



Often referred to at the time as the 'D Day Dodgers' the Italian campaign of WWII lasted throughout 1943 and 1945 with casualties now remembered in the war cemeteries and memorials either side the back bone of the Apennine mountains depending on the route the allied armies took in progressing north. Famous names like Monte Cassino, Salerno and Anzio are now where the majority of casualties lie. Over the last couple of years organisations and individuals have been making pilgrimages to these and many of the other cemeteries and submitted images to TWGPP. We decided to visit these as part of a 'family' holiday and try to complete the cemeteries where possible

The start of any holiday always seems to be in the middle of the night with a drive to the airport where it was no surprise to find that even though I had paid for the luggage on line and 'fast track' none of this was visible at the check-in desk so the wallet was made lighter by another 40 good English pounds even before we got to duty free!

Our plan of action was to land at Naples, collect the pre-arranged hire car then drive to Salerno which was the furthest cemetery south on our itinerary for the week. I was wondering why the hire car booth was putting so many 'stars' on the picture of the car but this was a direct comparison to the number of bumps and scratches on it. Never mind, I had experienced driving in Italy before so knew the score. As we left Naples we headed towards 'Vesuvius' knowing that whichever way you go around it, all roads headed towards **Salerno** in a round about sort of way.



Nearing the town we determined that hitting the coast road would point us to the cemetery but that was not taking into account the one way system through some very narrow streets. This was to set the precedence for every town and village we came to, one way with no signs. The coast road from Salerno appears to be one long beach stall and being Sunday was well populated but after a few miles it was time to try out my best 'Del boy' impersonation with "Bon Journo, Mon Cheri qui cemeterio Inglesi". With some distinct hand signs we were pointed in many directions so with a few 'Gracis' made our way to the first left and followed my nose.

By sheer luck we turned into another main road and found Salerno war cemetery on the left. With the temperature now in the late 30's we realised that it was going to be hot work but got on with the task in hand. An hour later with the thunder clouds rolling in we made our exit and headed towards Rome and our base for the week at Cassino.

We were based in the country house "La Pietre Raccontano" [www.lepiettreracontano.it](http://www.lepiettreracontano.it) as recommended by Mike Sutherland who stays there every year during the commemorations for the battle of Monte Camino in which his uncle fought and died.

The village of Rocca d' Evandro dates back to medieval times and is overshadowed by an imposing castle currently being restored but during WW2 was a German HQ. The view from our widow looked out over this **castle** and the mountains of Monte Cassino. As a base for our purpose we could not have picked a better place being central for Anzio, Salerno and the Adriatic coast, a drive over the Appenines. Raphael and Marco made us feel very welcome even though neither of us could speak the others language but my chicken impersonations seemed to work as we did get the omelette I desired.



Fortunately for us we had been introduced to Pepe and Giovanni from the village to do some translation. Both ex pat Italians who had returned to Rocco however Giovanni's Burnley accent from a true Italian did seem a little strange. We opted to eat the 'plat du jour' every night mainly because we did not know how to order anything else but the food and ambiance was excellent.



**Steve contemplates the hi-jack**

The village centre had a small bar, church, war memorial and tree around which the men play cards of an evening and would make the perfect setting for an Italian version of 'Allo, allo' which I suppose would be translated to 'Ciao, ciao'?

Being fresh from UK we decided to trek to the other side of Italy on the first full day to take in the cemeteries of Moro River and Sangro River on the Adriatic Coast. Google maps had declared a journey of 2.5 hours but did not take into account collapsed tunnels and associated diversions. Although very scenic, the journey took 4 hours before we arrived at Moro River Cemetery where we met the gardener Carmelo Galvano.

His 'sit on' lawn mower and trailer was looking very good as a means of transport down the rows of graves with Sandra sitting in the trailer camera in hand. However, before we could hi-jack it he was off to lunch. Moro River was predominantly Canadian casualties which took us just over an hour to complete before the drive down the coast to Sangro River

A quick break at a beach cafe to top up on food and water was required before climbing a rise on the banks of the River Sangro to find the spectacularly situated cemetery.

The layout was like an amphitheatre with curving rows along a rise of land so we started on the left flank by the Indian cremation memorial and gradually worked along the blocks and rows eventually meeting the gardening team in the central section who very kindly furnished us with additional bottles of water. It was late afternoon by the time we finished the 2500 and the sun was dropping so after the photo shoot we sat looking over the mountains in the background when a fox crept out of the bushes to walk along the rows of graves.



