My WWII: Taking on Mussolini

**As Second World War veteran, Matt Mackinnon-Pattison, turns 100 years old, he looks back on the best and worst of his wartime experiences, fighting the fascists in Italy when he was just 18.**

I grew up in an orphanage. When I was born, my mother died. Two years later, I couldn't walk or talk. I had to be force fed. I wasn't even potty trained.

I was handed in to Quarriers Orphan Home in Scotland, near Bridge of Wear in Renfrewshire, where I stayed for the next 11 years. I grew up there, then I came out and I went to work on a farm for a little while, and eventually I joined the army.

We were sitting in the dining room of this farm home, where the trained boys were farming, and the news come on. Neville Chamberlain came on and he told us: “This country is now at war with Germany.”

I thought, “Great! I can't wait to get stuck in!”

The only thing was I wasn't old enough. I'm sitting back and I'm thinking, “I wish I was old enough to get stuck in.”

And, eventually, I became old enough.

**As soon as Matt turned 18, he joined the Argyll and South Highlanders. It was 1942 and, having been promoted to Lance Corporal, he was sent to Italy where fascist dictator, Mussolini, was waging a bitter bloody war on the side of Germany.**

I went to Italy just in time for the great battle of [Monte] Cassino. We arrived up to the frontline opposite Cassino. They'd had three goes at crossing the Rapido and moving on. And three times they'd failed. And now was the fourth time.

I'd not long come out from the UK. We were the next ones in. I lined my squad up, and I says, ‘Right, ready, follow me!’. Now, I'm not bragging, but I'm only five foot two. I was only a young fella then, but I had men in that squad who were older than me, been longer in the army than me, but they would not take a responsibility. I got lumbered with them.

So I've got them lined up and everything's all around. Bang, bang, bang, bang…! Bullets flying everywhere! And we're all lined up there. And suddenly a whistle goes. And a stunning silence.

If you've ever heard silence, this is it. You can never understand how silent things can be after you've been in a bloomin’ battle right over your head. But, anyway, I've got them lined up, side by side, waiting for a whistle. And suddenly a whistle goes, and… ‘Right, advance!’ Now I've got to get my squad to advance.

We move down the river RapIdo and then we row across the river. Now the river's flowing like the clappers. Overheads, blasted, explosions, bullets everywhere! You just don't know when you're going to get hit! And I saw… one of my sergeants copped it.

 All is quiet. Then suddenly you hear the whistle of a shell, and then you get the ‘bang, bang!’. Then you get the machine gun. Firing bullets, and they are coming at you left, right, and centre. Tuk, tuk, tuk, tuk, tuk!

It's absolute murder! You don't know where to jump or what to do. You're looking for a hole in the ground, and you just run anywhere you can where you think you can get between you and the enemy.

All those bullets are coming your way. And you've got that all the time. And while you're crossing the river, you've got that firing at you. And you're wondering where it is. And you're stuck. You can be stuck in the middle of it.

And when you're on the frontline, you can have it flying over your head, all around you. Shells busting… bang, bang! You think you're in a nice, safe little position and suddenly, ‘Heeeeee, boom! Heeeeee, boom!’ You think, ‘Oh my god, where's the next one going to go?’

We managed to advance and eventually we got up. The allies managed to get up into the Monastery of Cassino. Now, in honour of the Poles, we were told to stop and they gave the Polish Army the right to take the Monastery at Cassino.

They were part of the attack, but we gave them the full credit. More or less an insult to Germany, wasn't it? That a country like Poland can beat you through your toughest fortress.

**As they pressed on, the enemy attacks were relentless. Eventually, they approached the Gothic Line - the German and Italian defensive fortress along the summits of the Apennine Mountains - and Matt found himself in an unexpectedly fortuitous position.**

We'd moved up to the Gothic Line, and we were very comfortable up there. And suddenly Jerry started shelling us. And lo and behold, because it's a mountainous area, we’d dug out a little hole in the side of the mountain where we could come and sneak in there and go to sleep when needed and come out and do our duty sitting further up in the open. So that was our little bed.

Well, I crawled back one evening and I found my little dugout in the side of the mountain, and I crawled in there and I thought, “Lovely, I'll have a good night's sleep here.”

I've seen everybody else on guard. I made sure that everybody else was in duty. Well, I slept, and I was sleeping quite nicely when suddenly Jerry started shelling us.

And when he shelled us, he hit the mountain right above me, and it loosened a large piece of stone. And it fell down, and I'm lying in this little hole in the mountainside, and it fell on me. It fell on my leg.

By the time they'd pulled me out, my leg was sore. I said, “I don't know how bad it is.” And somebody said, “We better take you down to see the medical officer.”

Well, they took me down to see the medical officer. And he said, “It's not broken, but looks badly bruised. You’d better move further back.”

So, I got moved from there to one base, after another, all the way back. Eventually, I'm put on a stretcher. On the other side of the stretcher, there's a little fella about my height and weight to balance me. I would go all the way down this mountainside.

It's amazing how frightening that is - when you realise that if you slip one slip, and you're hundreds of feet down the side of the mountain.

But eventually we got to the base at the bottom of the mountain and I was taken to the hospital there and my leg is… well to be quite honest, if I'd got up and walked and given it a good rub I'd probably have been alright. But somehow or another, I thought, “I want a break.” I'd had enough and so I just lay still.

They diagnosed that my leg was badly damaged. And from my hospital ward I can see Vesuvius kicking up, spouting up, and being, vomiting up its red-hot ash. Down below, if got up, I could see the ruins of Pompeii all spread out below me.

