

Battle of Monte Cassino

17 January thru 18 May 1944



Monte Cassino Abbey in November 2004

The Battle of Monte Cassino (also known as the Battle for Rome and the Battle for Cassino) was a costly series of four assaults by the Allies against the Winter Line in Italy held by the Germans and Italians during the Italian Campaign of World War II. The intention was a breakthrough to Rome.

At the beginning of 1944, the western half of the Winter Line was being anchored by Germans holding the Rapido, Liri, and Garigliano valleys and some of the surrounding peaks and ridges. Together, these features formed the Gustav Line. Monte Cassino, a historic hilltop abbey founded in AD 529 by Benedict of Nursia, dominated the nearby town of Cassino and the entrances to the Liri and Rapido valleys, but had been left unoccupied by the German defenders. The Germans had, however, manned some positions set into the steep slopes below the abbey's walls.

Fearing that the abbey did form part of the Germans' defensive line, primarily as a lookout post, the Allies sanctioned its bombing on 15 February and American bombers proceeded to drop 1,400 tons of bombs onto it. The destruction and rubble left by the bombing raid now provided better protection from aerial and artillery attacks, so, two days later, German paratroopers took up positions in the abbey's ruins. Between 17 January and 18 May, Monte Cassino and the assaulted four times by Allied troops, the last involving twenty divisions attacking along a twenty-mile Gustav defenses were front. The German defenders were finally driven from their positions, but at a high cost.

Background

The Allied landings in Italy in September 1943 by two Allied armies commanded by General Sir Harold Alexander, Commander-in-Chief Allied Armies in Italy, were followed by an advance northward on two fronts, one on each side of the central mountain range forming the "spine" of Italy. On the western front, U.S. Fifth Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General Mark W. Clark, moved from the main base of Naples up the Italian "boot" and in the east General Sir Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army advanced up the Adriatic coast.

Fifth Army made slow progress in the face of difficult terrain, wet weather and skillful German defences. The Germans were fighting from a series of prepared positions in a manner designed to inflict maximum damage, then pulling back and so buying time for the construction of the Winter Line defensive positions south of Rome. The original estimates that Rome would fall by October 1943 proved much too optimistic. Although in the east the German defensive line had been breached on Eighth Army's Adriatic front and Ortona was captured, the advance had ground to a halt with the onset of winter blizzards at the end of December, making close air support and movement in the jagged terrain impossible. The route to Rome from the east using Route 5 was thus excluded as a viable option leaving the routes from Naples to Rome, highways 6 and 7, as the only possibilities; highway 7 (the old Roman Appian Way) followed along the west coast but south of Rome ran into the Pontine Marshes which the Germans had flooded. Highway 6 ran through the Liri valley. Dominating the south entrance to this valley was the hill mass behind the town of Cassino. Excellent observation from the peaks of several hills allowed the German defenders to detect Allied movement, prevent any advance northward, and direct artillery fire on Allied units. Running across the Allied line of advance was the fast flowing Rapido River which rose in the central Apennine mountains, flowed through Cassino and across the entrance to the Liri valley (where the Liri joined the Rapido) after which its name changed to the River Garigliano (often referred to as the "Gari" by the Allies) and it continued to the sea. With its heavily fortified mountain defenses, difficult river crossings (not only was the river fast flowing, but the Germans had temporarily diverted the Rapido at the head of the valley so as to flood the valley bottom and make conditions underfoot most difficult for any attackers), Cassino formed a linchpin of the Gustav Line, the most formidable line of the defensive positions making up the Winter Line.

Because of the historical significance of the fourteen centuries old Benedictine Abbey, in December 1943, the German commander-in-chief in Italy, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, ordered German units not to

include the monastery itself in their defensive positions, and informed the Vatican and the Allies accordingly.

Some Allied reconnaissance aircraft reported seeing German troops inside the monastery. The monastery had excellent observation of the surrounding hills and valleys, and thus was a natural site for German artillery observers. It is clear that once the monastery was destroyed the Germans occupied it and made use of the rubble to build defensive positions. Ultimately, however, the military arguments leading to the monastery's destruction rested on its potential threat (real or imagined) rather than its actual state of occupation.

First battle



Plan of Attack.

The plan of U.S. Fifth Army commander General Clark was for British X Corps, on the left of a twenty mile front, to attack on January 17, 1944, across the Garigliano near the coast (British 5th and British 56th Infantry Divisions). British 46th Infantry Division was to attack on the night of January 19 across the Garigliano below its junction with the Liri in support of the main attack by U.S. II Corps on their right. The main central thrust by U.S. II Corps would commence on January 20 with 36th (Texas) U.S. Infantry Division making an assault across the swollen Rapido river five miles downstream of Cassino. Simultaneously the French Expeditionary Corps, under General Alphonse Juin would continue its "right hook" move towards Monte Cairo, the hinge to the Gustav and Hitler defensive lines. In truth, Clark did not believe there was much chance of an early breakthrough, but he felt that the attacks would draw German reserves away from the Rome area in time for the attack on Anzio where U.S. VI Corps (British 1st and U.S. 3rd Infantry Divisions) was due to make an amphibious landing on January 22. It was hoped that the Anzio landing, with the benefit of surprise and a rapid move inland to the Alban Hills, which command both routes 6 and 7, would so threaten the Gustav defenders' rear and supply lines that it might just unsettle the German commanders and cause them to withdraw from the Gustav Line to positions north of Rome. Whilst this would have been consistent with the German tactics of the previous three months, Allied intelligence had not understood that the strategy of fighting retreat had been for the sole purpose of providing time to prepare the Gustav line where the Germans intended to stand firm. The intelligence assessment of Allied prospects was therefore over-optimistic

Fifth Army had only reached the Gustav line on January 15, having taken six weeks of heavy fighting to advance the last seven miles through the Bernhardt Line positions during which time they had sustained 16,000 casualties. They hardly had time to prepare the new assault, let alone take the rest and reorganization they really needed after three months of attritional fighting north from Naples. However, because the Allied Chiefs of Staff would only make landing craft available until early February, the Anzio landing had to take place in late January with the coordinated attack on the Gustav line some three days earlier.



