

BATTLEFIELD STUDY
ITALY

12 - 19 September 2011



Compiled by Richard Harvey and Scott Flaving

BATTLEFIELD STUDY ITALY

Report on Battlefield Study

The Duke of Wellington's Regiment Association Group
12 – 19 September 2011



By Scott Flaving & Richard Harvey
24 September 2011

MONTE CECE

WORLD WAR TWO

Ground.

The northern Apennines consists of a hilly, wooded region cut through by small streams and rivers, such as the Senio, with communications along the valleys linking small communities and towns. It is ideal defensive country, being almost impassable to tanks off the narrow roads and mule/bullock tracks that existed in 1944 (some of which have been upgraded to good roads since then, but still almost impassable to large trucks and buses...).

This was where the Germans constructed their Gothic Line fortifications, with depth positions on the Green and Winter Lines behind the main line.

Situation.

By September, 1944, the main Gothic Line had been breached and 1st British Division was fighting through the depth positions. On 24th September Palazzuolo was liberated by the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, with the feature of Monte Ceco (759 metres) a few kilometres to the North, barring forward movement along Arrow Route through Mercatale to the West of the German-held hill.

On 8th October, 'A' Company of the Kings Own Shropshire Light Infantry moved from the area of Mercatale to take the hill, but was repulsed. Later in the day 'A' and 'C' Companies of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, supported by 'B' Company then assaulted the hill. During the attack four or five German Spandau gun teams were destroyed by Pte Richard Burton, who was later awarded the Victoria Cross for this action and also being instrumental in breaking up the German counter-attack with his Bren gun on the 9th October.

The 'Dukes' were relieved by The Loyals on the 9th and moved back to Borgo San Lorenzo, into reserve.

Study Tour Itinerary: Day Four.

Stand Nine, Monte Cegno. During the journey from Asiago to the second itinerary at Palazzuolo sul Senio a halt was made at Monte Cegno, which was the scene of a desperate battle to maintain a hold on the Asiago Plateau by the Italians in June 1916. Between 1916 and 1918 the Sardinian Grenadier Regiment, supported by the 1st Engineer Regiment, had established a remarkable defensive position on the western edge of the plateau, dominating the Assa Valley from a high vantage point hewn out of the rocks. A series of tunnels had also been cut for Command Posts, gun positions, cover from artillery fire and supply lines. As we scrambled along the track carved from the mountainside it was evident that living and fighting in this area would have been extremely arduous. The re-supply of food, water, ammunition and other supplies would have been extremely difficult, even with mules. The thought of lugging ammunition boxes to the top was enough, without actually having to lift them!

Day Five.

A planned rest day had been unexpectedly turned into a civic reception and an early start was made to get to the Pallazuolo Vecchio in Florence for a presentation by the City Council. This was to honour their British Allies. For some members of the group this was followed by an interesting guided tour of their spectacular museum, by one of the council workers, who had been the interpreter for the speeches of welcome and solidarity between the Region of Florence and the British representatives of 1st British Division that had liberated the area in 1944. A quick lunch was followed by a hurried spot of sightseeing before a route march back to the coach to return to Palazzuolo and a welcome ice cream.

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944

Day Six.

A later start to the day gave time for a meander around Palazzuolo, before the opening of an exhibition to commemorate the liberation of the town. Romano Rossi, the local historian and the author of some of the books dealing with the war was present, being instrumental in setting up the various memorials to the liberation. In the afternoon, we had a presentation in the hotel from General Sir Evelyn Webb-Carter on the Battle. The 66th Airmobile Regiment had volunteered six offroad military vehicles to take us to 300 metres short of the summit of Monte Cece. Tom Moore, 90 years old, was amongst the first of us to scramble to the top to take part in the ceremony, along with the local Alpini Regiment veterans and the town council representatives – with the usual speeches. In the evening we retired to the hotel for a group ‘concert party’, hosted by our bugler, David Peckover. This also acted as a dress rehearsal for an anticipated singing competition, against the Alpini veterans, on the following day.

