

Pvt. JOHN ALBERT (JAMES) NASH

Hastings and Prince Edward (Hasty PEs)

Bath, UK April 17, 1906 – Spittal am Drau, Austria October 29, 1943



by Raffaella Cortese de Bosis

The street sign reads "CARONIA km 40". It is a small village perched in the Nebrodi mountain range in Sicily, with a breathtaking view over the Mediterranean sea. But John will never see the village and Caronia will only be a name on a street sign, hanging on a rusty pole.

In that very spot, 40km from Caronia, John J Nash, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, 1st Canadian Infantry, is captured by the Nazis, while he was drawing water for the wounded. It is July 22, 1943.

John participated in the Sicily landing. Code name "Operation Husky" and with his regiment he fought step by step, in minefields, climbing steep mountains, treading trails along cliffs, inching forward on his elbows, trying to arrive in time to rescue the wounded. John is a stretcher-bearer. The July heat is unbearable in this area. The soil is cracked by draught. Shade is a rare commodity. And the ubiquitous dust mixes with sweat and lands on the burns caused by the sun. Some wear handkerchiefs on their head with the four knotted corners, others take their shirt off and wear it as a hat but get their backs burned.

John was born in England and lived in Canada. It is an environment that he had never experienced before.

After becoming a POW, John is made to cross Southern Italy to get to the Capua concentration/transit camp, POW Camp 66.

In this 350 mile journey, thirst is overpowering. John is weak and disoriented. But tries to react. The temperature reaches 104°F and at night, humidity makes it hard to breathe.

In this journey toward the unknown, John reminisces of another journey toward the unknown.

Caronia. That very same name. Caronia was the name of the ship that brought him from England to Canada when he was 12. John was born in Bath on April 17, 1906. His father had died and his mother was destitute. She entrusted him to the Annie MacPherson's organization, that assists orphaned children and arranges for such children to be sent to Canada. He left Liverpool on July 14, 1923 and arrived in Halifax on the 21st. He is assigned to the "distribution home" of Marchmont, Belleville.



The Caronia ship. One of its passengers was John Nash
(courtesy Marmora Historical Society)

John grows up, he starts working and meets Mary Lena Wells, whom he marries on December 4, 1929. They have two daughters, Joan Gertrude and Jean Rosalie. The family lives in Marmora, Ontario, for a dozen years, until John enlists and in December 1939, embarks in Halifax to Greenwich with his regiment, Hastings and Prince Edward. He participates in various operations and serves in England until June 1943. He boards another ship. Destination: Italy. After all that time with the Regiment in Great Britain, friendships are strong. Soldiers share their personal stories, but they also joke. And as they sail onto the new destination, relationships and team spirit become stronger.

One morning, Bernard Thompson appears at breakfast with his honey jar, which he jealously guards. He is very fond of it and carries it everywhere. Hartley Hie sits by him. As a civilian he is a baker. He plays around with a golf ball. He uses it to calm his anxiety. John Frolis, the "Hungarian" (born in Budapest) shows off his tattoo on his arm: a pin up dressed in a sailor suit. Michael Fortier, the "French" (his father was born in France), is a hotel waiter. He knows etiquette. And notices that here it may not be followed much!! John Nash is quiet. He observes his surroundings as he sips his tea. He discovers a namefellow. Ferdinand Nash. They are not relatives, not even remotely. But it tickles their curiosity. Ferdinand works in a sawmill, as does Orville Thompson, also on the ship.

Many days roll by. The soldiers share stories. Issie Bell, "the Russian" keeps hearing the petulant and unrelenting sound of the Jew's harp that Frederick Punchard plays a few inches from his ear and moves to chat with John Taylor, horseback riding instructor, who tells him so many

interesting stories. At dinner, Bernard Thompson brings a different jar: Daddies' Sauce, a type of ketchup. But he is very jealous of this as well! Jokes fill the air, and everyone tries to find a way to take some from him.

The date of the landing is near. The soldiers are tense and anxious but the pride of wearing that uniform has grown deep. Along the way, they learn that the enemy has sunk three ships that were part of the assault convoy and 58 Canadians lost their lives.

We are on the eve of the most extensive allied attack ever. Only a year later will it be surpassed with Operation Overlord, the Normandy landings.

The Canadians land in Sicily on July 10. Hasty PEs were assigned the area between Pozzallo and Pachino. Feelings of anxiety and excitement sweep the ship. The landing operations, with men and equipment, is exhausting. Initially, they are not faced with heavy resistance. The barbed wire barriers are eliminated with Bangalore torpedoes, explosives that open vast passages.

The weather is as hot as you can imagine. The parched beach is suddenly teeming with hundreds of soldiers and military vehicles, large and small. And there are the mules, precious travel companions, critical in transporting people and things.

At dusk, John, his uniform full of sand, looks for Harold Lawson and Charles Nutley but cannot find them. He will not see them again. They are the first casualties of his Regiment.

