

FOOTNOTES & ENDPICES

Notes from a War Diary – The Filter System of Sorting Casualties from the Battle of Cassino – Italy May 1944

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This is the second extract taken from the War Diaries of Brigadier JG Morgan CBE TD MD and is specifically taken from papers he used to prepare a talk for a Civil Defence Audience in the 1950's. Having introduced a system of filtering in Tripoli in 1943 when in command of 48th General Hospital [1], he was specifically appointed to oversee the medical arrangements for the Battle of Cassino and was awarded the CBE for his work which is outlined below. It has been prepared from the original documents and edited by his sons.

"On 5th March 1944 I was appointed DDMS^a of III District in Italy. At that time the main Allied forces were held at Cassino, and the attempt to outflank the Germans at Anzio had been checked. A spring offensive was in preparation.

I was warned that the Battle for Cassino would take place soon and it was expected that there would be at least 19,000 casualties. We had many hospitals in Naples and surrounding, but at that time they were mostly full so it was quite a problem to deal with 19,000 men. Each day a further 3000 were being admitted with general sickness and Malaria.

All hospitals were told to double up. Another hospital was sent from Tripoli where activities had ceased; more convalescent depots were put up and where possible a maximum of seven days stay in hospital was arranged. All cases were then sent to the convalescent depots. Evacuation to the United Kingdom by hospital ships was also arranged so that by D-Day I had available about 26,000 beds to cope both with the sick and wounded. As a matter of fact, the number of casualties did not amount to more than 15,000.

Few realise what little space there is in Italy to erect any kind of hospital, every inch of available space is used for cultivation, even up the steepest hill the Italians have terraced off small areas in which they grow vines. When looking for a new site the only available spaces were light cultivated fields at Canchello and it was with the greatest of difficulty and opposition from the Italians that we could take over these fields. Near them was a huge railway marshalling yard which we had bombed effectively and all that remained were railway lines covered with the debris of trucks and moving stock, which were well rusted. I approached our own Movement Control with the object of them moving and clearing the tracks but they stated that this would take at least three weeks with the tackle that they had available, but they hinted that the Americans had just brought over two very powerful engines which would soon drag all this mass of stuff away.

Armed with a couple of bottles of whisky I went to the American Movement Control and after a few preliminary necessities and with the aid of the whisky, they consented to do their best. The engines were sent down to Canchello, hitched on to the rusted trucks; there was an almighty banging and soon our lines were clear and our plans back on track, considerably shortening the drive for the motor ambulances.

Now we come to the Filter Unit at Capua. Capua as you may well remember is the home of the Capulets, that ancient family mentioned by Shakespeare in "Romeo and Juliet". Juliet was a Capulet and it was at Capua that Romeo first met her. Looking at the map you will notice that Capua was ideally situated for this unit. All the main roads from Cassino met there and from there main roads went to all parts of Naples (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. The locality around Capua

Prior to my being appointed to III District I had paid a visit from North Africa to 10 Corps in Italy after which I had prepared a report which foreshadowed some of the ideas I subsequently introduced. My thinking was based on my previous experiences of mass casualties. My plan was to sort the casualties as far forward as possible and have them treated in specialist hospitals.

On 11th April, I went to Capua to locate a site for the Control Post (Filtering Unit). I found a spot strategically placed at a point where the 8th Army ambulances would reach the junction between the roads which led to Naples and Casserta. I would add at this point that after we had gone to a great deal of trouble in setting up the Command Post, the routes were changed and I had to make a personal appeal to the American Commander for permission to continue using the routes originally planned. With the command post so situated at Capua it would be possible to sort out the wounded at an early stage.

I took over a block of flats and an old ruined house which had been bombed and set up a small hospital and my own HQ. On the land in front of the building I put up a series of tents to

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represent each hospital and a large marquee into which all the wounded would be taken on arrival for sorting by two surgeons and a physician (Figure 2). They decided to which hospital the patient should go. Setting up the filter unit involved a tremendous amount of work. To staff it I called in a Field Ambulance who were being held in reserve. Brigadier Edwards, the Chief Surgeon provided Surgeons and Medical Officers. After organizing the ruined house and the flats we had to install telephones, water and petrol supplies and put up tents. Medical stores held in Naples were treated like gold and I had to send my next in command (Col Haydon) with written orders to collect what was required. I transferred my own lodgings to the Command post to make sure it would work.