Day Seven.

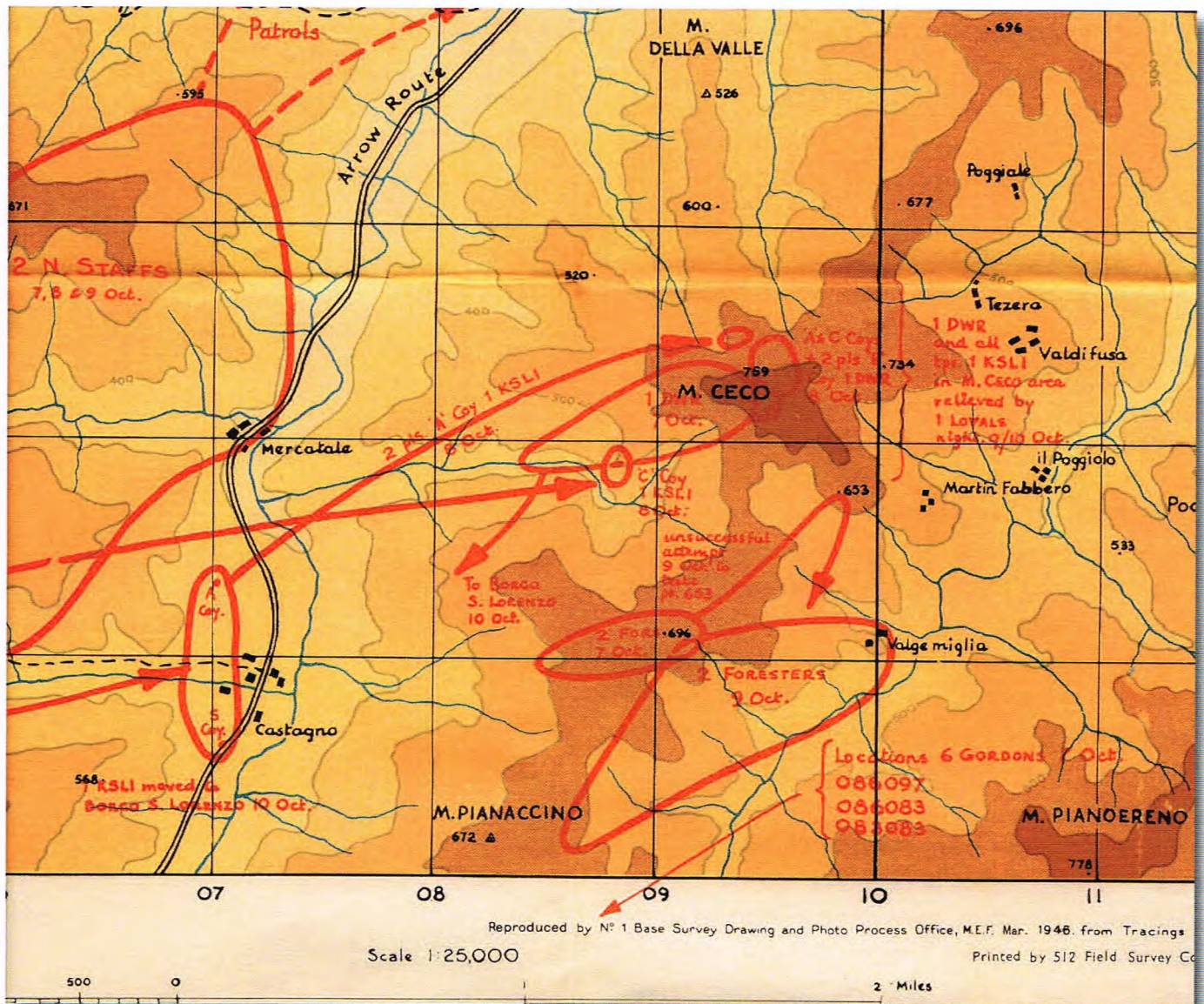
A parade was held in the town square in the morning, with the 66th Airmobile Regiment and our serving soldiers in full uniform, which was also attended by the British Military Attaché from the Embassy in Rome. Wreaths were laid by both the Italian and British contingents at the town’s Liberation Memorial, with the usual speeches interpreted from and to English and Italian. Following the parade the group was invited to a meal in a large marquee in the town centre. Afterwards presentations were made by the town to their British guests and speeches made, followed by the singing competition between the Alpini veterans and the group. In previous years the English guests, being small parties with few common songs, had been