The advance is toward the towns of Grammichele, Valguarnera, Assoro, Leonforte, Nissoria, Adrano, Agira, Catenanuova and Centuripe, which get liberated one by one. The Allies fight and then cross medieval, extremely poor towns, with debris scattered everywhere. Small streets and alleys are suddenly used by tanks and other military vehicles that may or may not go through. On a threshold, or what is left of it, three generations of women sit on the ground, barefoot, and wave to the soldiers; children with threadbare clothes run toward the soldiers who give them candies and chocolate; in the piazzas, where there is more room, small and large jubilant crowds gather. Their hardships and poverty, already a burden before the war, are now unbearable. The houses are destroyed, no running water or any other primary need. Food is scarce.

Analphabetism is widespread. The future starts and ends in the same moment. Dreams are tucked away.

The advance continues; the casualties tally continues. On July 14, Orville Thompson is wounded. His liver is in shattered. He is found but dies after a few hours. He was initially buried at the Modica Cemetery.

Bernard Thompson, who loved honey, and "rider" John Taylor were killed on the 18th.

Valguarnera Caropepe, July 17/19. The enemy is perched on the hills around Grammichele. About 6 miles from Valguarnera, on the 17th at noon, the first attack of the Hastings and PEs is repelled. They receive the order to continue on in the mountains and avoid the town. They are unfamiliar with the territory, and it is pitch dark. The order meant they cross 15 miles of mountainous terrain, with no trail, coming out close to a town in enemy hands and force the enemy to retreat. They have no tanks or artillery, so each soldier has to carry a heavy load of weaponry. Which means climbing cliffs in these conditions. Nevertheless, in the dead of night, the march begins. It feels like groping one's way in a labyrinth made of stones that roll to the ground, thorny plants, fallen trees and sudden cliffs. They have no idea in which direction they are going and maps are of no help.

The violence of the combat kills Ferdinand, John's namefellow, and also Francis Huish and Frederick Punchard, the Jew's Harp player. Charitable hands bury them in their temporary graves. Sicily envelops them. Their devastated comrades say their last goodbye and one by one pose a rock on their graves, with a cross made of twigs and their names written by hand.

Finally, on July 19, 1943, Valguarnera is freed. They must continue on, but someone noticed that by the Valguarnera train station, the water tank which is set up high on props, was hit and water is gushing out. Immediately, a lot of them rush under that refreshing waterfall.

The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment was later awarded the Battle Honors for the liberation of Valguarnera.

But there is no time to rest. On July 20th, the fighting continues toward Assoro, a small, historical town about 2500 ft above sea level. Here, Hasty PEs, as the Regiment is called, lose their Commander, Lieutenant Colonel B. Sutcliffe. He was hit by enemy fire on a 900-foot rocky spur. Major Lord Tweedsmuir is appointed his replacement.

During the night of the 21st, the Regiment succeeds in establishing a defense fighting position near Assoro. At dawn, the Hasty PEs have a perfect view of the enemy's positions.

The Germans react, but Major Tweedsmuir sends a radio message with the coordinates of the enemy. Following gruelling and exhausting fighting, the Germans retreat.

It is July 22. On this day John Nash goes Missing in Action. He is taken prisoner and along with other POWs he is brought to PG 66, a POW transit camp near Capua, some 30 miles north of Naples. PG 66 is a POW transit camp. Here, prisoners are put in tents, 5 or 6 of them in each. Straw on the ground, a dirty piece of cloth as sheet. Food is horrific. From here, he writes to his family:

(August 3) "My darling Wife and Family, I am at present a POW in Italy" but adds that he is looked after very well and getting Red Cross parcels. "I could be a lot worse off" he says and concludes this letter asking his wife to write often so he will be alright.

(August 19) My dearest Lena,...."looking forward to the time when I shall be able to get a letter from you, as I am a bit fed up with this life as it is so totally different". "Keep smiling till we meet again and hope that won't be too long now. God bless you all. Your loving husband Jim".

John did not stay here long. After August 19, he was sent to the Wolfsberg concentration camp, Stalag XVIII A. He contracted pneumonia and died on October 29, 1943, shortly after his arrival in Austria, at the Lazarett Spittal Stalag XVIII A.

John's body is first taken to the Elding cemetery, Spittal am Drau. In 1946 he is transferred to the Klagenfurt British Empire Cemetery. He rests in the Villanova di Bagnacavallo (Ravenna) cemetery since 1950.

He was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Italy Star, the Defense Medal, the War Medal and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp and the Memorial Cross

In Marmora, Ontario, a street is named after him.

Remembrance day 2020: at the Villanova di Bagnacavallo (RA) cemetery a Poppy was layed, following the initiative of the Wartime Friends Association.



Translated from Italian by Alessandra Cortese de Bosis