

Joseph Kitchen – A hero from Cassino

After every battle there are men who have to bury fallens; I have met one: Joseph Kitchen.

This is a very nice story to tell: he was born in the spring of 1922 in Hunslet, Scotland, his family was very poor and it was composed by 23 people. In 1940 he enlisted in the Royal Engineering and he started the war in the Northern Africa. He fought at Al Elamein; actually his unit's task was to realize "Dummy Tanks": they were used to deceive enemies and to create false objectives. I asked him if it was better to carry out this task or to fight with front-line troops, he answered that his task was very hard, because he had to work 24 hours everyday to built tanks with the sun and to bring them at the front-line during the night, but it was always better than the fight.

Then there was the Italian campaign: in Sicily, in Salerno, in Cassino. His unit was concerned with removing the detonator of enemy bombs. Mined fields were everywhere and unexploited bombs were a constant danger for citizens and for soldiers, too. But the most interesting part of the battle was going to come.

After the battle of Cassino, Joseph had a new task: he had to find temporary sepultures for English soldiers and to bury them in Cassino cemetery. He was at the head of a New- Zealanders soldiers' group and there were also 250 Italian workers.

In that period the area where now there's the Commonwealth's cemetery was reclaimed, then they started to exhume fallens' bodies from all the front-line of the battle. His story is now sad and touched. It was a delicate work, they needed to identify fallen soldiers, to pick up personal objects and to send them to the families, finally they needed to lay out the bodies and to bury them in the cemetery. Joseph carried out his mission with devotion and abnegation for 4 years, until 1948. In this period 4000 soldiers were buried. When they found German, Italian, Canadian, Polish and American fallen soldiers, they informed the units concerned with this operation. Indian soldiers, according to their religion, were cremated.

In this period Joseph knew his wife, Elisabetta Di Biasio (Tina). One of his two daughters, Anne Marie, lives now in Cassino and her son, Joseph's nephew, is the cemetery keeper of Cassino: a family costume!

I have met Joseph in September 2003 when Mr. Federico Lamberti called me because an old English man wanted to see a house in Roccasecca where he had lived during the war. After a short research we found it, at that time on the front door of the house there was an inscription left by New-Zealanders: "Kiwi House"; we found also a cellar in Caprile in which Joseph was used to go with his fellow-soldiers.

After this meeting I felt admiration for a simple man who obtained big results. He has continued to say to me he had to carry out strictly that pitiful work and I have no doubt about it.