overwhelmed. This time we had used song sheets the night before and could wheel out our secret weapon, David Peckover, who blew away the opposition when breaking into an Italian operatic aria, which the Italians immediately recognised and were suitably impressed with. After this opening barrage the ‘Dukes’ choir took heart and this time we overwhelmed the opposition.

Day Eight.

We partook of a very early breakfast, before boarding the coach to get to the airport to return home.

WORLD WAR TWO



Map showing scale of heavy fighting for Monte Cece, October 1944

Monte Cece, known as Monte Ceco in 1944, was the scene of a German rearguard action on the edge of the Gothic Line. Although the line was shortly afterwards broken, further advances were bogged down in the dreadful winter conditions. General Alexander had to call a halt to the crossing of the Po Valley in November, to rest his Armies. The British First Division, with the 1st Battalion, was sent to Palestine in early 1945.

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944

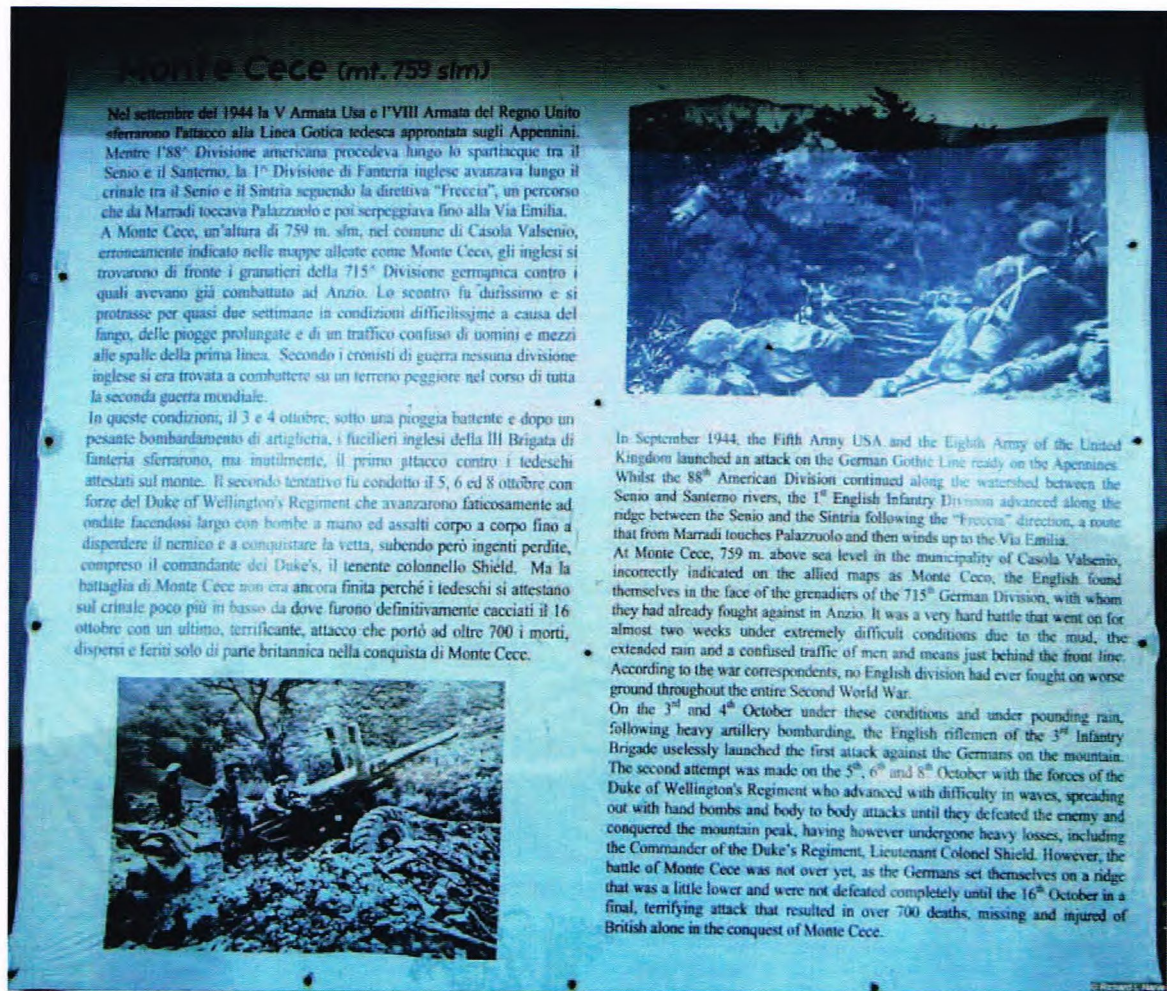


Lynne Burns checking the climb to the summit of Monte Cece, 2011



Tour Group on Monte Cece, with Italian 66th Airmobile Regiment

WORLD WAR TWO



Monte Cece (mt. 759 slm)

Nel settembre del 1944 la V Armata Usa e l'VIII Armata del Regno Unito sferrarono l'attacco alla Linea Gotica tedesca approntata sugli Appennini. Mentre l'88^a Divisione americana procedeva lungo lo spartiacque tra il Senio e il Santerno, la 1^a Divisione di Fanteria inglese avanzava lungo il crinale tra il Senio e il Sintria seguendo la direttiva "Freccia", un percorso