

Excerpts from the Memoirs  
of  
Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”  
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Portions of the original German text can be found  
on the website of the German Historical Museum:  
[Rückzug aus Italien 1944](#)

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## MONTE CASSINO

With my marching orders in hand I once again made my way toward Frosione, and this time I actually got there. But my unit was no longer there. At the forward control station I was simply plucked from my position in the regiment by the Division quartermaster. My regiment was no longer located here, but Division was. The reason they pulled me out of my old position was that once again there was a great shortage of heavy truck drivers. They noted on my papers that I had a Class 2 driver's license and had already served once with the Division quartermaster corps as a driver. My dream of returning to quartermaster duties with my old regiment went up in smoke. I was going to be a driver again. From this point on in my wartime experience I would not ever be assigned to a fixed unit. I was and would remain a wanderer in the great Army Circus. For me continuous change would be the only constant in my military life. This was very different from how I imagined things would be.



*The Commanding Position of the Monastery Monte Cassino*

Truck drivers were desperately needed to run supplies to the front lines at Monte Cassino. A mad and horrible struggle was in progress there because Monte Cassino was the key to defending the Abruzzi and the Apennine mountains. The Allies wanted to take this key point and the Germans wanted to defend it at any price. On our side it was defended by ordinary infantry units like my division, but also Fallschirmjäger [paratroopers] and elements of the Waffen-SS. The Fallschirmjäger would earn their legendary renown here. They would become known not only as the elite troops that they were, but also as heroic

fighters who continued to battle from the rubble of the monastery even after it was clear that the battle was lost.

On the other side was the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army. There was also a Polish division under the command of the Polish general Anders as well as a Gurkha unit under the command of British officers. There were disturbing rumors about the Polish troops as well as the Gurkha troops that turned out for the most part to be true for the German

soldiers, not only in battle but, worse, after capture. Of the Polish it was said that they rarely took prisoners, they simply shot them. It was also said that the Gurkha's took 'trophies' from POW's; they cut an ear off. This turned out not to be scare tactic propaganda as the Landser [Landser: common soldier; enlisted man] were able to verify for themselves when our counter attacks would reveal German soldiers who were dead or still living. The battle tactics of the Gurkha's were a gruesome fact. They were feared for their daggers that they would use in hand to hand combat. It always led to death. They never took prisoners, instead they rammed their daggers home in the body of their enemy. Rumors also warned about their ability to creep up silently on forward sentries and quietly kill them by slashing their throats.



*Gurkha with his Kukri*



Bundesarchiv, Bild 103-J24110  
Foto: Luthge | März 1944

*Fallschirmjäger at Monte Cassino firing a MG42*

These heroes were valued by the British as elite troops and their leaders, the English officers, gave them free rein to behave as they liked. Wasn't this terrorism? Apparently not, they were only carrying on combat as they did it in their own country, nothing more. Moreover, from the viewpoint of the Allies, this was a just war against the Nazi barbarians; therefore every means to counter the threat was justified. War crimes were only carried out by the Nazi barbarians no one else. The others fought for Freedom, Democracy and Humanity, even if they occasionally had to resort to barbarian practices. It was the barbarian's fault; otherwise the world would fall under their harsh rule.

I don't want to be misunderstood on this point. This observation is not intended to be any sort of justification for such criminal acts. It is simple a statement of fact that all of the warring parties committed atrocities. For me every war is an atrocity. For me there is no such thing as a just war. The ideologues who tout the 'just war' are only indulging in misdirection. It is just a cover up for death and murder carried out and abetted by the participants on both sides.

Monte Cassino, was the door to the North. One side wanted to keep it shut and the other side wanted with all their might to open it. This led to an awful stalemate centered on the Cloister that so far had been spared.

From the German side it was already seen as an absurd situation. The German positions were shallow foxholes in the stony mountain side that gave very little shelter. Nevertheless when the enemy made their advance following the heavy artillery and mortar barrage, something incredible happened. A strong resistance was mounted and the Landser arose from their holes and beat back the attacks. It was total insanity but Hitler and his high commander, Kesselring, wanted it that way and Montgomery on the other side did not behave any differently. This craziness on both sides cost untold thousands of dead and wounded. It wasn't until May 18, 1944 that the Germans yielded Cassino and gave the English a clear path to the North. On this path the Allies would still face stiff resistance. The Wehrmacht would not make things easy for them in spite of their superiority in men and materials.