Well, I managed to stay there for a while. I kept quiet and I thought, “This is the life.” After being through the battle, you don't mind having a break and you sit back.

Then one day the officer said, “If you get up and walk around, you should be alright.” So, I got up and I walked around, and I explored the ruins of Pompeii. Most amazing, wonderful place.

**Matt was moved to a reinforcement camp and it was there where he spotted a recruitment notice for the SAS, asking for experienced soldiers. He knew little about this new unit of the Army but, curious, he put his name down...**

Chaps from way back wanted to get in. There were quite a great number of us. And we stood in a line. We thought we were going to the Paratroopers, actually. And the officer came up - Canadian officer - and he said, “I'm from the SAS. We drop parachutes in behind the enemy lines in one, two, three, and half a dozen, where they raid, play merry hell with the enemy.”

Well, I thought, “That's not for me. That's too much.” Anyway, he said, “I'm coming along the line to answer any questions.” When he came to me, I said, “Have you got a parachute that will go up and not drop down, or go down and not up?” I was trying to get out of it… but instead I was being dragged further into it…

Apparently the Canadian officer selecting us liked my attitude. And, secondly, I think the fact I was wearing a Scottish beret, and he was of Scottish extraction - called MacDonald - meant I was enlisted into the SAS.

We were trained in all sorts of things - explosions and one thing and another - and eventually we got to the point where we had to learn to do parachute jumping. So, we got on the plane, off we went, and we jumped out the plane.

And it was the most exciting moment of my life.

**Matt was sent to join an SAS operation already in progress and found himself based in an idyllic Italian village up in the hills. When he wasn't scouting for Germans and disrupting their military might, he was tasked with a rather unusual job...**

We dropped in, about ten of us, to a little village which was north of Genoa and just south of a town called Alba.

We were dropped in there, and we spent the day traveling around, scouting around, seeing where the Germans were, shutting them up, and doing what we could to distract them.

However, it was quite nice there. Little village, way up in the hills, and we were all in the guest house. And we slept in the school room because everybody was out in the village. But we used to have dinner in the guesthouse.

One day we said the officer was fed up with macaroni and cheese and spaghetti and one thing and another. So he radioed through and he got us some British food. And the British food came in and we gave it to the landlady of the guesthouse. But still we got pasta shoots and the macaroni. We asked her what was wrong. She didn't understand how to cook [the British food].

So what happened is that I made a cup of tea, and the officer drank the cup of tea, and he said, “You can cook. You get into that guest house and teach her how to cook British food.”

So, I spent the rest of the time there. I had to go out on operations, but when we came back I didn't have to do any of the cleaning of the equipment. Somebody else did that. I was instructing the landlady on how to cook British food.

**As a member of the SAS, Matt was selected for a special operation to break the enemy blockade which had developed across Italy. The battle was intense, bloody and exhausting. Thousands of troops were killed on both sides.**

People think that the war was simply the Normandy Landings. Now you want to know about Italy. Italy was… it was a hell hole. We had one hell of a job with it because you were locked in there, in this narrow strip of a leg.

You were locked in and you got mountains in the middle, and Germany could sit on that mountain and watch you. And every movement you made, he'd shoot at you. So, you had to go back and find somebody who'd shoot back at him. It was constant war.

It was worse than anything. I was head down all the way. We used to dig ourselves a little pit in the ground, called a trench. And it would be two foot wide or more, two or three foot long, four or five foot deep, with a little step so you didn't go too far down. But you'd get in there. And your head was above ground level.

And that was your bed. That was your dining room, your bedroom, your sitting room. That was where you lived. It didn't matter if it rained. If it rained, too bad. There was none of this coming out and getting a change. You stayed there for 14 days at least.

Then after 14 days or more, no matter how bad you felt… tired, weary, unclean, shattered… You'd be told, “Right, change over!” And you'd crawl out and you'd walk down the hill, down the mountainside, until you got to where somebody else would be coming up to take your place.

**Eventually, the war ended and Italy surrendered. Matt's regiment was given one final order - to find Mussolini and take him to a British base.**

We were dropped in a town where the partisans were, in an area of Italy that was worse than being on the frontline because the Italians had divided themselves into two groups: communists, democrats, and were fighting each other. And we were in the middle.

And I had only a horse to ride around on. When you're riding a horse and you hear a bullet whizz past her head, it's not exactly a pleasant thought.

Anyway, in this kerfuffle, Italy was surrendering, packing up. But Mussolini was still loose and we were supposed to go and pick him up and bring him back to British base.

Unfortunately, when our little group got up the mountains in Northern Italy to pick Mussolini up, he'd been shot. Somebody had shot him. So, all we got was a dead body.

That was that. War finished and I came back home, and I was transferred to Germany into the War Crimes Investigation Unit.

**After he eventually came home, Matt went on to marry and have a family. He lost his sight in later life due to macular degeneration. Now widowed, we provide him with specialist support and equipment to help him continue living independently.**

 I must admit, Blind Veterans UK has done me a great deal of service because when they knew that I had eye trouble, they came and gave me this printing enlarger. That's helped me a great deal because I'm now able to read my personal letters and things.

I have a community support worker called Peter, who looks in on me now and again to make sure I have everything I need, and he’s very good that way.

Any veterans with troubles with their eyes should go to Blind Veterans UK. At least they are interested in helping you, one way or the other. Blind Veterans UK have done a great deal for me and I'm very, very proud of them.

**We thank Matt for his extraordinary service and bravery and wish him a very happy 100th birthday.**