che da Marradi toccava Palazzuolo e poi serpeggiava fino alla Via Emilia. A Monte Cece, un'altura di 759 m. slm, nel comune di Casola Valsenio, erroneamente indicato nelle mappe alleate come Monte Ceco, gli inglesi si trovarono di fronte i granatieri della 715^a Divisione germanica contro i quali avevano già combattuto ad Anzio. Lo scontro fu durissimo e si protrasse per quasi due settimane in condizioni difficilissime a causa del fango, delle piogge prolungate e di un traffico confuso di uomini e mezzi alle spalle della prima linea. Secondo i cronisti di guerra nessuna divisione inglese si era trovata a combattere su un terreno peggiore nel corso di tutta la seconda guerra mondiale.

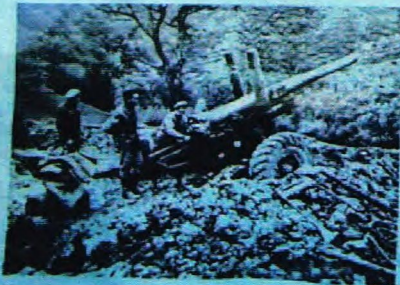
In queste condizioni, il 3 e 4 ottobre, sotto una pioggia battente e dopo un pesante bombardamento di artiglieria, i fucilieri inglesi della III Brigata di fanteria sferrarono, ma inutilmente, il primo attacco contro i tedeschi attestati sul monte. Il secondo tentativo fu condotto il 5, 6 ed 8 ottobre con forze del Duke of Wellington's Regiment che avanzarono faticosamente ad ondate facendosi largo con bombe a mano ed assalti corpo a corpo fino a disperdere il nemico e a conquistare la vetta, subendo però ingenti perdite, compreso il comandante del Duke's, il tenente colonnello Shield. Ma la battaglia di Monte Cece non era ancora finita perché i tedeschi si attestano sul crinale poco più in basso da dove furono definitivamente cacciati il 16 ottobre con un ultimo, terrificante, attacco che portò ad oltre 700 i morti, dispersi e feriti solo di parte britannica nella conquista di Monte Cece.