Royal Engineers cross Garigliano river on 19 January 1944

The first assault was made on January 17. Near the coast, British X Corps (56th and 5th Divisions) forced a crossing of the Garigliano (followed some two days later by British 46th Division on their right) causing General von Senger, commander of German XIV Panzer Corps and responsible for the Gustav defenses on the south western half of the line, some serious concern as to the ability of the German 94th Infantry Division to hold the line. Responding to Senger's concerns, Kesselring ordered the 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions from the Rome area to provide reinforcement. There is some speculation as to what might have been if X Corps had had the reserves available to exploit their success and make a decisive breakthrough. The corps did not have the extra men, but there would certainly have been time to alter the overall battle plan and cancel or modify the central attack by U.S. II Corps to make men available to force the issue in the south before the German reinforcements were able to get into position. As it happened, Fifth Army HQ failed to appreciate the frailty of the German position, and the plan was unchanged. The two divisions from Rome arrived by January 21 and stabilized the German position in the south. In one respect, however, the plan was working in that Kesselring's reserves had been drawn south. The three divisions of X Corps sustained 4,000 casualties during the period of the first battle.

The central thrust by U.S. 36th Division commenced three hours after sunset on January 20. The lack of time to prepare meant that the approach to the river was still hazardous due to uncleared mines and booby traps, and the highly technical business of an opposed river crossing lacked the necessary planning and rehearsal. Although a battalion of the 143rd Regiment was able to get across the Rapido on the south side of San Angelo and two companies of the 141st Regiment on the north side, they were isolated for most of the time, and at no time was Allied armor able to get across the river, leaving them highly vulnerable to counterattacking tanks and self-propelled guns of General Eberhard Rodt's 15th Panzer Grenadier Division. The southern group was forced back across the river by mid-morning of January 21. Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Keyes, commanding II Corps, pressed Maj. Gen. Fred Walker of 36th Division to renew the attack immediately. Once again the two regiments attacked but with no more success against the well dug-in 15th Panzer Grenadier Division: 143rd Regiment got the equivalent of two battalions across, but once again there was no armored support, and they were devastated when daylight came the next day.

The 141st Regiment also crossed in two battalion strength, and despite the lack of armored support managed to advance 1 km . However, with the coming of daylight, they too were cut down, and by the evening of January 22 the regiment had virtually ceased to exist; only 40 men made it back to the Allied lines. The assault had been a costly failure, with 36th Division losing 2,100 men killed, wounded and missing in 48 hours.



A German Panzer crew attempt to restore their Pz.Kpfw. IV Ausf. H tank's mobility after receiving battle damage during fighting around Monte Cassino



First Battle: Northern Sector 24 January – 11 February 1944.

The next attack was launched on January 24. The U.S. II Corps, with 34th Infantry Division under Maj. Gen. Charles W. Ryder spearheading the attack and French colonial troops on its right flank, launched an assault across the flooded Rapido valley north of Cassino and into the mountains behind with the intention of then wheeling to the left and attacking Monte Cassino from high ground. Whilst the task of crossing the river would be easier in that the Rapido upstream of Cassino was fordable, the flooding made movement on the approaches each side very difficult. In particular, armor could only move on paths laid with steel matting, and it took eight days of bloody fighting across the waterlogged ground for 34th Division to push back General Franek's 44th Infantry Division to establish a foothold in the mountains.

On the right, the Moroccan-French troops made good initial progress against the German 5th Mountain Division, commanded by General Julius Ringel, gaining positions on the slopes of their key objective, Monte Cifalco. Forward units of the 3rd Algerian Division had also by-passed Monte Cifalco to capture Monte Belvedere and Colle Abate. General Juin was convinced that Cassino could be bypassed and the German defenses unhinged by this northerly route but his request for reserves to maintain the momentum of his advance was refused and the one available reserve regiment (from 36th Division) was sent to reinforce 34th Division. By January 31 the French had ground to a halt with Monte Cifalco, which had a clear view of the French and U.S. flanks and supply lines, still in German hands. The two Moroccan-French divisions sustained 2,500 casualties in their struggles around Monte Belvedere.

It became U.S. 34th Division's task (joined by 142nd Regiment of 36th Division) to fight southward along the linked hilltops towards the intersecting ridge on the south end of which was Monastery Hill. They could then break through down into the Liri valley behind the Gustav Line defenses. It was very tough going: the mountains were rocky, strewn with boulders and cut by ravines and gullies. Digging foxholes on the rocky ground was out of the question, and each feature was exposed to fire from surrounding high points. The ravines were no better since the gorse growing there, far from giving cover, had been sown with mines, booby-traps and hidden barbed wire by the defenders. The Germans had had three months to prepare their defensive positions using dynamite and to stockpile ammunition and stores. There was no natural shelter, and the weather was wet and freezing cold.

