night sky was lightened by the stream of molten lava, visible for miles. After two days it split into two flows like an inverted 'Y' and was set to engulf the twin hamlets of San Sebastiano and Vesuvio a Massa.

As a medical unit within the city, the 67th was approached for help with the aged and infirm and although we could not allow the use of ambulances because of the impending battle, volunteers

were called for to go with the 3-ton trucks to assist with the removal of people and their goods and chattels.

This seemed like a good idea to see this unique event at close hand, because the scene had been fascinating from the roof of the Cavalry Barracks and it was a change from the horrific task we had been engaged in for the last two years.



*View from Naples*

Having no idea of the dangers involved we started off thinking it was going to be a picnic. The scene that met our eyes when we arrived at the edge of the village were like nothing we had ever seen or contemplated. Looking straight down the main street of San Sebastiano, some thirty or forty houses distance was a large red glowing coke fire that towered over the buildings with the diffused bright light of the distant moving lava stream coming out of the volcano.



We waited and watched the two trucks that were being loaded from houses and cottages on either side of the narrow road and could see the small figures hurrying in and out with bundles and small furniture. Farther on down the road were two men from the laboratory who were monitoring the movement of the huge wall of menacing heat. The trucks were facing out towards us and as soon as they were loaded moved out very quickly and the carabinieri called forward the next two. Our turn seemed to be ages and watching the awesome sight one began to wonder why old soldiers such as we should have volunteered?

Soon it was our turn and, while it was warm where we had waited, as we approached the 'safe area' the heat was blistering, and every so often large burning pieces of red molten rock would fall ever closer, another part of a house was reached by the slowly moving giant and collapsing, bringing the wall of heat ever closer to us. We scuttled in and out of the house bringing out bundles, small furniture, pots and pans in boxes until the Italian signalled to finish with that house. Each time you came out there was a quick glance down the road to see if there was any change, my clothes were sticking to me and, stopping for breath, I asked the Italian in a white coat, "How long?" pointing to the glowing mass. He smiled and replied, "One minute, two hours or now!" with a shrug of his shoulders. Finally, the truck was loaded and the RASC lad went off to dump the effects near where the folk had been evacuated. We stayed on and helped to speed up the loading. It was quite a cold feeling to see the house we had emptied being crushed and the road blazing, but I never was able to judge the time that everything happened.



*San Sebastiano*

Our drivers came and collected us, dirty, toasted and exhausted but that we had a feeling in the midst of a war we had seen some of nature's might and we were impressed by the quiet courage of the men whose job was to observe, calculate and predict the outcome of this tragedy for ordinary people. There was no panic and the poor people were pathetically grateful for the little we could do for them.

Although this may have given the troops massing for the 3rd battle of Cassino (15th to 25th March) something to look over their shoulders and watch, it did not delay the start of the battle. So we were back to our normal business.

Early on the 15th March the allied bombers decided to put on a show of their own and, for a change, a bright sunny morning we watched the destruction of the Monastery of Cassino. An awesome sight watching the tons of HE rained down on this hated building, which was the symbol of all the miseries suffered by the 'sharp end'. Little were we to know that it was to have a terrible effect on the Polish divisions who would be called on later (in what was afterwards called the 4th battle of Cassino, 11th to 18th May 1944) to fight through the ruins and rubble. Even at the time it seemed a puny effort compared with the unstoppable force of nature viewed from the roof of the Cavalry Barracks.

Once the lava ceased to flow at night and the streams which had submerged the two little hamlets began to cool and set hard, a huge black smoke pillar billowed thousands of feet from the centre of the crater into the sky. Luckily there was no wind, but after four days it bent over and a strong wind carried a huge smoke-screen several hundreds of feet in height seawards towards the Isle of Capri and Ischia. (To the amusement of the troops – the islands were 'Officers Only'.)



*After the lava had stopped flowing*

Once the 3rd battle of Cassino was fought to a standstill and the casualties ceased to be so heavy, a chum and I went to see what the village looked like. It was no more! It lay under a solid sea of what looked like grey pumice stone and we walked over the outlining streets to where the church stood and we were level with the bell tower, the skeleton of which was jutting out through the rock.



*Covering San Sebastiano*

The R.A.F. took no notice of the local civilian officials and in consequence lost a considerable number of fighters from the falling ash and the airfield was completely destroyed, together with a large quantity of stores and equipment.

Footnote:

The event that caused the other ranks quite a bit of satisfaction was after the fourth day the huge pillar of smoke bent over and continued, blowing directly over the islands of Ischia and Capri covering everything with a black soot. The houses were sealed, and everyone evacuated. This was the rest camps for the officers and out of bounds to all other ranks.

Trips to Pompei were also out of the question and swimming at Herculaneum beach was impossible. This did not matter too much as we were quite busy with other things.

