

A Presentation prepared by the Military History Study Group Moss Vale Mens Probus

The Battle of Monte Cassino

SITUATION PRIOR TO THE BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

One of the most controversial battles of World War II which involved, after much soul searching, the total destruction by the Allies of the centuries old Benedictine Abbey. It was questionable whether the Allies should even land in Italy after their North Africa successes. The Americans preferred to bypass Italy altogether and to land in Southern France (Operation Anvil) where they could give more direct support to the Normandy landing (Operation Overlord) which was being planned at that time.

The topography of Italy, with its limited frontage and central mountainous 6000 foot spine plus numerous bisecting river systems the length and breadth of the peninsula heavily favoured the defenders and was a primary reason for not landing in Italy. A further advantage for the defenders was that the Allied commanders were known to be reluctant to operate outside the range of their tactical air forces. This meant that seaborne landings to bypass defensive positions were limited to less than 300 miles from the nearest tactical airfields. This made the task for defending commanders of predicting likely beachheads and to pre-position reserve formations all the easier.

Regardless of the pros and cons, Churchill, who favoured landing in Italy won the day and landings in Sicily took place in July 1943. From here the 8th Army fought its way up the Italian peninsula, aided by the first bypass operation, the landing at Salerno on the West coast and within range of their tactical air force(the landing at Salerno, by the US 5th Army, Operation Avalanche, was correctly predicted by Field Marshall Kesselring). From Salerno the US 5th Army advanced on the left flank and the British 8th Army advanced on the right flank until both armies reached the Gustav Line. The Gustav Line was a major defensive line South of Anzio and occupied by the German 10th Army. It was on this line that the battle, known as the Battle of Monte Cassino, took place, its name being taken from the dominant feature in the line. The battle which proved to be a long drawn out affair incurring 68,000 casualties (and up to 200,000 if one includes the Italian casualties whose figures are questionable) started in January 1944 and would not be finalised until May.

SUMMARY OF THE BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

DATE. January to May 1944

LOCATION. The Gustav Line extended from Minyurno on the West Coast--Cassino--to Pescara on the East coast. It made use of the three river obstacles, the Garigliano on the west coast, the Rapido in the centre and the Sangro on the eastern flank. The bulwark of the Gustav Line was the mountainous region overlooking the Rapido river. These mountains also provided direct observation over the Liri Valley and Routes 6 and 7 the principal roads to Rome, about 70 miles to the north. The Anzio beachhead, which was established after the start of the Battle of Monte Cassino was about 50 miles North of the Gustav Line.

AIMS OF THE ACTION. From the Allies point of view there were two;

* To break through the Gustav Line with a view to advancing to and capturing Rome.

* To draw enemy formations away from the Anzio beachhead to enable that force to penetrate inland to cut off the 10 Army once the Gustav Line had been breached

The first aim was achieved eventually but the second was not for the reason that General Clark, a man interested in self promotion, probably paid more attention to being the first Allied commander to

capture a major Axis city, something which would be more newsworthy than the destruction of the German 10th Army.

From the German point of view the aim was to prevent or at least delay the Allied advance on Rome. To be practical the first aim was unattainable but the second was most successful and a tribute to the fighting qualities of the German soldier and to the Commander's skilful use of reserve formations.

COMMANDERS AND ORDER OF BATTLE

Allies

15th Army Group. General Alexander.

Br 8th Army. General Leese.

US 5th Army General Clark.

French Expeditionary Corps. General Juin

Polish Corps comprising two divisions.

8th Army comprised.

Br 10th Corps General McCreery, comprising 56th Div General Templar, 5th Div and 46th Div.

NZ 2nd Corps General Freyberg comprising NZ 2nd Div General Parkinson. This division comprised 4th Armoured Brigade and 5th and 6th Inf Brigades (comprising Maoris, British and Indians).

US 5th Army comprising US 2nd Corps General Keyes, 34th Div General Ryder, 36th Div General Walker. US VI Corps General Lucas.

French Expeditionary Corps comprising 2nd Moroccan Inf Div General Dody and 3rd Algerian Inf Div General de Monsabert.

Polish Corps comprising two divisions.

Germans

Army Group Commander. Field Marshal Kesselring.

10th Army. General Vietinghoff. Comprising 6 divisions. These were used for the defence of the Gustav Line.

14th Army. General Mackensen. Comprised 8 divisions. These were used primarily for containing the Anzio beachhead.

German 10th Army comprised

XIV Corps. This comprised 5th Grenadier Div, General Schrank, 44th Inf Div, General Franck, 90th Panzer Grenadier Div, General Baade, 15th Panzer Grenadier Div, General Rodt, 94th Inf Div, General Steinmetz, 1st Parachute Div General Heidrich. Other divisions took part in the Battle of Monte Cassino but details are not readily available.