By early February, American infantry had captured a strategic point near the hamlet of San Onofrio, less than a mile from the abbey, and by February 7 a battalion had reached Point 445, a round top hill immediately below the monastery and no more than 400 yards away. An American squad managed a reconnaissance right up against the cliff-like abbey walls, with the monks observing German and American patrols exchanging fire. However, attempts to take Monte Cassino were broken by overwhelming machine gun fire from the slopes below the monastery. Despite their fierce fighting, the 34th Division never managed to take the final redoubts on Hill 593 (known to the Germans as Calvary Mount), held by the 3rd battalion of the German 2nd Parachute Regiment, the dominating point of the ridge to the monastery.

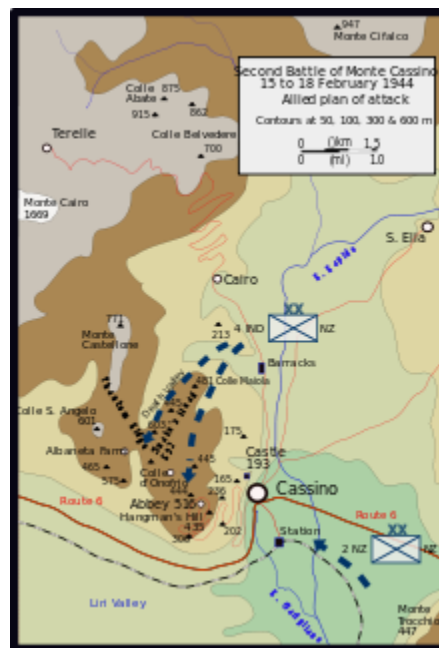
On February 11, after a final unsuccessful 3-day assault on Monastery Hill and Cassino town, the Americans were withdrawn. U.S. II Corps, after two and a half weeks of torrid battle, was fought out. The performance of 34th Division in the mountains is considered to rank as one of the finest feats of arms carried out by any soldiers during the war. In return they sustained losses of about 80% in the Infantry battalions, some 2,200 casualties.

At the height of the battle in the first days of February General von Senger und Etterlin had moved 90th Division from the Garigliano front to north of Cassino and had been so alarmed at the rate of attrition, he had "...mustered all the weight of my authority to request that the Battle of Cassino should be broken off and that we should occupy a quite new line. ... a position, in fact, north of the Anzio bridgehead". Kesselring refused the request. At the crucial moment von Senger was able to throw in the 71st Infantry Division whilst leaving 15th Panzer Grenadiers (whom they had been due to relieve) in place.

During the battle there had been occasions when, with more astute use of reserves, promising positions might have been turned into decisive moves. Some historians suggest this failure to capitalize on initial success could be put down to General Clark's lack of experience. However, it is more likely that he just had too much to do, being responsible for both the Cassino and Anzio offensives. This view is supported by General Truscott's inability, as related below, to get hold of him for discussions at a vital juncture of the Anzio breakout at the time of the fourth Cassino battle. Whilst General Alexander chose (for perfectly logical co-ordination arguments) to have Cassino and Anzio under a single army commander and splitting the Gustav line front between U.S. Fifth Army and British Eighth Army, Kesselring chose to create a separate Fourteenth Army under Gen. Eberhard von Mackensen to fight at Anzio whilst leaving the Gustav line in the sole hands of Gen. Heinrich von Vietinghoff's Tenth Army.

The withdrawn American units were replaced by the New Zealand Corps (2nd New Zealand Division and 4th Indian Division) from the British Eighth Army on the Adriatic front. The New Zealand Corps was commanded by Lt. Gen. Bernard Freyberg.

Second battle (Operation Avenger)



Second Battle: Plan of Attack.

With U.S. VI Corps under heavy threat at Anzio, Freyberg was under equal pressure to launch a relieving action at Cassino. Once again, therefore, the battle commenced without the attackers being fully prepared. As well, Corps HQ did not fully appreciate the difficulty in getting 4th Indian Infantry Division into place in the mountains and supplying them on the ridges and valleys north of Cassino (using mules across 7 miles of goat tracks over terrain in full view of the monastery, exposed to accurate artillery fire - hence the naming of Death Valley).

Freyberg's plan was a continuation of the first battle: an attack from the north along the mountain ridges and an attack from the southeast along the railway line and to capture the railway station across the Rapido less than a mile south of Cassino town. Success would pinch out Cassino town and open up the Liri valley. However, Freyberg had informed his superiors that he believed, given the circumstances, there was no better than a 50% chance of success for the offensive.

Increasingly, the opinions of certain Allied officers were fixed on the great abbey of Monte Cassino: in their view it was the abbey-and its presumed use as a German artillery observation point-that prevented the breach of the 'Gustav Line'.

The British press and C. L. Sulzberger of The New York Times frequently and convincingly and in (often manufactured) detail wrote of German observation posts and artillery positions inside the abbey. The commander in chief of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker accompanied by Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers (deputy to General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, the Supreme Allied Commander of the Mediterranean Theater) personally observed during a fly-over "a radio mast, German uniforms hanging on a clothesline in the abbey courtyard; [and] machine gun emplacements 50 yards from the abbey walls." Major General Geoffrey Keyes of U.S. II Corps also flew over the monastery several times; he then reported to Fifth Army G-2 that he had seen no evidence the Germans were in the abbey. When informed of others who had claimed to have seen Germans in the abbey, he stated: "They've been looking so long they're seeing things."

