

**AN ACCOUNT OF
THE BATTLE FOR CASSINO
MAY, 1944**

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(REPRINTED FROM THE ROYAL ENGINEERS JOURNAL)**

PART I

THE INITIAL RECONNAISSANCE OF THE RIVER RAPIDO

BEFORE I describe the recce that we made of the River Rapido prior to the Battle of Cassino, I must explain briefly the tactical situation appertaining at that time. The Boche had maintained a strong winter defensive line right across Italy since December, 1943. This line was known as the "Gustave" line, and on the western side of the Apennines followed approximately the line of the rivers Rapido and Garigliano. The only suitable gateway to Rome was up the wide valley of the River Liri following the famous Route 6, but this valley was completely dominated by Cassino and the monastery above it. Cassino was the key to Rome and had to be taken before any progress could be made. The Boche knew this too. Any assault on Cassino itself necessitated an assault crossing of the little River Rapido, no more than 70-80 ft. wide, but deep and fast flowing.

The Americans first had a crack at Cassino in January, 1944, but were beaten back with fairly heavy losses. Next the New Zealanders under General Freyburg attacked on the 5th of March, having first pounded the town and monastery with waves of Fortress bombers - a very impressive sight which I watched from nearly twenty miles away. Still the Boche bobbed up from cellars and dug-outs and beat them back. It was therefore decided by General Alexander to mount a really big assault along the entire length of the Gustave Line, each assaulting division backed up with another infantry division and an armored division. The date chosen was the 12th May, which allowed five weeks from the time the decision was made to train the assaulting divisions and to build up stocks of ammunition for the guns.

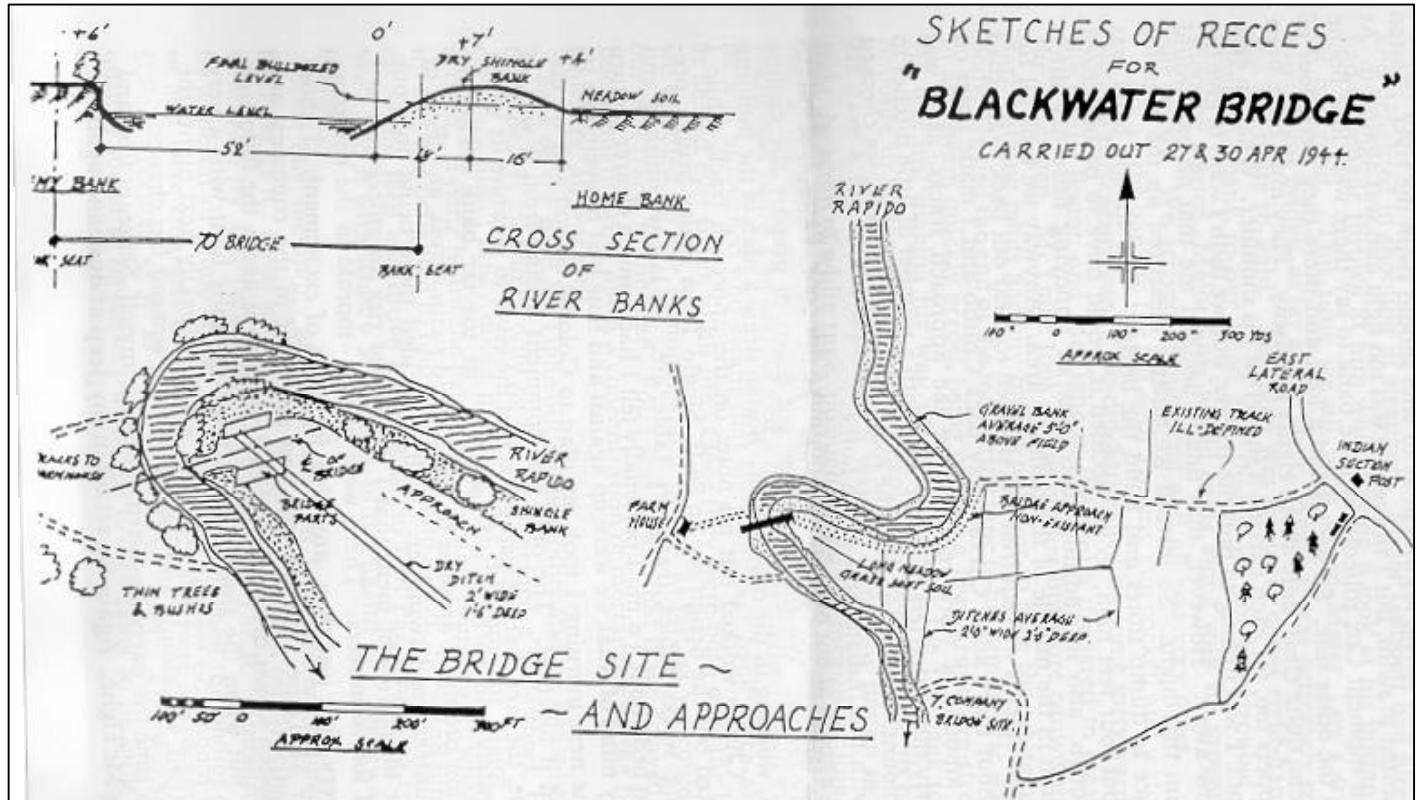
Briefly the assault on Cassino was planned as follows: the Polish Corps were to attack over the mountains on the right, and the 4th British Division on the left would cross the River Rapido and swing right-handed to link up with the Poles on Route 6, behind Cassino, thus completely surrounding it. Meanwhile, the Guards Brigade would contain the garrison from the front. It was hoped that when the garrison was completely surrounded it would surrender.

