



Come Back To Portofino: Through Italy with the 6th South African Armoured Division

James Bourhill

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Come Back To Portofino: Through Italy with the 6th South African Armoured Division James Bourhill World War II combat—the South African ‘Red Tabs’ in Italy Using archival sources and private documents recently unearthed, Come Back to Portofino chronicles the journey taken by volunteers in the 6th South African Armoured Division. From training camps in Egypt through to the blissful summer of 1945 the ‘Div’ left its mark on towns and villages across Italy. From Monte Cassino to the outskirts of Venice and the River Po the campaign lasted exactly twelve months. During the advance through Rome up to Florence, it was a case of constant movement and violent contact with the enemy. Experiences which left an enduring impression on returned soldiers included the periods of rest at Siena and Lucca as well as the four miserable winter months in the northern Apennines. Overall, the casualty rate was surprisingly low considering the ideal ambush country and mountain defences which had to be overcome. In the rifle companies however, the rate of attrition was high and replacements were few. Among the South Africans who are buried in Italy, there are those who died in vehicle accidents, from drowning and falling out of windows or from suicide. For the ordinary soldier the most important part of everyday life was contact with home or foraging for food and wine, and even enjoying the company of signorine when operations permitted. Nevertheless, it was not one long happy camping trip as was often portrayed in the press. The cast is made up of the famous regiments and ordinary South Africans who participated in these epic events. James Bourhill did his national service in a mounted unit which nearly ruined his love of horses. He attended Cedara College of Agriculture, after which he went farming in Rhodesia and America before returning to South Africa as a farmer. Needing to discover why farming was so unprofitable, James studied agricultural economics at the University of Pretoria, attaining a master’s degree. By profession, he is a property valuer but his passion has always been history and travel. Currently these two interests are combined in his research for a D.Phil in history, which demands numerous trips to the Mediterranean region. James has a small apartment in the south of France where he aspires to be known in the village as “the Sud-African writer” and to have nothing but a bicycle for transport.

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