

'Io Non Dimenticherò Mai l'Italia': I Will Never Forget Italy

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Hearing about my grandfather's World War II experience 70 years later



Growing up I never asked about my grandfather's war past. I knew he was a veteran and I can remember seeing scars on his back and one of his knees just didn't look right. But I never asked and I regret never trying.

My grandfather, Lieutenant R. A. Cawsey, was only 21 when he arrived to fight in Italy and left due to intensive injuries to his entire body when he was just 22.

In May of last year, I went on a trip to Italy to see where my grandfather fought during World War II, but unknowingly revealed a memorial dedicated to him and the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment. It was around this time I finally heard his story reading his war journal.

His War, the Beginning

"On May 10th, 1944, I was appointed "C" Squadron Harbour Master before the crossing of the Gari River," he writes. "The Squadron's original plan was to let the "A" Squadron approach the Gari River and cross at dawn. My troop was to follow them across then break off to surprise the Germans at 11 o'clock at night.

Just after 3 a.m., my major, Don Taylor, informed me that my Squadron was to be the first to cross the bridge. In the morning I was to follow battle and join up with the 3/8 Punjabis, only to find out many of their boats were sunk and that their major, Sujohn Singh, had been killed. Moments later they received a radio call that the bridge was still being built and that they had to wait."

A Quick History of the Gari River

The Gari River flows in the Italian province of Frosinone near the city of Cassino. It is a wide, deep river that the Americans attempted to cross before the Canadians and ended up being massacred by the Germans.

Due to the depth and width of the river, the only way to cross was by bridge or boat. The Canadians managed to build a bridge using a tank to lift a makeshift bridge on top of a carrier tank, which drove into the river creating "A bridge too soon- for the Germans, that is."

Reasons for Enlisting

"May I express to you my deepest sympathy on the report that your son is missing in operations."

His brother, my great uncle, was nicknamed Buzz. He was a fighter pilot. He was shot down by Germans and was never found.

Right away my grandfather enlisted to fight the Germans. I personally believe he wanted revenge for losing his only brother.

His War, the Crossing

"At 5 a.m., May 12th, 1944, word was received that the bridge was ready and my artillery officer called for smoke to be laid down on the north side of the river. I drove my tank in a path that was marked to avoid landmines and drove through the heavy smog and smoke to reach the bridge.

One-hundred yards before the bridge, the ground became muddy. This caused every tank but mine and one other to become stuck. Instructed by my Commander, my co-driver, Price, and myself drove across the bridge under heavy artillery, machine gun fire and mortar fire.

Just two tanks made it across before the bridge was destroyed. It was several hours before backup could reach the two tanks.

We had the German Army all to ourselves. As soon as we crossed the bridge, we saw bodies of the Americans who had tried twice to cross the river during the first battle for Cassino."

May 2012, 60 years after the Italian Campaign, my family finally revisited my grandfather's greatest battle.



Reporter Hannah Cawsey helps reveal a memorial dedicated in memory of her grandfather, Honorable Mister Justice R.A. Cawsey.

Photo courtesy of Hannah Cawsey

On a warm spring evening, less than a kilometre away from the crossing site, the Cawsey family revealed the memorial dedicated in the memory of the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment and to my grandfather, Robert Allan Cawsey.

I was 19 years old and had been curious of my grandfather's war story since I can remember.

I stood on a dirt road outside Cassino, Italy, looking up at this giant chunk of marble with my grandfather's name on it. My uncle just finished reading a few pages from my grandfather's war journal.

I looked around the memorial, finally hearing the Gari River Crossing story and gazed out on the field that, 60 years prior, had been filled with death, sorrow and war.

Right after the revealing, my uncle handed me a German bullet shell that was found while the memorial was being built. It was heavier than I thought, covered in dirt but still the golden body was visible and the texture was rough and jarring.

All I could do was stand there, holding this empty shell wondering if a man died or was injured because of it. If the caked-on dirt had blood of a victim of war or if the shooter of the bullet missed and it just happened to land in the dirt, I prayed the latter.

I remember feeling overpowered by emotions, just standing there knowing more about my grandfather, knowing that he killed to save lives that hadn't been created yet, knowing that he sat in his tank with his shooter in front of the German army and survived with foreign blood on his hands that he could never wash off.

The night after the revealing of the memorial, my family was brought to the exact location of the crossing. The river, as depicted in the journal, was deep and the water was flowing fast. I remember thinking, "how stupid were the Americans to try to swim across?"

Thinking that and noticing ants were crawling all over my legs. I was standing where he stood, probably scared and homesick, and all I could think about was stupid Americans and ants.



Clint Cawsey, uncle of Hannah Cawsey, holds up a German bullet found during foundation of the memorial.

Photo courtesy of Hannah Cawsey

I have stood in Nazi German trenches, walked along graves of our fallen youth and had complete strangers walk up to me just to thank me for being Canadian. All eye opening experiences, yet nothing could compare to the emotions I was feeling then.

I wanted to kick myself for not telling my grandfather how much I loved him when he was still alive, I hated the fact I never knew what he did in the Second World War until now. I will never get the chance to thank him or ask him what his brother was like.

In the eyes of some, my grandfather might be seen as a murderer of war, but I see him as a hero, a man who stood against the odds and made Canada proud. Because of his actions and the actions of thousands of other brave men, I will never have to face a war and I can live in peace because of their sacrifices.

I will never forget him or his brother and to this day, every November 11th I visit Buzz's makeshift grave on Memorial Drive and I spend my moment in silence thanking the man who will never know how much I respect and love him.

Lest We Forget.