4th British Division was to assault the river on a narrow front with two brigades leading, the third brigade in reserve ready to go through, swing right, and link up with the Poles. The two Field Companies, R.E. 7th Company on the left (commanded by Major Low), and 225th Company on the right (commanded by Major Gabbett), which were affiliated to the assaulting brigades, were each to build a Class 40 Bailey Bridge and two ferries in their brigade sectors. The third field company, the 59th Field Company, was to build a Class 9 Bailey bridge as a return route for traffic between the two Class 40 bridges, more or less in the center of the divisional front. This was the bridge that I was particularly interested in.

On the 26th April the C.R.E., Lieut.Colonel Nelson, sent for me and told me the plan. We studied air photographs and decided approximately the site for our Class 9 bridge, which was given the code name of "Blackwater" bridge. He told me to carry out a recce on the river line, decide the exact site for the bridge, and produce an outline plan by the morning of the 28th.

On returning to the company, I held a council of war and decided that Lieutenant Boston should build the bridge with his platoon, and that Lieutenant Chubb would improve the approach and exit with the remaining half of his

platoon. (The other half had been lent for work on the ferries, and Lieutenant Drummond's platoon was C.R.E.'s reserve, which I could not touch.) We accordingly decided to carry out a recce of the approach and bridge site the following night. At this time the company itself was back at Mignano, some ten or twelve miles south of Cassino on Route 6. The sappers were working at nights on the widening and improving of tracks from Route 6 to the River Rapido, which would eventually be needed as approaches to the bridges. It was, therefore, quite easy to fit in a recce of the river and to work out a plan:



On the evening of the 27th, Boston, Chubb, Sergeant Cox and I set off in my jeep at dusk. We had arranged to rendezvous at the Company H.Q. of the Indian Battalion, who were then holding the river. There we met Major Low, who was also doing a recce of his own Class 40 bridge site farther to our left. We were given the password and told the Indians where we were going, and that we intended to be back in about an hour. The river was no-man's-land, but was freely patrolled by both British and Boche alike.

From there, we made our way in single file down the approach track to the river. It was rather light with a half moon, very quiet and extremely eerie. The river had a flood bank of shingle which had at some time been dredged out of it. There was still plenty of American equipment lying about and some very unpleasant smells. However, we made our way slowly, keeping below the bank, towards our bend, stopping often to listen. Having reached the bend, Sergeant Cox lay on the bank with-his-Tommy-gun cocked as "lookout man" (we all carried Tommy guns). Meanwhile Boston, Chubb and I had a long argument as to who should swim the river. Boston wanted to swim, but I thought it was too light and was against it. At this moment Cox rolled down the bank to say there were four Boche on the other side. So we all had a look and there they were, four of them, quite clear, only about eighty feet away. They must have been sappers too, for each carried a shovel on his shoulder. What an easy shot! I was itching to pull the trigger, but we didn't want to give the show away. However, that finally decided me that no one would swim that night. So instead we quietly measured up the area for space to dump stores and build the bridge. The shingle bank was about four feet high, so we decided it would have to be bulldozed through. Also, in addition, there was an annoying little dry ditch plumb in the middle of the building area. Anyway, we took all the measurements we required and decided to clear out back

to the road without more ado. On our way back, Chubb and I made notes on the amount of work required on the approach tracks, as it was nearly three-quarters of a mile long with a number of little ditches to surmount. Having reached the road, somewhat relieved, we checked in with the Indians and drove home.

We got in about one o'clock and found our cook, Parry, had hot tea ready for us. We then all three got down to prepare the outline plan, working in the office truck. Boston drew a plan of the building area, Chubb worked out his notes on the approach track, while I worked out the design for an 80-ft. Single Truss Bailey bridge, preparing works tables, transport table, etc. At last we finished and got to bed about 3 a.m. I personally felt I had a much clearer picture in my mind of what we were up against and how best to overcome it.

