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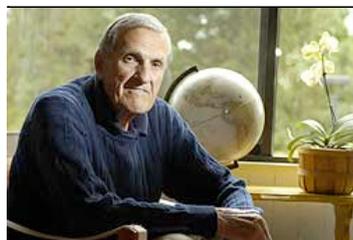


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NEWS



Retired engineer Tony Kingsmill is a hero in a small Italian town he helped liberate in the Second World War.

Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Italians recognize innovative bridge builder's bravery

By Mark Hasiuk-Staff writer

Tony Kingsmill returned last month, at age 87, to a quiet riverbank in Italy, where his bravery and engineering expertise helped win a pivotal battle during the Second World War.

In the spring of 1944, the 24-year-old captain fresh out of engineering school received orders to construct a temporary "Bailey bridge" that would allow much-needed heavy artillery to traverse the river and engage the Germans on the other side.

"The suggestion came out of a staff meeting between the general and the colonel of the regiment," remembered Kingsmill. "It got passed down to me, and after chucking at it for a bit, I said, 'Lets go look at a Bailey bridge.'"

His outfit was attached to the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment-also known as the Calgary Regiment-to maintain, recover and repair equipment during the Allied push through Italy. "We were like a big mobile garage," he said.

The Calgary Regiment encountered stiff German resistance from across the Gari River near the town of Sant'Angelo, five kilometres southwest of Cassino, Italy.

The plan called for a turret-less tank to transport a 100-foot wooden bridge-built 500 yards from the riverbank-halfway across the 80-foot wide river. When the lead tank became submerged, a second tank would push the bridge the remaining distance to the other side-all while under heavy enemy fire.

Without the familiar blueprints and technical tools he used in university, Kingsmill relied on his keen sense of observation and design to construct the bridge and mount it on the turret-less tank. "I did it all in the field," he said. "It was strictly eyeball



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engineering."

Kingsmill and two other soldiers manned the first tank. They bailed out, as planned, just before the river engulfed the tank's exit hatch. While the second tank successfully completed the bank-to-bank connection, and bullets and artillery whipped up the surrounding water, the three men swam ashore where Kingsmill was wounded by a German mortar blast. He spent one month in a field hospital before rejoining his regiment. For his actions, Kingsmill received the Military Cross for gallantry.

The Gari River crossing was a key victory for Canadian and British forces during the Italian campaign, and Kingsmill is proud of his regiment's accomplishment. "The Germans didn't really expect us to get our tanks across that river, but all of the sudden there we were, and that broke up their position," he said, noting the Allies carried their momentum deep into Italy. "Within a month or so we were in Rome."

On May 12, 2007, Kingsmill, long retired and living on Arbutus Ridge on Vancouver's West Side, returned to Italy for the first time since the war, when the Calgary Regiment, in cooperation with residents of Sant'Angelo, erected a small monument near the Gari River. The commemorative plaque retroactively renamed the temporary bridge used in the Gari River crossing the "Kingsmill Bridge," in honour of its chief architect and engineer.

Kingsmill, who along with his wife Tee has two grown children and three grandchildren, said a lot has changed since his last visit to that Italian riverbank. The area has grown over with lush green foliage, and his temporary bridge-like many of his wartime compatriots-lives only in memory, having been removed shortly after the war. But the gratitude from Italian villagers is intact.

"They are very grateful for what we Canadians did there," said Kingsmill. "When we landed in Italy from Sicily, the Italians declared peace and the Germans rushed in and treated them like the enemy. So it was a little like Holland, because we tried to get them fed and sheltered and all that sort of stuff."

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