The view in New Zealand Corps HQ was that the monastery was probably being used as the German's main vantage point for artillery spotting, since it was so perfectly situated for the purpose that no army could refrain from using it. There is no clear evidence to this effect, but he went on to write that from a military point of view the current state of occupancy of the monastery was immaterial: "If not occupied today, it might be tomorrow and it did not appear it would be difficult for the enemy to bring reserves into it during an attack or for troops to take shelter there if driven from positions outside. It was impossible to ask troops to storm a hill surmounted by an intact building such as this, capable of sheltering several hundred infantry in perfect security from shellfire and ready at the critical moment to emerge and counter-attack. ... Undamaged it was a perfect shelter but with its narrow windows and level profiles an unsatisfactory fighting position. Smashed by bombing it was a jagged heap of broken masonry and debris open to effective fire from guns, mortars and strafing planes as well as being a death trap if bombed again. On the whole I thought it would be more useful to the Germans if we left it unbombed".

Major General Francis Toker, whose 4th Indian Division would have the task of attacking Monastery Hill, had made his own appreciation of the situation. In the absence of detailed intelligence at Fifth Army HQ, he had found a book dated 1879 in a Naples bookshop giving details of the construction of the abbey. In his memorandum to Freyberg he concluded that regardless of whether the monastery was currently occupied by the Germans, it should be demolished to prevent its effective occupation. He also pointed out that with 150 foot high walls made of masonry at least 10 feet thick, there was no practical means for field engineers to deal with the place, and that bombing with "blockbuster" bombs would be the only solution since 1,000 pound bombs would be "next to useless". Toker said he could not be induced to attack unless "the garrison was reduced to helpless lunacy by sheer unending pounding for days and nights by air and artillery"

On February 11, 1944, the acting commander of 4th Indian Division, Brigadier Harry Dimoline, requested the bombing of the abbey of Monte Cassino. Toker reiterated again his case for bombing the monastery from his hospital bed in Caserta, where he was suffering a severe attack of a recurrent tropical fever. Freyberg transmitted his request on February 12. Freyberg's request for an air attack, however, was greatly expanded by air force planners, and probably supported by Ira Eaker and Jacob Devers. They sought to use the opportunity to showcase the abilities of U.S. Army air power to support ground operations. Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark of Fifth Army and his chief of staff Major General Alfred Gruenther remained unconvinced of the "military necessity". When handing over the U.S. II Corps position to the New Zealand Corps, Brigadier General J.A. Butler, deputy commander of U.S. 34th

Division, had said "I don't know, but I don't believe the enemy is in the convent. All the fire has been from the slopes of the hill below the wall". Finally Clark, "who did not want the monastery bombed," pinned down the Commander-in-Chief Allied Armies in Italy, General Sir Harold Alexander to take the responsibility: "I said, 'You give me a direct order and we'll do it,' and he did."



A B-17 Flying Fortress over Monte Cassino, 15 February 1944

The bombing mission in the morning of February 15, 1944 involved 142 Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses heavy bombers followed by 47 North American B-25 Mitchell and 40 Martin B-26 Marauder medium bombers. In all they dropped 1,150 tons of high explosives and incendiary bombs on the abbey, reducing the entire top of Monte Cassino to a smoking mass of rubble. Between bomb runs, the II Corps artillery pounded the mountain. Many Allied soldiers and war correspondents cheered as they observed the spectacle. Eaker and Devers watched; Juin was heard to remark "... no, they'll never get anywhere this way." Clark and Gruenther refused to be on the scene and stayed at their headquarters. That same afternoon and the next day, in an aggressive follow-up, further artillery barrages and additional tonnage onto the ruins by 59 fighter bombers convulsed the rubble of the great abbey. The German positions on Point 593 above and behind the monastery were untouched.

The air raid however, had not been coordinated between the air and ground commands, with the timing driven by the Air Force projecting it as a separate operation, considering the weather and to be fitted in with other requirements on other fronts and theaters and without reference to the ground forces. Indeed, the Indian troops on the Snake's Head were taken by surprise when the bombing actually started. The raid took place two days before the New Zealand Corps was ready to launch their main assault. Many of the troops had only taken over their positions from U.S. II Corps on February 13, and besides the difficulties in the mountains, preparations in the valley had also been held up by difficulties in supplying the newly installed troops with sufficient material for a full-scale assault because of incessantly foul weather, flooding, and waterlogged ground.



Monte Cassino in ruins.

Pope Pius XII was silent after the bombing; however, his Cardinal Secretary of State, Luigi Maglione, bluntly stated to the senior U.S. diplomat to the Vatican, Harold Tittmann, that the bombing was "a colossal blunder . . . a piece of a gross stupidity.

It is certain from every investigation that followed since the event that the only people killed in the monastery by the bombing were 230 Italian civilians seeking refuge in the abbey. There is no evidence that the bombs dropped on the Monte Cassino monastery that day ever killed any German troops. However, given the imprecision of bombing in those days (it was estimated that only 10% of the bombs from the heavy bombers, bombing from high altitude, hit the monastery) bombs did fall elsewhere and killed German and Allied troops alike, although that would have been unintended. Indeed, sixteen bombs hit the Fifth Army compound at Presenzano 17 miles from Monte Cassino and exploded only yards away from the trailer where Gen. Clark was doing paperwork at his desk.