The Cloister had been spared during the battle until the day when the Allies flew in and unleashed a frightful rain of bombs on it. The attack was totally senseless. There was not a single German soldier in the Cloister. The monastery buildings were totally destroyed, but the Allies received no benefit from it. The conflict would go on until the situation became hopeless for the Germans and the commanders finally had to mercifully give the order for the remnants to withdraw. These commanders included the chief of my Division, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry, Lt. General Baade.



*Destruction of the Monastery of  
Monte Cassino*

A very objective book about the Battle for Monte Cassino was written by Janusz Piekalkiewicz. It is not a heroic epic; it is an account of the insanity from the viewpoints of both sides.

Now that I had been commandeered as a truck driver by the Division Supply Unit, I still had to wait until they found a vehicle for me to drive. There were not many left to be had. Trucks had become a rare commodity because of the many losses due to the Jabos [Jagdbombers: Fighter Bombers]. While I was waiting, I had to help other soldiers in the evenings bringing food and supplies 'forward.' This was no longer just a function of the Supply Unit of a company, it was now 'central,' and any soldier could be diverted to this duty. In all the chaos the only important thing was to provide food and munitions.

Every command post had to be reached and then supplied as long as there were still soldiers left at their posts. It was also the case that for the most part the combat groups would be made up of soldiers from several outfits who happened upon each other in the rubble. Their own unit would have been decimated and they had to reform as ad hoc units as best they could.

It was not easy to get supplies to the forward positions. Not the least of the problems was the terrain that consisted mostly of difficult mountain paths. These paths were often under direct observation of the enemy and also subject to withering artillery fire. The

primary means of transport was mules and donkeys. Food canisters and ammunition boxes would be hung over their backs and then we were off, straight into the mountains.



*Supply Donkey at Cassino*

In the areas that were subject to direct enemy artillery fire care had to be taken to try to time the individual cannon shots and to move between the individual salvos. There was an art to marking the time between shots then attempting to move forward bit by bit. The Landser had carefully worked out the timing and knew the exact moment to make the dash to the next spot and take cover. Unfortunately, the stupid

mules and donkeys never caught on to the system. They tended to stop dead in their tracks, right there where the shelling was the heaviest and refuse to take another step. Hitting them as hard as you could with a big stick did nothing to budge them from the spot where they decided to stop. Every night it was the same show that played out with these animals, most of whom did not survive to the next day.

Slaughter is not a pretty word, but it is the only one that fits the miserable death that these animals suffered. It was truly a slaughter of innocent beasts that were cruelly used by men as a means to an end. But also many Landser were slaughtered while trying to take on the loads of the mules that had been hit. But Monte Cassino had to be held regardless of the cost, only to be yielded anyway later. It was pure insanity and I had lost my taste for war and any



*German Troops Relieve the Donkey of Its Load*

sense or meaning it may have had for me. But what could I do or any Landser do? Disobeying orders would lead to a death sentence. Desertion? An impossibility as long as one still had the hope of somehow coming out of this alive. A runner, a deserter was also seen by the enemy as a coward. All armies of all nations agreed that this type of behavior was to be despised even though all armies had deserters. Anyone who deserted would not get a warm welcome from the enemy who also saw this as a dishonorable act. Desertion could not end the war; there could never be enough deserters to make a significant difference in the outcome of the war.

All of this should be looked at under a new light and not that of the stupid and ignorant views of the know-it-all's who sold their views after the war as the absolute truth without knowing the truth. This practice was not limited to the pundits in Germany, but could be found on all sides.