In September 1944, the Fifth Army USA and the Eighth Army of the United Kingdom launched an attack on the German Gothic Line ready on the Apennines. Whilst the 88th American Division continued along the watershed between the Senio and Santerno rivers, the 1st English Infantry Division advanced along the ridge between the Senio and the Sintria following the "Freccia" direction, a route that from Marradi touches Palazzuolo and then winds up to the Via Emilia.

At Monte Cece, 759 m. above sea level in the municipality of Casola Valsenio, incorrectly indicated on the allied maps as Monte Ceco, the English found themselves in the face of the grenadiers of the 715th German Division, with whom they had already fought against in Anzio. It was a very hard battle that went on for almost two weeks under extremely difficult conditions due to the mud, the extended rain and a confused traffic of men and means just behind the front line. According to the war correspondents, no English division had ever fought on worse ground throughout the entire Second World War.

On the 3rd and 4th October under these conditions and under pounding rain, following heavy artillery bombarding, the English riflemen of the 3rd Infantry Brigade uselessly launched the first attack against the Germans on the mountain. The second attempt was made on the 5th, 6th and 8th October with the forces of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment who advanced with difficulty in waves, spreading out with hand bombs and body to body attacks until they defeated the enemy and conquered the mountain peak, having however undergone heavy losses, including the Commander of the Duke's Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Shield. However, the battle of Monte Cece was not over yet, as the Germans set themselves on a ridge that was a little lower and were not defeated completely until the 16th October in a final, terrifying attack that resulted in over 700 deaths, missing and injured of British alone in the conquest of Monte Cece.



Information board on Monte Cece



Terrain surrounding Monte Cece

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944



View over typical Gothic Line terrain



Final section of assault on Monte Cece

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Dedication Plaque to 1 DWR on Monte Cece Summit



'Dukes' Flag flying on Monte Cece

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944



Photo call for 'Dukes' flag

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Alpini veterans and local town banners



Laying of wreaths to the fallen

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944



British and Italian wreaths

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944



Parade forming up



Town officials forming up

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Italian banners and association flags on parade



Duke of Wellingtons Association and 3rd Battalion Yorkshire Regiment (Duke of Wellington's) representatives on parade

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944



Major Shiel, General Sir Evelyn and Lynn Burns preparing to lay wreaths at the town Memorial



Military Attache from British Embassy in Rome in Direct Support

WORLD WAR TWO



Raising of Union Flag



Duke of Wellingtons Association and 3rd Battalion Yorkshire Regiment (Duke of Wellington's) representatives on parade

MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944



Palazuolo sul Senio Liberation Ceremony

Soldiers from the Italian 66th Airmobile Regiment kindly provided vehicles and drivers to take the tour group close to the summit of Monte Cece. The terrain proved challenging for both vehicles and drivers in peace time conditions, it can only be imagined how difficult resupply would have been in 1944.

The Regimental Commander led a contingent of soldiers, both male and female, to participate in the Liberation Ceremony in Palazuollo the following day.

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Laying of Italian and British wreaths at the Liberation Memorial



MONTE CECE, 1st BATTALION DWR – 1944

SUMMARY.

The tour covered a great deal of ground, a lot of history and was extremely interesting to all those who took part. It was a good example of the 'golden thread' linking the past with those soldiers of the Regiment, still serving today, who had been able to attend the tour.

Members of the group were able to meet older veterans, who had served in earlier conflicts, and learn of their experiences and also establish and cement friendships with the locals of Palazzuolo, who are so obviously proud of their history and who had gone to great lengths to make the group feel very welcome.

It is hoped that these Battlefield Studies may be able to continue, in order to foster and maintain special relationships with the local populace in the many places that the Regiment has fought for their liberation.

NOTES