On the day after the bombing at first light, most of the civilians still alive fled the ruins. Only about 40 people remained: the six monks who survived in the deep vaults of the abbey, their 79 year old abbot, Gregorio Diamare, three tenant farmer families, orphaned or abandoned children, the badly wounded and the dying. After artillery barrages, renewed bombing and attacks on the ridge by 4th Indian Division, the

monks decided to leave their ruined home with the others who could move at 07:30 on February 17. The old abbot was leading the group down the mule path toward the Liri valley, reciting the rosary. After they arrived at a German first-aid station, some of the badly wounded who had been carried by the monks were taken away in a military ambulance. After meeting with a German officer, the monks were driven to the monastery of Sant'Anselmo. On February 18, the abbot met the commander of XIV Panzer Corps, Lieutenant-General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin. One monk, Carlomanno Pellagalli, returned to the abbey; when he was later seen wandering the ruins, the German paratroopers thought he was a ghost. After April 3, he was not seen anymore.



German paratroopers at Monte Cassino

It is now known that the Germans had an agreement with the monks to not use the Abbey for military purposes as long as they remained. Following its destruction, paratroopers of the German 1st Parachute Division then occupied the ruins of the abbey and turned it into a fortress and observation post, which became a serious problem for the attacking allied forces.

On the night following the bombing, a company of the 1st Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment (one of the British elements in 4th Indian Division) attacked the key point 593 from their position 70 yards away on Snakeshead Ridge. The assault failed, with the company sustaining 50% casualties.

The following night the Sussex Regiment was ordered to attack in battalion strength. There was a calamitous start. Artillery could not be used in direct support targeting point 593 because of the proximity and risk of shelling friendly troops. It was planned therefore to shell point 575 which had been providing supporting fire to the defenders of point 593. The topography of the land meant that shells fired at 575 had to pass very low over Snakeshead ridge, and in the event some fell among the gathering assault companies. After reorganizing, the attack went in at midnight. The fighting was brutal and often hand to hand, but the determined defense held and the Sussex battalion was beaten off, once again sustaining over

50% casualties. Over the two nights, the Sussex Regiment lost 12 out of 15 officers and 162 out of 313 men who took part in the attack.

On the night of February 17 the main assault took place. The 4/6th Rajputana Rifles would take on the assault of point 593 along Snakeshead Ridge with the depleted Sussex Regiment held in reserve. 1/9th Gurkha Rifles was to attack Point 444. In the meantime, the 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles were to sweep across the slopes and ravines in a direct assault on the monastery. This latter was across appalling terrain, but it was hoped that the Gurkhas, from the Himalayas and so expert in mountain terrain, would succeed. This proved a faint hope. Once again the fighting was brutal, but no progress was made and casualties heavy. The Rajputanas lost 196 officers and men, the 1/9th Gurkhas 149 and the 1/2nd Gurkhas 96. It became clear that the attack had failed, and on February 18 Brigadier Dimoline and Freyberg called off the attacks on Monastery Hill.

In the other half of the main assault the two companies from 28th (Mliri) Battalion from the New Zealand Division forced a crossing of the Rapido and attempted to gain the rail road station in Cassino town. The intention was to take a perimeter that would allow engineers to build a causeway for armored support. Nevertheless, with the aid of a near constant smoke screen laid down by Allied artillery that obscured their location to the German batteries on Monastery Hill, the Mliri were able to hold their positions for much of the day. Their isolation and lack of both armored support and anti-tank guns made for a hopeless situation, however, when an armored counterattack came in the afternoon on February 18. They were ordered to pull back to the river when it became clear to headquarters that both the attempts to break through (in the mountains and along the causeway) would not succeed. It had been very close. The Germans had been very alarmed by the capture of the station and, from a conversation on record between Kesselring and Tenth Army commander Gen. von Vietinghoff, had not expected their counterattack to succeed.

Third battle

For the third battle, it was decided that whilst the winter weather persisted, fording the Rapido downstream of Cassino town was an unattractive option (after the unhappy experiences in the first two battles). The "right hook" in the mountains had also been a costly failure, and it was decided to launch twin attacks from the north along the Rapido valley: one towards the fortified Cassino town and the other towards Monastery Hill. The idea was to clear the path through the bottleneck between these two features to allow access towards the station on the south and so to the Liri valley. British 78th Infantry Division, which had arrived in late February and placed under the command of New Zealand Corps, would then cross the Rapido downstream of Cassino and start the push to Rome.

None of the Allied commanders were very happy with the plan, but it was hoped that an unprecedented preliminary bombing by heavy bombers would prove the trump. Three clear days of good weather were required and for twenty one successive days the assault was postponed as the troops waited in the freezing wet positions for a favourable weather forecast. Matters were not helped by the loss of Major General Kippenberger, commanding 2 New Zealand Division, wounded by an anti-personnel mine and losing both

his feet. He was replaced by Brigadier Graham Parkinson. Meanwhile, a German counterattack at Anzio had failed and been called off.



Third Battle: Plan of Attack.