To repeat one more time; the soldiers that had to fight were not criminals, they were not bloodthirsty warriors, they were not fanatic Nazis. They were soldiers in a war that they did not start who had to do what soldiers do: their duty. They had to do it until they died whether they (still) wanted to or not. In this they were no different from any other soldier in any other army. So, we had to go on, obey our orders and do our duty also here in the mountains of Monte Cassino and supply our comrades who were stuck in a tough situation with the food and ammunition they needed. We had to risk the nighttime paths through unknown territory and difficult terrain without knowing if it would be our last trip or not. There was no going back. We did not do this to be heroes; we did it because we had to, even though we could no longer see the sense of it and even though we were full of anger at the leaders who had brought us to this misery. We would have rather have tossed all the junk aside. We had to keep going or we would all go to the dogs. This made us no different from the others on the other side who were also hunkered down in the mud to either live or die there.

The war was a crime against all men, regardless of which side they were on, and even though the other side spoke of themselves as liberators on a crusade against the Nazi barbarians. That is total nonsense and we need to put an end to it. High or low all of us soldiers were pitiful swine that were stuffed with their own side's current ideology. The battle for Right and Freedom, for Democracy and the attendant Humanism was more a phrase than a reality in the thinking of the soldiers who had to fight the war. It was a war where they could not ask questions and where they had to be obedient in accord with their soldier's oath. All were under the force of orders that they had to obey without questioning the sense or lack thereof. It has been the same in all armies in all times. The insanity of war has been a sad companion of mankind since the beginning of time, and only the means and methods of conducting war have changed noticeably along with civilization. The major change was the development of 'better' means of conducting war more efficiently. The victory of Reason in the French Revolution was not a victory, because the insanity of war was carried, under the banner of their country, over the border by the humane and tolerant revolutionaries to other nations.

This crazy war that we found ourselves in now could have been avoided if Reason had been invited to the conference table in Versailles in 1919, but it was locked out of the room. This war was not simply a genocidal crime of the Nazi regime; it was already in the air at Versailles as many of the politicians of the Entente already realized. Even under a different regime in Germany the path would still have led to war. The idea of a war of revenge as well as the concept of a Greater Germany as the center point of a new Europe was already widespread. It changed nothing that under Hitler the war came to a quest for power and that criminal practices were adopted that had the goal of destroying and displacing whole populations. It must be understood that next to Hitler and under him, but much more to the point, *with* Hitler were the conservatives and the German military who stood fully behind him and his policies. They shared the same basic principles as can be seen if one only takes the time to read about it.

This fact came to bother me very much when after 1945 a new view of things arose that saw the Second World War as solely a German crime. Anyone who suggested otherwise would be beaten down with accusations of being incorrigible or worse, a Neo-Nazi. And the Old Conservatives successfully managed to wash their dirty hands clean with the observation that they had always been against Hitler right from the beginning.

And in this Shit War the German Landsers had to die or be crippled because they had to obey orders. Orders that were issued not by the Nazi powers, but by the German-Prussian officers who learned and developed their view of the enemy in the military schools maintained in the hermetically closed little world of the caste of German-Prussian Militarism.

This military caste saw it as their duty to obey all orders, even though they now came from Ex-Private Hitler, their commander in chief. Why? Was there any resistance to it? No, that is silly. They did it because it offered them a multitude of opportunities for advancement up the military ladder, along with a infinite possibilities to win medals and decorations.



Unfortunately, they did not realize that modern warfare would be very different from past. The war had become a 'total war,' not just in the slobbering speeches of Goebbels, but in the actual methodologies used by all branches of the service. These methodologies led to atrocities on all sides of the conflict and were a byproduct of 'total war,' regardless of the parties involved, or where they occurred. It was perhaps this miscalculation that a few of the officers wanted to correct in 1944 [cf. assassination attempt on Hitler's life], but without wanting to end the war against Russia. In spite of all, German history was not going to be rewritten.

So it was and so we soldiers on this front still had to fulfill our duty. Night after night we made our difficult way up the steep paths of Monte Cassino. In doing so we were neither heroes nor fanatics. We were just soldiers who had to do as we were ordered.

My ordeal on this nightly climb into the 'heavens' now came to an end. I was ordered to return to staff headquarters to pick up a truck that had been located for me and to resume my role as a driver.