The next morning, I took my plan to Colonel Nelson and we discussed it together. The only real comment arising from it was, of course, the fact that we must get across the river to measure its width accurately and to have a "look-see" at the far bank. The big question promptly arose as to who should swim across, an officer or a volunteer good swimmer. Well, I decided there being only one officer to sixty-eight men, that I would not risk an officer and so I called for volunteers. There were plenty--morale in the company was very high just then, anything for a bit of excitement. I chose Driver McTighe. He was the best swimmer in the company and was Boston's own driver. I decided we'd do it again the following night, but when the time came it was frightfully light with a very bright moon. So we put it off for a day. Luckily next night, the 30th April, was cloudy and just right, for it was our last chance.

This time the party consisted of Boston, myself; Sergeant Cox and Driver McTighe. Again we set off in my Jeep at dusk, and again we met Major Low, who was working on the approach to his bridge. We called on the Indians and warned them of our movements - this was very necessary, as they were extremely light on the trigger and delighted in shooting at strangers. Major Gabbett had already had a grenade thrown at him while having a look at his bridge site on our right. This time we all went down Major Low's track, towards his bridge, as far as the river. Again it was extremely eerie, but not quite so light. The plan was for us to crawl right-handed along the bank to our bend, and that if we got into trouble and shooting started, Major Low would come along with his sappers to our rescue. We arrived at our bend and all was very quiet.

I lay on the bank to the left with Tommy gun cocked and watched intently the enemy bank. So did Sergeant Cox some forty yards to the right. Boston and McTighe in the center prepared to measure the water gap. McTighe took off his clothes but wore canvas shoes, dark bathing pants and my brown pullover to hide the white of his body. He tied the end of the measuring tape to his tummy. He waded in and swam quickly across, being carried a few yards down-stream. He was just making his way up-stream under the far bank to get opposite to Boston when two loud explosions went off over his head. He gave a tug on the tape which was the signal for Boston to pull tight the scrap of white tape, through which the measuring line had run, at the water's edge. Either McTighe had set off a trip-wire, or a Boche had heard him and lobbed a couple of grenades. At all events, he was untouched, and swam that sixty-odd feet back twice as fast as he had ever swum in his life. Once they were both over the bank, we bundled up our belongings and beat it as fast as we could, up our own track to the road. For I was afraid that if we delayed, the Boche might bring down a concentration of mortar fire on the bank. However, all was well.

Back on the road McTighe put on his clothes and we had a look at the tape. It measured only 52 ft. This seemed a little short, but I certainly didn't fancy doing it again. At this moment Major Low arrived. Having heard the explosions, he came round to see what was up and was delighted to find us all safe and sound. So we all jumped on to the jeep and drove home again to find Parry had tea ready. We laced it with whisky and drank to the health of "Blackwater" bridge.

Next day, inevitably of course, the C.R.E. would not believe our figure of 52 ft. I was sure it was all right so I asked our Intelligence Officer to try and persuade the Divisional "Tac R" Squadron to fly a special air photo recce. This he did and when the photos came in and were enlarged, they showed 55 ft. We were saved and the C.R.E. accepted 55 ft. as the width of the water. This was subsequently found to be correct when the bridge came to be built later on.

The next thing to do was to prepare the company's final plan for the operation. Boston and I went ahead together on this. The bridge was to be 70 ft., of Single Truss construction, but Boston devised an unorthodox method of building in order to cut down to the very barest minimum work on the enemy bank. And so began a tussle. I took Boston's side being convinced by the calculations that it would work. But the C.R.E. was adamantly opposed to any divergence from the strictly orthodox method of launching a Bailey Bridge which entailed the removal of a "skeleton nose" on the far bank. Whereas Boston's method employed a counter-weight to cut out any dismantling on the far bank. Well, to cut a long story short, we won our case and Colonel Nelson agreed subject to the actual rehearsals proving successful. As a hard and fast rule Bailey bridges should never be built by unorthodox methods unless there is plenty of time to rehearse, because in training the sappers are taught the orthodox method till they can do it in their sleep.

And so our plan, in all its multiplicity of detail, was accepted and the bridging team assembled. This consisted of Boston with his platoon, Chubb with half his platoon, Lieutenant Williams with the bridging lorries, twenty Northumberland Fusiliers to help unload, and lastly a D7 bulldozer. A total of some seventy-odd men and thirty-two vehicles. The team then went down south to the village of Pietro Variano on the River Volturro, where we set up camp in a pleasant olive grove. I went with them to direct and assist in the training programme. We became, in the ten days of intensive rehearsal, a very happy and confident team. There wasn't a man who doubted for an instant that our Blackwater bridge must succeed.

PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM THE ARMY COMMANDER

Great events lie ahead of us. All round Hitler's Germany, the Allies are closing in: on the East, the victorious Russians drive on; in the West, the British and American Armies are massed to invade.

Now in the South, the Eighth and Fifth Armies are about to strike.

Side by side with our French and American Allies, we will break through the enemy's winter line and start our great advance northwards. Our plan is worked out in every detail-we attack in great strength, with large numbers of tanks and guns, supported by a powerful American Air Force and our own Desert Air Force.

