

## Exercise EAGLE SPRINGBOK 08 Death and Glory on the Gothic Line Battelfield Tour

by Maj Richard Orvis

*"We learn from history, that we learn nothing from history." (Sir Basil Liddell-Hart)*

*"History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce." (Karl Marx)*

A 'battlefield tour' is the opportunity for serving officers and soldiers to study the successes and mistakes of historic conflicts in an attempt to educate the commanders of today and challenge the cynical views of commentators like Liddell-Hart and Marx. Often facilitated by a military historian, the battlefield tour melds historic knowledge and contemporary experience in order to promote discussion, debate and ultimately learning.

Being located so close to Firenze and the Pisa-Rimini line, the UK Contingent of NRDC ITA were offered the perfect opportunity to study one of the lesser known and lesser heralded campaigns of World War II: often referred to as 'The Battle for the Apennines' by Field Marshal Albert Kesselring or 'Alexander's Summer Offensive' by Winston Churchill.

To an Italian headquarters it may seem ridiculous that the Allied and German World War II campaigns in Italy, fought so brutally through 1943-1945, should be so little known. It is a fact that the Allied focus had long since been on what was to become Operation OVERLORD, and thus considered the Italian Campaign a second and lesser front. The British VIII Army and US V Army were both stripped of much of their combat power during summer 1944 in order to support OVERLORD. Allied histories often favour the successes of the D-Day landings and consider the Italian campaign a sideshow. Hitler too was having to fight a war on at least three fronts and chose to shift the balance of combat power away from the Italian front. Fortunately for the Germans, Field Marshal Kesselring proved a formidable commander of notable tactical and operational acumen.

*"The battle of Rimini was one of the hardest battles of VIII Army. The fighting was comparable to El Alamein, Mareth and the Gustav Line (Cassino)." (General Sir Oliver Leese, Commander British VIII Army until Sep 1944)*





Our studies were to focus on Field Marshal Kesselring's final defensive line stretching east-west between Pisa and Rimini and General Alexander's efforts to breach the so called 'Gothic Line: a mass of fortified defensive positions running 320 km from Pesaro on the Adriatic to Massa Carrara on the Tyrrhenian Sea; thick with Panther gun turrets, steel shelters, rock tunnels and deep minefields. From the left bank of the River Foglia it boasted 2,376 machine-gun posts, 479 antitank guns, mortars and assault guns positions in addition to hundreds of kilometres of wire and antitank ditches. Kesselring's tactical aims were to engage in a series of defensive actions, withdrawing to pre-prepared positions, and trade time for space in a classic delay action. His operational objective was ultimately to deny the Allies penetration of the Gothic Line until the winter snows of 1944, whereupon conditions would significantly favour the defender and his shorter logistic tail, thus lessening the likelihood of major Allied offensives. Achieving this would buy the Germans some months to consolidate, rest and above all reconstitute; thereby reducing pressure on Berlin.

Twelve officers and SNCOs from the UK contingent headed south to Firenze for three days to study

and debate the Gothic Line actions; watched over and tutored by the author, renowned military historian and Gothic Line specialist James Holland. The group ranged in rank from Major-General to Sergeant and had representation from the Royal Marines, the Royal Air Force and across the length and breadth of the Army. There were those who had not previously participated on a battlefield tour and some old hands; all of whom were encouraged to bring their experience and opinion to the debating table.



James Holland and LTC Tim Harbinson, Commanding Officer of the UK Contingent, had produced a programme of stands that allowed us to visit the exact ground over which many of the tactical skirmishes were fought, to gain a sense of scale and to draw in the atmosphere of what it might have been like to be there 64 years earlier.

At each stand James would set the strategic context and orientate the group to the ground. Selected members of the contingent would then present findings from their own research into specified aspects of the campaign. Under consideration were topics as varied as the use of armour in close country, the utility of indirect fire in the assault and the effects of

partisans in war.

As we stood atop the Peabody's Point, balanced precariously on a rocky ridgeline and looked sharply down the steep valley sides from a German machine gun position, the reality of these battles struck home. What better place to discuss the challenges of morale, motivation and junior leadership than a spot where German defenders had been isolated, cold wet and hungry for many weeks: a spot up to which the Allies would have to assault repeatedly through a fierce hail of deadly bullets and mortar bombs? The ability to relate the ground to the historical record of events added immeasurable benefit to the experience.

It became evident that the Italy campaign was fought between hundreds of thousands of soldiers, capable of the full gamut of virtues and sin. We examined the effect of pride and prejudice on the operational decision making of 'Generals' and marvelled at the selfless sacrifice of countless private soldier's tactical actions. We studied tales of altruism and heroism, of brutality, self-interest and hypocrisy. Time and again, it became apparent that at critical moments in this campaign, the success of whole formations would sometimes come down to the actions of 'small bands of determined men.'

The human cost of the Italian front came in to sharp focus at our visits to the Allied cemetery in Castiglione Dei Pepoli and the German cemetery ironically so close at the Futa Pass. As we paid our respects to those who

had fallen, one began to reflect on the motivations of the ordinary soldier, whose acts of bravery had paid the ultimate sacrifice. What had driven them to bear arms? Fear? For King and country? The belief in an ideology? Defence of the Realm? Or was it simply their brothers in arms who now they lay beside in row after row of graves?

Three days of study and debate distilled into this question, arguably at the very heart of every nation's armed forces: what makes a soldier fight? For the soldiers and officers of the UK Contingent, the ongoing search for the answer proved to be an interesting, rewarding and humbling experience.