**Sangro River**

It was then time to think about the long drive back to Cassino having taken advice from the gardeners to go back towards Rome, via the motorway, and then drop down to Cassino via another route. Longer but shorter by time.

On Tuesday we decided to stay 'local' and planned to get to Cassino war cemetery early before it got too hot. That was the plan but even by 09:00 it was in the early 30's and with about 4000 to do the cemetery looked a bit daunting but crack on we did. At the rear of the cemetery the Indian gravestones were being



reset in their straight lines and was effectively out of bounds but having spoken to Carlos (gardener) about the need to complete them all in this one day visit he arranged via the contracts manager for me to be accompanied in the area so the objective was achieved.

It took five hours to complete the cemetery and a re-shoot of Cassino Memorial. We stopped for lunch in Cassino town before driving up the hairpin route to the monastery at the top where the plan was to photograph all of the Polish graves

**Cassino Monasterv & Polish cemetery**



A different sort of layout than what we are used to with large stone plaques on tiers going up the hill side and a large Polish eagle memorial above them. It was in fact more popular with visitors than Cassino War Cemetery was down the bottom of the hill with many Poles looking at the graves. The stones were quite faint after all these years but we did complete the 1000+ graves and then moved downhill to visit the **German cemetery** further out of town. I must admit I was not aware of this one at Caira until just before we left and discovered that it held over 20,000 Germans from all theatres in Italy.



By the time we arrived the light was going and after 7 hours on the go in the heat we were feeling a bit worn out. The prospect of another 20,000 was not inviting so knowing that we could not possibly finish it we decided to leave this one for a future visit.

Wednesday took us further north to Anzio and the site of the allied landings of 1944. Two cemeteries here of Beach Head and Anzio had a total count of 3000. Beach head was immaculate as usual with shade being offered by pergolas. We had a special request here to get the grave of one of Derek's friends who was orphaned as a child and he never knew that he had had a brother who had been killed during this campaign until recently.

The fact that a wife and children were mentioned on the epitaph has opened up the possibility of finding a long lost family for him.

On the return journey we stopped at the large **American cemetery** nearby and although immaculate, as expected, there was a lack of 'personality' about the long lines of white crosses with no flowers or any indication of families visiting them. Quite opposite to the English country garden and peaceful setting of the Commonwealth cemeteries.



Thursday was planned for a 'dry run' back to Naples airport just to be sure we could find our way back and whilst in the city we would attempt to get Naples War Cemetery and Naples British Cemetery.

The Commission website already mentions that care should be taken and "that Naples War Cemetery is located in an area where there have been a number of robberies from individuals". Having taken this advice, one of the gardeners in another cemetery contacted the CWGC office in Rome and arranged for us to park in the secure compound of the cemetery. Nevertheless we took minimal valuables including the removal of Sandra's wedding and engagement rings. Finding the cemetery was a bit arduous but Google maps had highlighted the one way system from the motorway and we found it where Gianfranco opened the gates to let us park in the secure area.



With one eye over the shoulder we completed **Naples War Cemetery** in about 1.5 hours then retraced our steps back to the motorway to then try and find Naples British Cemetery which held 18 war graves from WW1.

We found the road by the civil cemetery where I thought it was going to be but this turned out to be incorrect. The gatehouse keepers tried to give me directions but having had comprehensive hand signals and learning that 'semaphore' meant traffic lights I abandoned the idea as it looked like it meant driving further into Naples which was not appealing. Instead we got back on to the motorway to aim for Caserta War cemetery about an hour away.



Caserta was not signposted at all but the satellite view on Google gave me a ball park area which we drove around twice before stopping at the main civil cemetery gates to ask for directions. On opening the door to the 'office' I found myself in the morgue where it looked like there had been a recent autopsy so I beat a retreat and found the gates of the war cemetery at the end of the car park. Maintained by Francesco it was again immaculate.

By Friday we had completed the objectives to photograph the cemeteries and made tracks back home.

Thanks should go to all at Rocca d'Evandro for the help and guidance and to the Western Mediterranean Office of CWGC in Rome whose gardeners made us welcome in all the cemeteries. It's just a pity that there were not more British names in the visitor's books.



**Caserta**



**Sangro staff**

## **Photo Album**

**Francesco**



**Rocca d'Evandro**



**Cassino**



Post script : Since our return, CWGC Rome have offered to take the pictures at Naples British Cemetery which were being replaced at the time of our visit so were probably not in the cemetery at the time!