

Tale of Two Cities -- 1944

NAPLES, March 25 -- Two cities died over here this month.

One was executed by man ... deliberately and thoroughly ... that was Cassino.

The other was killed by Nature, blindly and horribly ... that was San Sebastiano.

Cassino's end was the quicker. In the span of a few hours it went up in the smoke and flame of thousands of tons of hot steel and high explosives.

San Sebastiano died for days, slowly, under a house-high river of molten lava that leisurely munched up its buildings like a lazy giant eating cookies.

Men still live in the carcasses of both cities. In Cassino are soldiers, Germans, British, Americans, who run and crawl and hide and kill among its bones.

In San Sebastiano there are soldiers too. But their task is life -- not death. They are saving what is left for the future. And San Sebastiano has a future. Cassino? Maybe, but hardly.

They are only 70 miles apart, these two cities, Cassino lies on the edge of the Liri Valley, its white buildings curving up Castle Hill. Between the town and the valley floor flows the bloody Rapido, while rising skyward behind are the two heights that will be talked of whenever infantrymen gather -- Montecassino and Monte Caro.