The truck they got for me was just crazy. It was an Italian truck made by SPA. It was ancient. It had to be started using a hand crank! The hand crank was located on the front of the vehicle under the radiator. It had to be cranked very carefully and could be very dangerous when it kicked back. This jalopy should have been tossed on the junk pile a long time ago, but the proud German Army snatched everything it could to devote to the



**H Art.1006 - Fiat SPA "DOVUNQUE" 35 (softcab)**

war effort. There were no longer any vehicles in reserve near the front. What good material did remain was carefully locked away in Army motor pool lots far from the front lines and in Germany.

Along with this crazy vehicle came a co-driver. He was a not-very-sophisticated fellow from the Swabian mountains, but he was brave and decent. He had a true spirit, was a good comrade, simple in his ways, but reliable. He was a brick who handled himself well in the difficult

situations we were soon to face. Unfortunately, our paths diverged without me getting his home address and now I have also lost track of his name.

What now began for us two and our crazy SPA truck was a kind of reluctant Odyssey, typical of the common soldier's life. And, typically, our efforts were devoted to saving our own skins in the aftermath of the events at Cassino. The front became very broad, as the army fell back and could not build any new defensive positions that would hold for any length of time.

However, Herr General Feldmarschall Kesselring, the faithful servant of his Führer, naturally saw the matter otherwise. He continued to strategize and probably really



believed that he could still make something out of the situation. If no longer as the victor, then as an equal opponent who might be able to manage events so as to arrive at an honorable peace if nothing else.

For the moment we had to continue to fight in order to get into a position of negotiation. The commander in chief saw himself in a different light than his soldiers who had to unwaveringly do their duty without asking dumb questions and do so without griping. It is still an unanswered question for me as to why the commanders continued on even when it was clear that the war could not be won. This madness cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

It was truly brain-damaged military types that allowed themselves to be led by these irrational ideas that had nothing to do with reality any longer. They had no human relationship with their soldiers. These military men who became officers to the honor of the Fatherland did not let themselves feel too much for the common soldier. It was the same in the First World War. The strange thing is that in the army of the post-war republic, in the Bundeswehr as the new army was called, these men, as generals now, carried on their service as first class military men and no one said a word to stop them. They welcomed the rebuilding of the new, but now democratic, Wehrmacht. Song rang out high from the brave, patriotic German officers who still served their Fatherland even through the most precarious and hopeless situations. And if we had to capitulate then we would do so smartly and in the best order as befitting officers to officers.

Later in the 1950's there was held the so called "Traditions Event" in Hanover for the German Afrika Korps. I could not understand why a man like Kesselring was so courted and honored. At this reunion the 'Old Comrades' met and honored the man that they had very little to thank for. But it was not only them, but also the invitees from the English army who joined in the jubilation for this man who they still entitled, "Feldmarschall." A Feldmarschall by Hitler's good grace yet! They honored him as though Hitler never existed and as though Kesselring were a fully blameless German general who had not been investigated by the Allies in 1945 – or perhaps because of it. The Old Comrades had their Marschall at the reunion and they were among their own kind. The German spirit celebrated its typical German triumph.



*General Albert Kesselring,  
1940*

At that time I couldn't understand it. I went to the reunion in the hopes of perhaps running into another old buddy and to be able to congratulate ourselves on getting out of the schlamassel [mess] safe and sound. I didn't go there to honor a general and to attend

the Grand Military Tattoo in the evening as though nothing bad had happened in that shitty war. What I saw in Hanover made me want to throw up.

This occurred only a few years after the end of the war in conjunction with the English Desert Rats and everyone seemed proud of their memories of the chivalrous war in Africa. The war seemed to be just something that happened. There was no talk of war crimes and atrocities, even by the English.

Animosity was passé, we were friends now, bound in a struggle against the true evil in the world, Communism, which was far worse than Naziism. That was my first and last association with the yearly reunion of the Afrika Korps. The participants included not only the English, but also the Bundeswehr and the ex-generals of the Wehrmacht that were now once again new generals.



*Fresh, spirited American troops, flushed with victory, are bringing in thousands of hungry, ragged, battle-weary prisoners. (News Item)*

*Bill Mauldin*

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[To be continued...]

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