The third battle began March 15. After a bombardment of 750 tons of 1,000-pound bombs with delayed action fuses, starting at 08:30 and lasting three and a half hours, the New Zealanders advanced behind a creeping artillery barrage from 746 artillery pieces. Success depended on taking advantage of the paralyzing effect of the bombing. The bombing was not concentrated - only 50% landed a mile or less from the target point and 8% within 1,000 yards but between it and the shelling about half the 300 paratroopers in the town had been killed. The defenses rallied more quickly than expected, and the Allied armor was held up by bomb craters. Nevertheless success was there for the New Zealanders' taking, but by the time a follow-up assault on the left had been ordered that evening it was too late: defenses had reorganized, and more critically, the rain, contrary to forecast, had started again. Torrents of rain flooded bomb craters, turned rubble into a morass and blotted out communications, the radio sets being incapable of surviving the constant immersion. The dark rain clouds also blotted out the moonlight, hindering the task of clearing routes through the ruins. On the right, the New Zealanders had captured Castle Hill and point 165, and as planned, elements of Indian 4th Infantry Division, now commanded by Major General Alexander Galloway, had passed through to attack point 236 and thence to point 435, Hangman's Hill. In the confusion of the fight, a company of the 1/9th Gurkha Rifles had taken a track avoiding point 236 and captured point 435 whilst the assault on point 236 by the 1/6th Rajputana Rifles had been beaten off.

By the end of March 17 the Gurkhas held Hangman's Hill (point 435), 250 yards from the monastery, in battalion strength (although their lines of supply were compromised by the German positions at point 236 and in the northern part of the town), and whilst the town was still fiercely defended, New Zealand units

and armor had got through the bottleneck and captured the station. However, the Germans were still able to reinforce their troops in the town and were proving adept at slipping snipers back into parts of the town that had supposedly been cleared.

March 19 was planned for the decisive blow in the town and on the monastery, including a surprise attack by tanks of 20th Armored Brigade working their way along the track ("Cavendish Road") from Cairra to Albaneta Farm (which had been prepared by engineer units under the cover of darkness) and from there towards the Abbey. However, a surprise and fiercely pressed counterattack from the monastery on Castle Hill by the German 1st Parachute Division completely disrupted any possibility of an assault on the monastery from the Castle and Hangman's Hill whilst the tanks, lacking infantry support, were all knocked out by mid-afternoon. In the town the attackers made little progress, and overall the initiative was passing to the Germans whose positions close to Castle Hill, which was the gateway to the position on Monastery Hill, crippled any prospects of early success.

On 20 March Freyberg committed elements of 78th Infantry Division to the battle; firstly to provide a greater troop presence in the town so that cleared areas would not be reinfilitrated by the Germans, and secondly to reinforce Castle Hill to allow troops to be released to close off the two routes between Castle Hill and Points 175 and 165 being used by the Germans to reinforce the defenders in the town. The Allied commanders felt they were on the brink of success as grim fighting continued through 21 March. However, the defenders were resolute and the attack on Point 445 to block the German reinforcement route had narrowly failed whilst in the town Allied gains were measured only house by house.

On 23 March Alexander met with his commanders. A range of opinions were expressed as to the possibility of victory but it was evident that the New Zealand and Indian Divisions were exhausted. Freyberg was convinced that the attack could not continue and he called it off. The German 1st Parachute Division had taken a mauling, but had held.

The next three days were spent stabilizing the front, extracting the isolated Gurkhas from Hangman's Hill and the detachment from New Zealand 24 Battalion which had held Point 202 in similar isolation. The Allied line was reorganized with the exhausted 4th Indian Division and 2 New Zealand Division withdrawn and replaced respectively in the mountains by British 78th Division and in the town by British 1st Guards Brigade. The New Zealand Corps headquarters was dissolved on 26 March and control was assumed by British XIII Corps. In their time on the Cassino front line 4th Indian Division had lost 3,000 men and the New Zealand Division 1,600 men killed, missing and wounded.

The German defenders too had paid a heavy price. The German XIV Corps War Diary for 23 March noted that the battalions in the front line had strengths varying between 40 and 120 men.

Fourth and final battle (Operation Diadem)

General Alexander's strategy in Italy was "...to force the enemy to commit the maximum number of divisions in Italy at the time the cross-channel invasion is launched."

Circumstances allowed him the time to prepare a major offensive to achieve this. His plan, originally inspired from French General Juin's idea to circle around Cassino and take the Aurunci with his mountain troops to break the Gustav line, was to shift the bulk of the British Eighth Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Oliver Leese, from the Adriatic front across the spine of Italy to join the U.S. Fifth Army and attack along a 20-mile front between Cassino and the sea. Fifth Army (U.S. II Corps and French Expeditionary Corps) would be on the left and Eighth Army (XIII Corps and Polish II Corps) on the right. It would be possible to deploy large formations and armour effectively. With the arrival of the spring weather, ground conditions were



Fourth Battle (Operation Diadem): Allied Plan of Attack.

The plan for Operation Diadem was that U.S. II Corps on the left would attack up the coast along the line of Route 7 towards Rome. The French Corps to their right would attack from the bridgehead across the Garigliano originally created by X Corps in the first battle in January into the Aurunci Mountains which formed a barrier between the coastal plain and the Liri Valley. British XIII Corps in the centre right of the front would attack along the Liri valley. On the right Polish II Corps (3rd and 5th Divisions) commanded by Lt. Gen. Wladyslaw Anders, which was formed largely from the survivors of the Siberian exile effected by the 1939 Soviet occupation of Poland, had relieved 78th Division in the mountains behind Cassino on April 24 and would attempt the task which had defeated 4th Indian Division in February: isolate the monastery and push round behind it into the Liri valley to link with XIII Corps' thrust and pinch out the Cassino position. It was hoped that being a much larger force than their 4th Indian Division predecessors they would be able to saturate the German defenses which would as a result be unable to give supporting fire to each other's positions. Improved weather, ground conditions and supply would also be important factors. Once again, the pinching maneuver by the Polish and British Corps were key to the overall success. Canadian I Corps would be held in reserve ready to exploit the expected breakthrough. Once the German Tenth Army had been defeated, U.S. VI Corps would break out of the Anzio beachhead to cut off the retreating Germans in the Alban Hills.

