

# Infighting in Midwinter

ITALY (Vol. 1, *The Sangro to Cassino*), by N. C. Phillips; War History Branch (Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington).

(Reviewed by L.W.T.)

AS the war recedes, one tends to recall only the crowded hours, and to forget the continuum of sombre discomfort and frustrated hope which contributed to every campaign. For the New Zealand Division, such a period occurred during the mid-winter battles fought in the "narrow waist" of Italy between October, 1943, and March, 1944. Other campaigns were more costly, other terrain as difficult (it could scarcely have been more difficult), and other winters as rigorous; but no other period demanded so much in fortitude and endurance from the men of the fighting echelons and returned so small a measure of "apparent glory." This is the unpromising background of the latest volume of the Official History; yet this book is among the best, if not pre-eminent, in a very satisfactory series.

The author's chief design is to "consider what was going on in the minds of the commanders." Nevertheless, the piecing together of the sequences of battle is a fine exercise of historical imagination (as Sir John Fortescue understood it, "... never a creative function. It is rather re-creative and re-productive"). The volume is introduced

with a scholarly marshalling of the political and strategic factors which brought the Allied armies to battle in the Italian peninsula and kept them actively engaged in grossly unsuitable conditions of climate and terrain. The story begins with the Division in Egypt, crossing uneventfully to Taranto, and advancing to the Sangro River to gate-crash that considerable obstacle. The Siegfried winter line is broken into as the weather deteriorates, and the Division shapes up to the obduracy of Orsogna. The story of the assaults upon this fortified town and the unsuccessful attempts to by-pass its commanding position conclude this section of the book.

The second and major portion deals with events in and around Cassino—a sombre and evocative name to all who witnessed its ordeal and defiance: a retrospect upon the operational plans and their execution, with possible alternatives, concludes this work.

The author is beset throughout by the intricacies of simultaneous

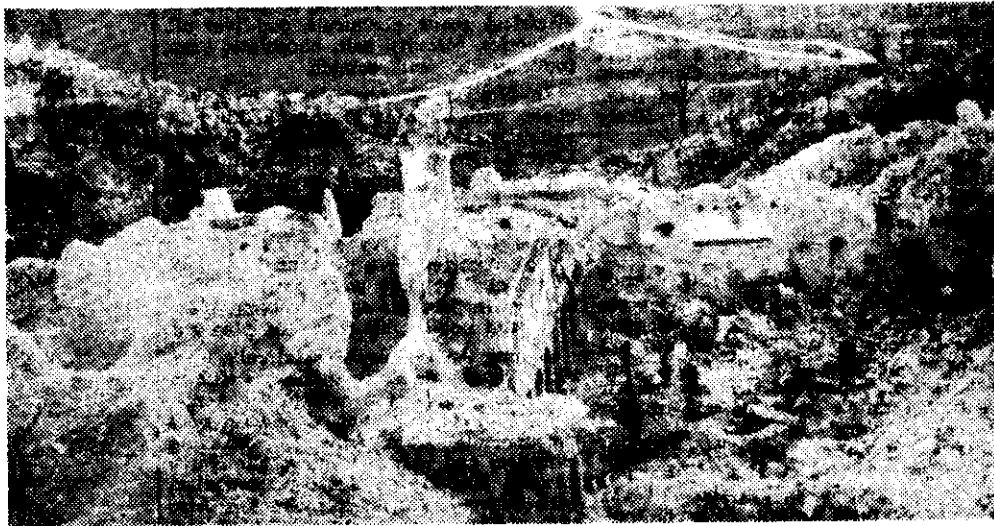
CASSINO ABBEY after the bombardment

activity at all levels, surely the bugbear of all military historians. He has overcome the difficulty and achieved remarkable clarity by adopting, neither obviously nor too rigidly, a constant arrangement within chapters. The writing is enlivened by the apt phrase and colourful imagery. There are no fruitless diversions, but happily, the "general historian" is never fully suppressed, so that we have stimulating, if fleeting, glimpses of the past, illuminating a moment of decision or a locality of historical consequence.

The author has offered opinion, but never dogmatically; indeed, the sense of dispassionate analysis is well sustained. Only at one point, and this is an incidental one, does the author re-

veal anything approaching personal prejudice—in a passing reference to a 25-pounder as "this lovable gun..." The term will no doubt pass unnoticed by other field gunners.

Inevitably much of the interest in this excellent volume will centre upon the analysis of the Cassino battles, and especially that of March 15-26. The morality of bombing the monastery at Montecassino may still be debated, but few will quarrel with Professor Phillips's dictum that the command of the New Zealand Corps had no "realistic alternative" but to demand the bombardment; greater weight might have been given to this conclusion by the revelation of how universally it was believed by the ordinary soldier in the Division that the



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