

GENESIS (addition to website [www.justlikeataxi.com](http://www.justlikeataxi.com))

*JUST LIKE A TAXI: FRONTLINE AMBULANCE, Italy 1944-45* Bill Cantrall celebrates the strangest military marriage of the war, undisciplined American civilian volunteers thrust into the front lines of allied armies to contend, serve, and finally bond with bands of Poles, Indians, Canadians, Gurkhas, Italians, New Zealanders, Afrikaners, French, British, and American GIs. These AFS rank amateurs proved to be “bloody marvels” and “damned nearly all heroes,” in Major John Masters’ *The Road Past Mandalay*, too *effective and vital* a part of British forces everywhere ever to be turned over to the US Army on contact as originally agreed.

But this remarkable, ultimately world-changing relationship is all but lost to history, a fact that suddenly came home to me in the New Zealand Embassy in 2002, where our group of WWII AFS drivers was being honored with a reception. With growing dismay I realized from the Ambassador’s general remarks about US and New Zealand cooperation that no one in this architecturally stunning structure, modeled on a Maori Council House, had any idea of what the AFS and 2NZ Kiwis had meant to one another. The equally bland response I had planned exploded into an impassioned recital of the reality, including AFS drivers, against orders, stopping to save Kiwi soldiers from burning lorries in the breakout from encirclement by Rommel’s Afrika Corps at Mersa Matruh, to re-form at El Alamein, and, in snow-bound Italy, Kiwi soldiers risking imprisonment to let unknown and clearly guilty me and co-driver Walt go free rather than carry out orders for our arrest, simply because we belonged to the American Field Service. Thunderous applause, and every young woman in the hall rushed up to embrace me. Presentation of AFS desert rescue of NZ soldiers in *LIFE* followed. See pic in [www.justlikeataxi.com](http://www.justlikeataxi.com) I had no choice but to “write that story down,” demanded by all, and eventually added equally pressing tales of life with the Poles, the Gurkhas, the Sikhs and Pathans, the Italians, the North Irish, the Twelfth Royal Lancers, South Africans, Yorkshiremen, AFS buddies, and, strangely enough, Yanks. Fortunately, at this distance from events, my younger self struck me as vastly amusing, which permitted the candor needed to show what *I* was really like. My experience, like others’, was intense, varied, and bizarre - extremely so, as I had no respect for the *Army Mind*, plus the temerity to follow my own, sometimes in accord with the Geneva Convention - which every army *did* mind. (I hadn’t come to war as a humanitarian internationalist, but so I became in the AFS, living and serving with my many brothers-in-arms.)

And thus was born History with Soul, not just military history with “a unique view of military operations,” but a more meaningful “portrait of the Italian campaign” with a full cast of characters. No one would ever enjoy the 2,000-pages of AFS history that J. P. Brinton III (Jody) and I had spent three years editing and preparing for a partly successful application to secure AFS drivers recognition as American veterans, but there seemed to be a willing audience for a more focused story with a single narrative line which would show what being an AFS driver was “really” like, a *representative* history: ***Just Like A Taxi***.

Most drivers had come to know one or two foreign army units; due to unique language, mapping, and topographical skills (WWI artillery vet Scoutmaster), I had been part of a dozen. No less, every driver saw action. Moving around I had “lucked out” with a lot. But most of all I was a natural lightning rod for trouble. Who else got shelled by both sides simultaneously? Who else broke every spring on his ambulance? Who else ever got arrested? - as well as, repeatedly, could have but didn’t? Who else was ever taken for an

Italian civilian, or an American GI? Who else could have gotten strafed by the last German plane in the air? Who else could have personally, by accident but proudly, pissed off Allied Commander Mark Clark yet managed to escape retribution - to the envy of many 5<sup>th</sup> Army GIs - and in an unmatchably improbable and hysterical way?

Hard to believe, but the American Field Service really were made part of the British Eighth Army, as Ambulance Car Company 485 and 567, AFS officers and drivers plus British support troops, Scots cooks and Yorkshire fitters in my platoon.