THE BATTLE. The battle which extended over 5 months from January to May 1944 is best summarised in its four phases. These phases are described as the Four Battles of Monte Cassino. Not all formations listed in the order of battle above were necessarily involved in all phases.

The First Battle. This took place between 12 January and 16 January. Heavy air attacks on German airfields and lines of communication preceded the battle, The US 34th Div, which was committed to a frontal attack was nearly annihilated on the Rapido River where the approaches were through wet marshlands which made the going extremely difficult. The US 36th Div captured Monte Trocchio, a feature overlooking the River Garigliano on the southern flank. The French Expeditionary Corps had some success in the mountains north of the Abbey but was diverted from this by General Clark who ordered it to turn south and aid the 34th Div in its attack. This resulted in the capture of a minor feature, Monte San Croce.

The Second Battle. This took place between 17 January and 18 February. An important event for the future conduct of the battle was the establishment by the British 10th Corps supported by the 5th Div of a bridgehead across the River Garigliano on the southern flank. The US 36th Div (Texans) suffered heavy casualties in attempting to cross the Rapido, losing most of their rafts and assault boats but they did manage to establish a bridgehead across the river with two infantry companies.

On 22 January the US VI Corps, landed at Anzio. On the same day, the bridgehead across the Rapido was forced back across the river with heavy losses. All fighting to date failed to draw any German reserves away from Anzio. The French planted their flag on the summit of Monte Belvedere, which is a feature about 6 miles north of the Abbey. In late January, 34th US Div achieved limited success crossing the Rapido and established a bridgehead with the 168th Inf Regt. On 2 February the US 133rd Regt entered the town of Cassino but was soon forced to withdraw.

On 11 February General Clark relieved the battered US 34th Div with the 4th Indian Div and on 15 February the Abbey was destroyed by heavy bombers because of its possible use as an observation post by the Germans which was questionable. The bombing achieved little and there were no German casualties. The main casualties were civilians who assumed they were safe to shelter there. The ruins subsequently proved to be a major obstacle for attacking Allied troops

The Third Battle. The responsibility for winning Monte Cassino was passed to the New Zealand Corps in March. Starting at 0830 hrs on 15 March, waves of Allied bombers began carpet bombing Cassino and targets to the north for four hours non stop. This was followed by a preparatory bombardment by 746 artillery pieces from three corps firing over 200,000 shells. Behind this covering fire, the New Zealanders and Indians (acknowledged as the best troops in the theatre), supported by armour, advanced against Cassino where they were surprised to meet ferocious German resistance. It took another 36 hours to advance to the centre of the rubble strewn town. By 18 March the railway station had fallen and the remains of the Hotel Continental were occupied. On 21 March Alexander discussed with his field commanders whether the attack should be terminated. General Freyberg obtained permission to try one more attack. The New Zealanders try once more but are stopped cold by 1st Parachute Div which refused to yield so much as a single yard. On 23 March, General Alexander ordered a halt. The Gurkhas cut off on Height 435 held up Red Cross flags and the Germans allowed them to pass through on their way back to their own lines.

The Fourth Battle. By May, the Allied command decided on a new approach. A broad offensive along the entire Gustav Line. The Americans to attack on the west coast; the French to move through the Arunci Mountains in the east; the British to advance across the Rapido, from their earlier established bridgehead, and into the Liri Valley and then to turn towards the Monte Cassino high ground and the Polish Corps to storm the Germans in their Abbey stronghold. This tactic worked and the breakthrough was finally achieved.

RESULTS. The Allies suffered 31,000 casualties and the Germans 37,000. Whilst the Allies eventually won the battle, the Germans fought a magnificent defensive battle and through the skilful use of reserves by Kesselring was also able to contain the Anzio beachhead throughout most of the Battle. Whilst Rome eventually fell, most of the German Army withdrew in tact rather than being cut off by the US 5th Army, as was the intention, and escaped to fight another day on other well prepared defensive lines, including the Trasimene and Gothic Lines. A telling comment on the Italian Campaign thus far is probably best made by the German commander Kesselring. Kesselring said "The Allied plans showed throughout that the Allied Command's dominating thought was to make sure of success (a Montgomery principle), a thought that led it to use orthodox methods and material. As a result it was almost always possible for me, despite inadequate means of reconnaissance and scanty

reports, to foresee the next strategic or tactical move of my opponent and thus to take the appropriate counter measures so far as my resources allowed"

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