The peoples of the United Nations will be watching the Eighth Army. Let us live up to our great, traditions and give them news of fresh achievements-great news such as they expect from this Army.

We welcome gladly to our ranks those Divisions whose first fight this is with the Eighth Army. We send a special message-to our Polish Corps, now battling beside us to regain its beloved country.

I say to you all-Into action, with the light of battle in your eyes. Let every man do his duty throughout the fight and the Day is ours.

Good Luck and God Speed to each one of you,

*OLIVER LEESE, Lieut -General.
ITALY, May, 1944*

THE OPENING PHASE OF THE ASSAULT CROSSING OF THE RAPIDO

The long awaited assault on Cassino and the German "Gustave Line" was to be on 12th May, 1944. The operation was to be known by the code name "Honker"-the cry of homing wild geese. But meanwhile the bridging team for "Blackwater" bridge had been working hard on the River Volturno at Pietro Variano. In all, the bridge had been built seven times under progressively difficult conditions and the training had gone remarkably well. We had good reason to be optimistic.

On 10th May we had a free day that we gave over to washing clothes, letter-writing and chores. It was a lovely day, I remember writing home so well. But the following day was devoted to briefing every member of the team, sappers, fusiliers and drivers all included. This was done with the help of three visual aids. The first was a most excellent model of the River, including our bend and the hinterland behind it, built up by Lieutenant Notley almost entirely from air photos. In addition we had sufficient vertical air photographs for every man to study. And thirdly, perhaps the most useful of all, we had a set of low-angle oblique air photographs of the river line looking toward the Boche.

That night, the team moved to a "lying up" area just behind Trocchio, about a mile from the river. The whole area was surrounded by guns and was in fact a part of the "Divisional Gun Area." When I remarked upon this to some gunners while doing a recce for the team they said, "Oh, yes, we usually get plastered about 10 p.m." just when the team was due to arrive. Time went on and no sign of them. I was getting very anxious. At last they arrived about an hour late to meet myself in a furious temper ordering them to dig in immediately. However luck was with us and no shells came in. I drove back to Company H.Q. at Mignano in the early hours of the morning, tired but relieved.

Next day I came up with the C.R.E. in the afternoon as he wanted to wish the sappers luck. We were sitting on the ground with perhaps twenty-five sappers sitting around, when suddenly shells started arriving. They came roaring in all over the area. All we could do was to lie flat, pressed to the earth, and pray to the Lord, while the ground shook and heaved all round. It was absolutely frightful, I literally bit the dust trying to make myself smaller. In two minutes it was all over. We'd had eighty shells-ten rounds of gunfire from two batteries. And the incredible thing was that not a soul was hurt, except Sapper Hughes who was sitting on the latrine and stopped a small fragment of shrapnel, while kit, motor-cycles and the one or two trucks we had with us were riddled. So we took it as a good omen and said our luck was in.

"H" hour was at 10 p.m. on 12th May. Suddenly the heavens were rent open and every gun fired simultaneously. There were, they say, 900 guns firing in the barrage. The noise was quite indescribable. The flashes made it as light as day but infinitely more lurid, while nearer the river itself, one heard the continuous swish of shells passing overhead. The whole effect was to make one, individually, feel extraordinarily small.

Meanwhile the old Boche, cunning fellow that he always was, did not retreat under the barrage, but instead came forward to line the shingle bank of the river with machine guns. It was, originally, a still night with natural mist hanging over the river. But to add to the general confusion, the Boche thickened up this natural mist with smoke till it was an impenetrable fog some hundred yards or more wide.

Into this thickest of "pea soup" fog the infantry advanced on a wide front, carrying their boats in good order straight towards the river. "W" or water hour was three-quarters of an hour after. "H" hour. But once in the fog they were lost. Some went right, some went left, and nearly all went round in circles, coming back out of the fog into unfamiliar surroundings. Meanwhile the Boche, who could not see either, fired his Spandau machine-guns intermittently into the fog as well as mortaring spasmodically all along the river. All this fire was of course unobserved and therefore not very dangerous, but in the fog extremely frightening. A few of the boats

did get across. But their main intention on landing was to get inland and seize their objectives. Which they did all too easily, there being no Boche anywhere near. But they did not clear the enemy off the far bank, nor were we able to get anybody to do this vital though invidious task. I did not want to use sappers for this task as we hardly had enough for our engineer tasks as it was.

Half an hour after "W" hour, I set up my Bridge H.Q. at the top of the approach track and at the same time the old bulldozer trundled down the track. This seemed to enrage the Boche, who directed all his available fire in the direction of the sound. This brought the bulldozer to a standstill, wounding one driver, but not until he had got almost to the bank. Thereafter, every time he started up, a hail of bullets arrived. Next the Sappers arrived with the first of the lorries. But nothing could be done in that awful fog with bullets whizzing overhead. We simply must get some chaps across to deal with those "Spandaus."