The large troop movements required for this took two months to execute. They had to be carried out in small units to maintain secrecy and surprise. U.S. 36th Division was sent on amphibious assault training,

and road signposts and dummy radio signal traffic were created to give the impression that a seaborne landing was being planned for north of Rome. This was planned to keep German reserves held back from the Gustav line. Movements of troops in forward areas were confined to the hours of darkness and armored units moving from the Adriatic front left behind dummy tanks and vehicles so the vacated areas appeared unchanged to enemy aerial reconnaissance. The deception was successful. As late as the second day of the final Cassino battle, Kesselring estimated the Allies had six divisions facing his four on the Cassino front. In fact there were thirteen.

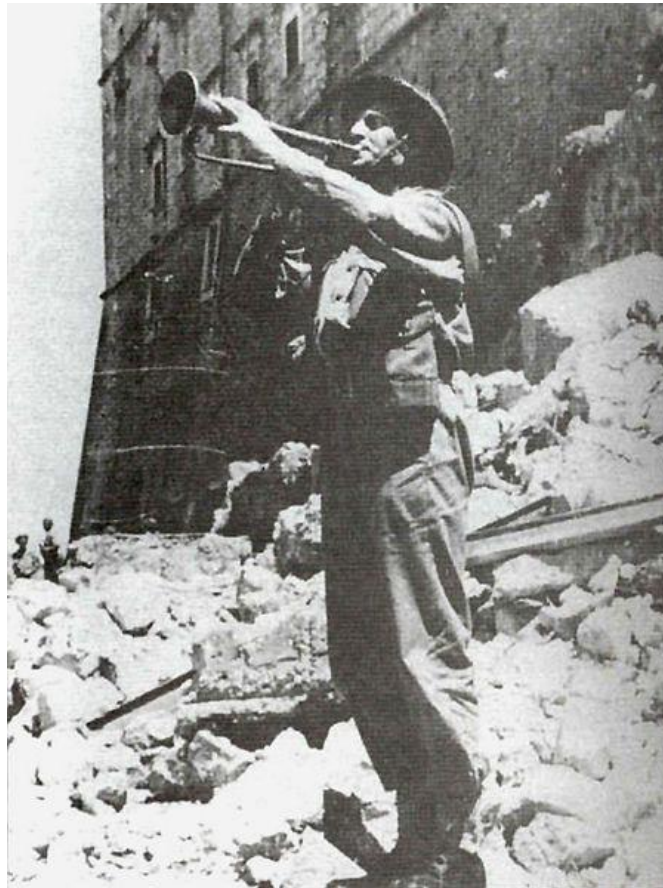
The first assault (11-12 May) on Cassino opened at 23:00 with a massive artillery bombardment with 1,060 guns on the 8th Army front and 600 guns on the Fifth Army front, manned by British, Americans, Poles, New Zealanders, South Africans, and French. Within an hour and a half the attack was in motion in all four sectors. By daylight the U.S. II Corps had made little progress, but their Fifth Army colleagues, the French Expeditionary Corps, had achieved their objectives and were fanning out in the Aurunci Mountains toward the Eighth Army to their right, rolling up the German positions between the two armies. On the Eighth Army front, XIII Corps had made two strongly opposed crossings of the Rapido (by British 4th Infantry Division and 8th Indian Division). Crucially, the engineers of Dudley Russell's 8th Indian Division had by the morning succeeded in bridging the river enabling the armor of 1st Canadian Armored Brigade to cross and provide the vital element (so missed by the Americans in the first battle and New Zealanders in the second battle) to beat off the inevitable counterattacks from German tanks that would come.

In the mountains above Cassino, the aptly named Mount Calvary (Monte Calvario, or Point 593 on Snakeshead Ridge) was taken by the Poles only to be recaptured by German paratroops. For three days Polish attacks and German counterattacks brought heavy losses to both sides. Polish II Corps lost 281 officers and 3,503 other ranks in assaults on Colonel Ludwig Heilmann's 4th Parachute Regiment, until the attacks were called off. "Just eight hundred Germans had succeeded in driving off attacks by two divisions," the area around the mountain having turned into a "miniature Verdun". In the early morning hours of 12 May, the Polish infantry divisions were met with "such devastating mortar, artillery, and small-arms fire that the leading battalions were all but wiped out."

By the afternoon of 12 May, the Rapido bridgeheads were increasing despite furious counterattacks whilst the attrition on the coast and in the mountains continued. By 13 May the pressure was starting to tell. The German right wing began to give way to Fifth Army. The French Corps had captured Monte Maio and were now in a position to give material flank assistance to the Eighth Army in the Liri valley against whom Kesselring had thrown every available reserve in order to buy time to switch to his second prepared defensive position, the Hitler Line, some eight miles to the rear. On 14 May Moroccan Goumiers, travelling through the mountains parallel to the Liri valley, ground which was undefended because it was not thought possible to traverse such terrain, outflanked the German defense while materially assisting the XIII Corps in the valley.