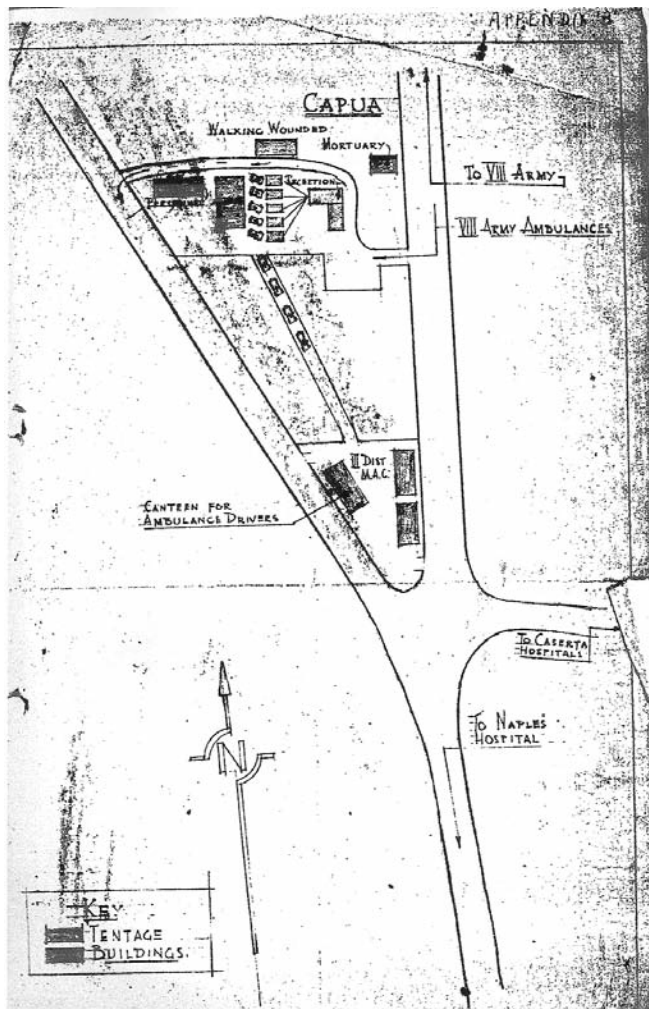


Figure 2. Layout of the Capua Filter Unit

It was arranged that the Ambulance would drive the cases down from the front directly to the main reception tent. This ambulance would then go to a small centre where I arranged for it to be cleaned, refueled, pick up fresh stretcher, blankets and equipment. Whilst the ambulance was being attended to the driver was given a meal. He then returned to the front. From this sorting centre the patient was then moved to the appropriate tent and then there was another set of ambulances available to take the patient to the

designated hospital. I had arranged that a small 100 bed hospital was put up near the reception centre to treat shocked cases in need of urgent resuscitation and transfusion. It saved many lives but a mortuary was also prepared for those who had died on the way down.

The filter method proved excellent value and definitely lightened the work of the hospitals and saved many lives. It soon proved a matter of great interest and I had numerous visits from other medical teams, notably the Americans and ADMS' from all around the area.

Behind the filter unit I arranged for different hospitals to deal with special cases. Thus **Hospital No 1** dealt with all the injuries from the neck upwards. This was essential as the enemy had hand grenades which had some kind of spring which caused them to burst at head level. Thus the injuries sustained were fragments in the brain, eyes and the jaws. I thus gathered in the same hospital brain, eye and maxillofacial surgeons so that at the same operation the brain surgeon would remove foreign bodies from the brain, he would be followed by the eye surgeon and in turn the facial surgeon who did the repairs to the jaw. All these are complicated operations and require special nursing after the operation. We had teams of nurses trained in these specialties with the result that the patients recovered far quicker than if they had been in general nursing care. It is interesting to note that in former wars injuries to the brain were almost always fatal but with modern techniques mortality was reduced to as low as 15%.

Hospital No 2 dealt with chest injuries and again a specialist in chest surgery with his team of nurses and auxiliaries was available with the result that mortality from chest injuries was reduced considerably. **Hospital No 3** dealt with gunshot wounds involving fractures of bones; as these were the greatest percentage of cases the largest hospitals (1200 beds) were set aside for these cases. **Hospital No 4** was set aside for special cases: a) Genito Urinary Injuries, and b) Nerve lesions and c) others.

The remaining hospitals dealt with General Surgery and those sick with malaria and other illnesses. One hospital was set aside for Psycho-Neurotic cases.

I also arranged that the intake of any hospital should not be more than 100 at a time so that when "A" Hospital had received its 100 patients its corresponding tent at the filter unit would close down and "B" tent opened up for the next 100 cases. This was a great advantage as it did give time to tidy up and get straight.

Diary Notes from D Day Onwards.

In it he mentions some numbers of casualties passing through the unit but clearly this is not comprehensive

Friday 12th May: The battle starts. 500 casualties pass through the Capua filter. **Saturday 13th May:** Mention that a German counter attack resulted in 400 deaths and 300 casualties. No mention of the number of casualties at the filter unit but inspected by Generals Sutton and Robinson who were both satisfied. **Sunday 14th May:** 400 pass through in the night. General Alexander takes time off from the battle to visit and was so impressed that he told the Americans to visit! **Friday 14th May:** Cassino falls."

Reference

1. Morgan LJ. Notes from a War Diary – Penicillin in the Field Hospital in Tripoli 1943. *J R Army Med Corps* 2010; 155(1): 73-74