At this juncture the C.R.E. arrived, and together we searched for some officers or warrant officers, but not one could we find; only dejected parties of infantry milling around with their boats. Meanwhile, however, Boston had swum across with a rope and secured both ends to trees and passed it through the bow fairlead of an assault boat, thus making a foolproof ferry. He then found an infantry officer who raised a platoon and promised to clear out the Boche. But they soon came back having got hopelessly lost in the fog.

All this time, of course, the bridging lorries had been arriving, strictly according to time-table, and were merely piling up at the top of the track. I stopped them eventually, but not until at least twenty out of the thirty-two had arrived. During this time Chubb was able to do a bit of improvement on the track, but even that was under difficulties, and several track material lorries were hit on the hill down to the river.

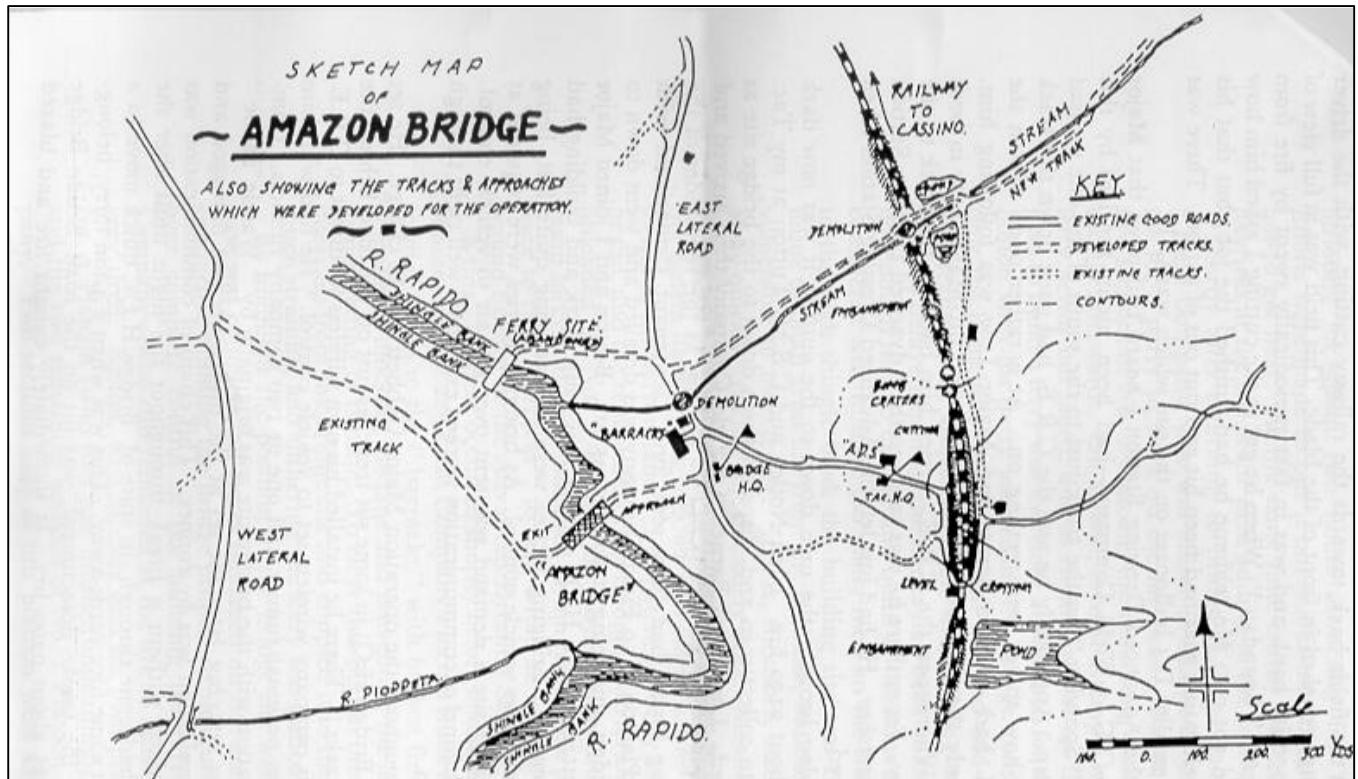
As the night wore on, this state of chaos increased steadily and to cut a long, exasperating story short, when dawn began to break absolutely nothing had been achieved. The Boche must have seen or sensed our concentration of vehicles at the top of the track, for suddenly he began shelling. Then followed half an hour of the worst, while we tried to turn the trucks round and get them out of it. Lieutenant Williams did magnificent work, finally being seriously wounded. Sergeant Cox was also badly wounded in this jam of struggling vehicles. At this time too, my White Scout car, which was my Bridge H.Q. carrying my wireless links to Company H.Q. and the C.R.E., received a bit of shrapnel the size of my fist through the radiator - much to the consternation of Company Sergeant Major Tutton inside.