On 15 May, the British 78th Division came into the XIII Corps line from reserve passing through the bridgehead divisions to execute the turning move to isolate Cassino from the Liri valley. On 17 May, Polish II Corps launched their second attack on Monte Cassino. Under constant artillery and mortar fire from the strongly fortified German positions and with little natural cover for protection, the fighting was

fierce and at times hand-to-hand. With their line of supply threatened by the Allied advance in the Liri valley, the Germans decided to withdraw from the Cassino heights to the new defensive positions on the Hitler Line. In the early hours of 18 May the 78th Division and Polish II Corps linked up in the Liri valley 2 miles west of Cassino town. On the Cassino high ground the survivors of the second Polish offensive were so battered that "it took some time to find men with enough strength to climb the few hundred yards to the summit." A patrol of Polish 12th Podolian Uhlans Regiment finally made it to the heights and raised a Polish flag over the ruins.



Polish bugler Master Corporal Emil Czech plays the Hejnal mariacki, announcing the victory.

The only remnants of the defenders were a group of thirty German wounded who had been unable to move. "The Poles, on their second try, had taken Monte Cassino, and the road to Rome was open. At the end of the war the Poles "... with bitter pride erected a memorial on the slope of the mountain."



Monte Cassino: the Polish War Cemetery.



Ruins of the town of Cassino after the battle.

Hitler line

Eighth Army units advanced up the Liri valley and Fifth Army up the coast to the Hitler defensive line (renamed the Senger Line at Hitler's insistence to minimize the significance if it was penetrated). An immediate follow-up assault failed and Eighth Army then decided to take some time to reorganize. Getting 20,000 vehicles and 2,000 tanks through the broken Gustav Line was a major job taking several days. The next assault on the line commenced on 23 May with Polish II Corps attacking Piedimonte (defended by the redoubtable 1st Parachute Division) on the right and 1st Canadian Infantry Division (fresh from Eighth Army reserve) in the centre. On 24 May, the Canadians had breached the line, and 5th Canadian (Armored) Division poured through the gap. On 25 May the Poles took Piedimonte, and the line collapsed. The way was clear for the advance northwards on Rome and beyond.

Anzio breakout

As the Canadians and Poles launched their attack on 23 May, General Lucian Truscott, who had replaced Lt. Gen. John P. Lucas as commander of U.S. VI Corps, launched a two pronged attack using five (three U.S. and two British) of the seven divisions in the bridgehead at Anzio. Fourteenth Army, facing this thrust, was without any armored divisions because Kesselring had sent his armor south to help Tenth Army in the Cassino action. A single armored division, the 26th Panzer, was in transit from north of Rome where it had been held anticipating the non-existent seaborne landing the Allies had faked and so was unavailable to fight.

By 25 May, with Tenth Army in full retreat, VI Corps were as planned driving eastwards to cut them off. By the next day they would have been astride the line of retreat and Tenth Army, with all Kesselring's reserves committed to them, would have been trapped. At this point, astonishingly, General Clark ordered Truscott to change his line of attack from a northeasterly one to Valmontone on Route 6 to a northwesterly one directly towards Rome. Reasons for Clark's decision are unclear and controversy surrounds the issue. Most commentators point to Clark's ambition to be the first to arrive in Rome although some suggest he was concerned to give a necessary respite to his tired troops (notwithstanding the new direction of attack required his troops to make a frontal attack on the Germans' prepared defenses on the Caesar C line). Truscott later wrote in his memoirs that Clark "was fearful that the British were laying devious plans to be first into Rome," a sentiment somewhat reinforced in Clark's own writings. However, Alexander had clearly laid down the Army boundaries before the battle, and Rome was allocated to Fifth Army. Eighth Army was constantly reminded that their job was to engage Tenth Army, destroy as much of it as possible and then bypass Rome to continue the pursuit northwards (which in fact they did, harrying the retreating Tenth Army for some 225 miles towards Perugia in 6 weeks). At the time, Truscott was shocked, writing later

"...I was dumbfounded. This was no time to drive to the northwest where the enemy was still strong; we should pour our maximum power into the Valmontone Gap to insure the destruction of the retreating German Army. I would not comply with the order without first talking to General Clark in person. ...[However] he was not on the beachhead and could not be reached even by radio. ... such was the order that turned the main effort of the beachhead forces from the Valmontone Gap and prevented destruction of Tenth Army. On the 26th the order was put into effect." He went on to write "There has never been any doubt in my mind that had General Clark held loyally to General Alexander's instructions, had he not changed the direction of my attack to the northwest on May 26, the strategic objectives of Anzio would have been accomplished in full. To be first in Rome was a poor compensation for this lost opportunity".

An opportunity was indeed missed and seven divisions of Tenth Army were able to make their way to the next line of defense, the Trasimene Line where they were able to link up with Fourteenth Army and then make a fighting withdrawal to the formidable Gothic Line north of Florence. Rome fell on June 4, 1944, just two days before the Normandy invasion.

The capture of Monte Cassino came at a high price. The Allies suffered around 55,000 casualties in the Monte Cassino campaign. German casualty figures are estimated at around 20,000 killed and wounded.

Total Allied casualties spanning the period of the four Cassino battles and the Anzio campaign with the subsequent capture of Rome on 5 June 1944, were over 105,000.

[Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Monte_Cassino May 2013 ++]