

Veteran Responders Community Shed

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Press Release

Commemoration Ceremonies

70th Anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino, Italy
16th – 19th May 2014



A 92-year-old Canberra World War 2 veteran has received the all clear for a trip to Italy for the 70th anniversary commemorations of the Battle of Monte Cassino.

Major Bernard Skarbek will return to this famous battlefield for the commemoration ceremonies being planned by the Polish Office for War Veterans and Victims of Oppression, and will meet up with colleagues from other Allied nations who also fought in this most significant battle of World War 2.

The Battle of Monte Cassino was one of the most bitter and bloody battles of World War 2, causing tens of thousands of casualties over five months in 1944. Now, 70 years later, the survivors will gather to pay homage to the bravery and sacrifice of those soldiers, who fought in this famous battle.

It will be a tribute to the 'D-Day Dodgers' so-called by the troops who during the Italian campaign endured the worst close-quarter fighting since World War 1. They felt their extreme sacrifice was eclipsed by the D-Day landings at Normandy, about which many feature films have been made.

Monte Cassino was a mountain redoubt in the German defensive line, stretching across Italy and blocking the Allied advance to Rome. During the harshest Italian winter on record and difficult terrain, the battle centred on the world-famous vast sixth-century abbey, an ideal defence for the Germans.

The Allied victory came at a high price. The Allies made repeated attacks on the abbey and some 200,000 soldiers on both sides – including American, British and Commonwealth - were killed or wounded. Many of those who survived were forever scarred.

The Germans, however, rescued the abbey's treasures, and at first the Allies refrained from bombing the building, though they eventually were forced to destroy it. The redoubt was finally captured by Polish troops.

The veterans of Monte Cassino lacked proper equipment to dig-in throughout the mountainous terrain and the rocks shattered like glass when hit by any projectile, which "sent splinters of rock in all directions, and causing a horrifically high number of head, face and eye injuries". Men also died from extreme weather exposure.

Bernard Skarbek aged only 18 entered the war on the very first day when Germany invaded his homeland of Poland from the west and only weeks later Russia invaded from the East. His parents and sister were all arrested and placed in war camps in Russia and his father was later murdered in Kalinin, now called Tver, and buried in one of the mass graves in Miednoje - referred to collectively as the mass graves of Katyn. Bernard was left to fend for himself and for months he helped save the lives of numerous soldiers, women, and children by leading them through enemy lines and across frozen rivers in the middle of the night to the south and to safety.

He was eventually captured, then escaped only to be recaptured when he was betrayed by another civilian trying to buy his own freedom. Bernard was sentenced without a hearing to ten years imprisonment with hard labour in a gulag in the frozen forests of Siberia. Many weeks were spent crammed in a putrid railway cattle car with little food or water and no sanitation until they arrived at the camp. The only warmth was each other's body heat.

After three winters cutting trees, building a hospital and other buildings, and burying the hundreds that perished in the horrific conditions he was set free, due to Germany invading Russia in Operation Barbarossa, despite a non-aggression pact signed between the two nations in August 1939. Mostly skin and bone they caught trains, caught rides on horse and wagons travelling south or they walked. The Polish prisoners were asked if they would fight for the Soviet Army or the Polish Army. Those who chose the Polish Army were subsequently forced out of Russia towards Persia via the Caspian Sea. Hundreds died, but those that made it across the Caspian Sea to Persia were immediately recruited into Polish Army regiments under British command and were given food and medical treatment.

Bernard Skarbek was then transported to Palestine where he was trained in all forms of soldiering; however, as he was highly educated he was recruited into communications in the 3rd Carpathian Division where he became a skilled telephone technician. Prior to the invasion of Italy, he was sent in an advanced covert team to establish communication lines for the invading forces. Before every battle from Castel di Sangro to Ancona and Bologna, his unit would set up communication cables under the cover of night for the frontline commanders and troops. Many were picked off by German and Italian snipers or heavy artillery.

After surviving the main battle of Monte Cassino he was wounded in the bombardment of Loreto and was transported to hospitals in Loreto, Ancona and Casamassima in Italy before being transported to recover in a hospital in Scotland.

After the war, Bernard Skarbek married, lived and worked in London. On hearing that some of his wife's family had also survived the war and were living in Australia, Bernard Skarbek, his wife and young daughter moved to Canberra in 1956. For many years he worked at the Canberra Brickworks, but he was recognized for his educational abilities and recruited into the Australian Public Service and worked in the Department of Trade. During that time, he was President of the Polish Ex-servicemen's Association in the ACT and was a substantial fundraiser for the Polish school, scouts and historical society. In 1990, he was awarded the Order of Australia for his services to the Polish community in Australia

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Skarbek aged 20



Skarbek leading Polish veterans – Australian War Memorial