Things looked pretty bad. It was full daylight now and the Boche had started putting over "Minenwerfers" in salvos of six. The river was clearly in view from the Monastery and so were we. I asked for the C.R.E. on the wireless and, when I'd explained the situation, asked for orders. Imagine my relief when he said get everybody back to the "Lying up area." I sent the Scout car off at once and passed the word round to all the men to return individually to our old field of yesterday. Finally Boston, Chubb and I walked slowly back together. Neither spoke a word, our tails could not have been lower.

THE FINAL PHASE OF THE CROSSING OF THE RAPIDO

In the original R.E. plan for operation "Honker," each field company was to build a bridge across the River Rapido on the night of 11th/12th May, immediately after the infantry had crossed in assault boats and secured a bridgehead. Unfortunately, this bridgehead was never secured in sufficient strength to allow any of the bridges to be commenced.

Thus, all attempts to bridge the River Rapido on the night of 11th/12th May having failed, the C.R.E. decided to make an "all-out" Divisional R.E. attempt to bridge the river on the night of 12th/13th, employing each company in turn with the intention of getting a bridge across at all costs, capable of carrying tanks. The site chosen was the original Site Of 225 Field Company's bridge "Amazon." The plan adopted was also 225 Field Company's own original plan. O.C. 225 Field Company - Major Gabbett - was therefore placed in charge of the operation. The companies were to relieve each other as each became exhausted in the order 225 Company, 7 Company and last, 59 Company. The bridge was to be an 80-ft.- orthodox - Double Single Bailey bridge, Class 40:



Work was commenced soon after 1700 hrs. by 225 Field Company on the near bank and near approach. 7 Field Company moved from their "lying up" area to the railway cutting, arriving about 1900 hrs. 59 Field Company moved up next to an area behind the railway cutting, arriving at about 2000 hrs. I went forward with Boston and Chubb to report to Major Gabbett at about 2030 hrs. On the way, I met Lieutenant Hobson of 7 Field Company, who was just taking his men down to the bridge site to relieve 225 Field Company, who had had a difficult time owing to enemy observation in the fading light. I also met Lieutenant Severn Of 225 Field Company on his way back from the bridge site. He told me that he had finished bulldozing and had got the rollers in position. We then went on to report to Major Gabbett at his Bridge H.Q. near the "barracks." It was decided that I should bring my platoons down to the railway cutting as each platoon Of 7 Field Company went out, so as to be as near as possible to the job, and at the same time to set up my Tac. H.Q. in the small building opposite the Advanced Dressing Station. On my way back, I met the commander of the platoon of 586 Field Company R.E., which was also to be available to finish off construction if necessary and to take over the bridge when complete. They were not in fact used. We then went back to bring up the company.

Going back up the lane, we saw the bulldozer grinding slowly across the fields, back towards the railway cutting, with the driver walking crouched in front of the blade. This field was in full view of the opposite bank and was in fact periodically swept by fire from an enemy "Spandau." When he got to the cutting I asked him

how he had got on. He told me he had finished the job, but that his blade elevating gear had been hit and put out of action. There was still a smaller D.4 bulldozer on the site which was O.K.

At the Advanced Dressing Station, I heard bad news that Major Low - O.C. 7 Field Company - had been hit in the legs by this same " Spandau " on the track just to the south of the one we had come up. Apparently he and the C.R.E. had gone down this track to see how things were getting on. At a rather open stretch, the C.R.E. had doubled across and Major Low was following him. Suddenly the "Spandau" opened up and hit Major Low in both legs. Whereupon the C.R.E. carried him back up the track to the railway. From there he was taken to the Advanced Dressing Station on a stretcher. He had just left the Advanced Dressing Station when I arrived.

Having brought the men down to the cutting, it was now dark and about 2130 hrs. I left Notley and C.S.M. Tutton at my Tac. H.Q. to collect men and dispatch them down to the bridge site as required. Lieutenant Barnes of 7 Field Company then arrived and asked for a platoon to assist in unloading, as the remainder of the bridging lorries had been sent for. - Lieutenant Drummond with No. 3 Platoon of 59 Field Company was detailed and went down to the bridge, this being at about 2145 hrs. Boston and I joined Major Gabbett at Bridge H.Q. It was now quite dark and building had commenced. Bridging lorries were also arriving quite fast, being dispatched by vehicle control. As bridging lorries were required at the bridge site, a demand was sent over the air to vehicle control. This channel of communication worked extremely well right through the job.

Throughout the operation Major Gabbett was in charge. He set up his Bridge H.Q. in some slit trenches just off the road behind the "Barracks." There he installed his own wireless set direct to C.R.E. and his company wireless set to vehicle control. He had with him his own personal runner and one or two company runners. Communication with the bridge site was originally by "Walkie Talkie" wireless sets, but later the set at the bridge became damaged and communication was by runner. This chain of communication was maintained without a break throughout the night until after the tanks had gone through, in spite of Bridge H.Q.'s. quick move to a culvert some fifty yards away. This was when a 3-ton lorry, belonging to the smoke detachment, was hit on the road beside Bridge H.Q. at about 0200 hrs. It immediately caught fire and blazed furiously for about two hours, attracting fire from the enemy. Efforts were made to put it out but failed effectively, as it was too hot to get near. At the same time enemy shelling set fire to some hayricks at the top of the field, adding to the conflagration.

Shortly after returning to Bridge H.Q. at 2200 hrs., Hobson of 7 Field Company, who was officer in charge of construction, asked me for a party to work on the far bank. Boston went down with two sections of No. 2 Platoon, the remaining two sections followed shortly afterwards. On arrival, several attempts were made to get a ferry across, but failed due to enemy snipers on the far bank. The plan to build a ferry was therefore abandoned for the time being, and Boston with his party assisted in the bridge construction. By this time the launching nose was nearly finished and the bridge proper was ready to be commenced on the building rollers. This was actually delayed until all the lorries had been unloaded. There were not enough men to unload and build at the same time, as it was not considered wise to have too many men on the site. Due, however, to the high shingle bank, the building site was comparatively immune to small arms fire from the far bank, but the lorries were very vulnerable to mortar fire. It was, therefore, essential to get them away quickly. All bar one got safely back. Meanwhile, the bridging lorries were arriving somewhat irregularly due to the traffic regulating system having broken down, and empty lorries were meeting full lorries in the narrow lanes. I dispatched Notley to sort it out, which he did, and the remainder of the bridging lorries all arrived and were unloaded by No. 3 Platoon by about midnight. When the last ramp lorry had been unloaded, Drummond took part of his platoon back to the "barracks" to rest, while he himself had a very small wound dressed at the Advanced Dressing Station.

A small incident occurred shortly before midnight, which is worthy of note. One of 225 Field Company's lorries stuck in the narrow lane leading down to the "barracks," with broken front wheel steering, completely blocking

the lane and preventing the last of the bridging lorries getting to the site. To clear this, Boston brought the D4 bulldozer up from the bridge site and coupled it to the front axle. After much straining and slithering, the lorry was pulled clear into a field.

By midnight the skeleton nose was complete, all stores unloaded on site, and all was ready to commence building the bridge proper. At this juncture Boston took over complete control of the building from Hobson of 7 Field Company, who still remained at the site to assist, in spite of being very tired. Boston, who already had his own platoon (No. 2) and No. 3 Platoon (who had just finished unloading), asked for Chubb and the two remaining sections of No. 1 Platoon of 59 Field Company. Only two sections of this platoon were available, the other two being away with infantry battalions. These two sections went down with Chubb to the bridge. Most Of 7 Field Company now left the site. I was at Bridge H.Q. at this time and reported probable time of completion as 0200 hrs. However, this was not to be. Enemy shelling and mortaring became rather more intense and inclined to be accurate. The enemy also developed a trick of firing Very Light flares behind the building site, which silhouetted the men against the white mist making an easy target for enemy snipers. I therefore called for counter battery fire, speaking direct to the C.R.E. on the wireless. In a very short while this came over in great strength (from 6th Army Group R.A., consisting of five Medium Regiments and two Field Regiments), but at the same time a number of rounds fell short, sounding terrifyingly near. A call to "pitch them up" was immediately put through to C.R.E. giving the approximate bearing. This had the desired results in a very few minutes and no more fell short. This magnificent counter battery shoot did, in fact, virtually silence the enemy shelling for quite a while.

Meanwhile a mine clearing party of two officers and thirty-nine sappers from 8th Field Squadron of the Armored Division, which was to follow up, arrived to clear a tank lane on the other side. But as no ferry yet existed, and the other side was extremely unhealthy, we advised that only a small recce party should go across first and for the remainder to go farther back and wait. This recce party eventually crossed by the bridge and later, unfortunately, the officer stepped on a "Schu" mine and lost his foot.

At about 0100 hrs., Sherman tanks were heard coming down the road, presumably expecting to cross the bridge at 0200 hrs. Fearing that the noise would attract fire, Major Gabbett asked me to try and stop them. I ran off up the road and stopped the leading tank about 200 yards off, but the damage was done and shelling of the area increased considerably for a short while. It was at this time that the 3-ton lorry, which had stuck in the ditch close to Bridge H.Q., was hit, and it blazed furiously, causing Bridge H.Q. to move to a culvert some fifty yards away. This blaze started further concentrations of enemy fire, and Bridge H.Q. became the center of quite a "strafe."

Meanwhile, building went on steadily but slowly, due to periodic enemy interference. First, the time of completion was amended to 0300 hrs., and later, out of sheer desperation, to 0500 hrs. Eventually, at about 0300 hrs., the bridge was pushed forward partly by hand and partly with the help of the D4 bulldozer (the D7 having long since left the field with its blade elevating gear out of action). For some time, one particular "Spandau" on the left had been causing almost continuous interference and quite a few casualties. So Sergeant Parry of 59 Field Company decided to go across on the launching nose and deal with this man. He lay full length on the leading transom until it grounded, and at once ran a few yards along the bank, throwing himself on the ground to take cover. When the "Spandau" opened fire, he got the direction and made a dash toward the spot, firing two magazines of his Tommy gun. The "Spandau" did not fire again. Sergeant Parry returned to organize getting the launching nose onto rollers. When the job of lifting the nose onto rollers was done and the bridge moved forward again, more "Spandau" bursts appeared to be coming from directly inland. Again Sergeant Parry, but this time with Sapper Halliday, decided to go after this "Spandau." They were going straight toward the direction of the "Spandau" when they heard cries to the right. On going to investigate they found two wounded men, an officer with his foot blown off by a "Schu" mine and a badly wounded sergeant. Sergeant

Parry took the officer back to the bridge on his back, while Sapper Halliday and Sapper Coombs carried back the sergeant. They were the 8th Field Squadron Recce party. Sergeant Parry and Sapper Halliday then returned to shoot up the "Spandau," which they must have succeeded in doing, as the fire ceased. Sergeant Parry was awarded the Military Medal.

The bridge was built by 0400 hrs. with the last four bays decked only and the decking of the other four bays piled on the last bay as counter-weight. Every available man, plus the D4, stood round to push it into position. This required a strong push, as it was an uphill launch. All went well until, with 20 ft. to go, the bulldozer gave out completely, having seized up. Both radiator and sump had been punctured some time before. This was a major disaster, as the bridge could not be pushed by hand alone. However, we suddenly remembered the tanks. Boston went to get the leading tank and I went to the wireless set to report the delay and the action we were taking. When I got back to the site, the tank had pulled the bulldozer out of the way and was slowly pushing the bridge forward. The enemy took extreme exception to this and put down a number of well-aimed mortar rounds, causing several casualties. It was, therefore, decided not to bother about jacking down, but to push the bridge clean off the rollers on to the ground. It did in fact fall nicely on the base plates. But the far side still had to be jacked up to remove the plain rollers. Once this was done, the launching nose was dismantled and the ramps were quickly built. I returned to the wireless set to report this excellent progress.

When the rollers were removed from the far end, the bridge rested merely on the shingle bank, and in fact only one of the two girders on each side was carrying the load, as it had been impossible to build a proper bank seat. The bridge was, therefore, not strictly a Class 40 bridge. However, as speed was so essential, it was decided to leave it in this condition and trust to luck. It did in fact hold up to a squadron of tanks and considerable traffic without showing signs of failure. Two days later it was jacked up and correctly finished off.

Meanwhile, there arose a very considerable risk of the enemy staging a local counter-attack and rushing the bridge, for by this time every available sapper was working and unarmed, and none were available to form a covering party. Therefore Major Gabbett, who knew the whereabouts of the infantry battalion, went off to get an infantry party as protection for the bridge. At almost exactly 0500 hrs. a runner arrived, rather breathless, from Boston to say the bridge was open. A runner was immediately sent along the road to inform the tanks that the bridge was open, and at the same time, I reported "Amazon" open to traffic to the C.R.E. At approximately 0500 hours, the squadron of tanks of 17th/21st Lancers was across.

The bridge was completed, having taken close on twelve hours and the whole resources of the 4th Divisional R.E. to build it. Credit is due to Major Gabbett, for having made the plan, laid on the organization and controlled the operation throughout. Credit is also due to Lieutenant Severn Of 225 Field Company, Lieutenant Hobson of 7 Field Company, and Lieutenant Boston of 59 Field Company, for their part in the actual building, which could never have been completed without their fine leadership and complete disregard of personal danger. Finally, great credit is due to a small mixed party of N.C.O's. and men from all three companies who worked unceasingly from the beginning to the end of the operation.

**PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM LIEUTENANT-GENERAL S.C. KIRKMAN, COMMANDER 13TH CORPS,
TO MAJOR-GENERAL A.D. WARD, COMMANDER 4TH DIVISION**

*H.Q., 13th Corps
18th May, 1944*

Now that Cassino has fallen to your division, I would like to let you know how well I consider they have done. The assault across the Rapido was undoubtedly a most formidable undertaking, as the river, so aptly named, is swift and deep and the defences were well prepared and strong. The overrunning of the enemy's positions was a magnificent effort, the work of your Sappers on the second night was first class, and the building of the bridge which allowed you to pass over your tanks was a turning point in the battle. Each subsequent advance which you were asked to do has been quickly and successfully carried out. What has been achieved will long be remembered as a credit to the 4th Division..

*(Sgd.) S. C. KIRKMAN
Lieut.-General, Commander*

This personal account of the Battle for Cassino has been taken from *The Royal Engineers Journal*.
To learn more about the Royal Engineers, visit www.reahq.org.uk.