

Part 3, FEBRUARY 1944: MTO – Mediterranean Theater

A. Chapters 24 & 25: The Test at Anzio and Bombing of Cassino; Feb 1944. MTO.

Salerno to Cassino, Martin Blumenson CMH Pub 6-3 xyza

1. **The Major German Attack, 16 to 20 February.** *Fourteenth Army* commander, Mackensen, saw success when the *29th Panzer Grenadier Division*, the *114th Division* from Yugoslavia, the *362d Division* and the *Berlin-Spandau Infantry Lehr* ("Teacher") Regiment arrived. But Kesselring and Mackensen were unhappy with Hitler's demand for massed forces on a narrow front. Selecting 16 February, the 4th Parachute and 65th Divisions made secondary efforts west of the Albano-Anzio Road as the Infantry Lehr Regiment, 3rd Panzer Grenadier, 114th, and 715th Divisions broke through east of the Albano-Anzio Road with 29th Panzer Grenadier and 26th Panzer Divisions in the next wave to exploit. The *Fourteenth Army* had 125,000 soldiers to only 100,000 for VI Corps soldiers. The *Goering Division* feint was repulsed, but the 4th Parachute succeeded against the 56th Division (British). They hit 45th ID on a 6-mile front in the center of the Anzio beachhead. The 157th and 179th IR's gave, but with reserve battalions halted the attack. Fierce fighting in the center lasted all day with German tanks stymied by mud. The German *Infantry Lehr Regiment* was weak to take heavy casualties, so the Allies did not need 1st AD reserve upon which the German focused on Day #2.

That night the Germans struck the middle of the 45th ID driving in a wedge forming a gap between the 45th ID's 157th IR and 179th IR. There German divisions hit the gap forcing units; at 1040 German planes ripped a hole in the line; and by noon the enemy drove a wedge 2 miles wide and 1 mile deep into the 45th ID. The regimental commander mistakenly pulled back a 1,000 yards of open ground for heavy casualties. Gen Lucas moved to fill the gap with air and Navy cruiser fire in a very desperate moment. German Gen Mackensen sent reserves into the opening between the regiments to split open Allied defenses waiting to use his second wave to destroy the beachhead.

But Allied defenders refused to break. Lines stretched with defenses near disintegration received heavy artillery, tank, tank destroyer, and mortar fire and its final line remained unbroken. The night of the second day, Mackensen forced his weary first wave to fight all night as two divisions of the second wave hit at 0400, 18 February as he had two fresh divisions for the breakthrough. But he had to commit them to breakthrough. The dawn attack of *29th Panzer Grenadier* and *26th Panzer* destroyed a 179th IR battalion by noon. Lucas sent Col Darby to take command as Darby's "contagious confidence, energy, and enthusiasm invigorated the headquarters." Then Darby asked to withdraw, but Gen Eagles refused. No retreat! Inexplicably, the Germans instead attacked the neighboring 180th IR "which gave as good as it got" as the "Germans had failed to achieve their breakthrough."

Allied riflemen, machine gunners, mortarmen, and tankers had fought at close range and refused to budge ... Artillery forward observers had brought crashing volleys ... (and) small Cub planes had directed heavy punishment -an observer ... massed the shells of more than 200 British and American pieces on a target of German infantry and a column of tanks twelve minutes after they were detected.

A final German effort on 20 February gained nothing. “The five-day attack that had pushed the Allied forces to their final defensive positions had failed to break them.” Each had 5,000 casualties, many from exposure. That month cost each 19,000 casualties (2,000 KIA, 8,500 MIA and 8,500 wounded). Losing 20%, each was “impotent” for a “stalemate”. (pp. 419-424)

2. Change of Command. The debacle led to Gen Lucas being fired. (*Blumenson devotes five pages to this event suggesting he disagreed with the action.*) (pp 424-428).

3. The Last German Attack on 29 February. Hitler demanded another German attack to eliminate the Anzio the beachhead. Mackensen proposed to attack on the other side with four divisions on 29 February. Heavy rain on 28 February limited Allied naval and air support as the attack hit the 3rd ID. Exhausted and depleted, the 3rd ID had managed to create impressive defenses. Gen O'Daniel laid heavy artillery fire but it failed to disrupt the Germans who overran a 509th AIR battalion but were then stopped. The 362^d Division main effort had tanks striking the 3rd ID head-on. The division bent but did not break. East, the 715th Division and 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division hit the 504th AIR but was stopped with heavy fighting. But clouds lifted that afternoon as 247 fighter-bombers and 24 light bombers gave close support hitting German tanks and infantry. The 3rd ID boldly counterattacked.

Mackensen kept going a second day when Kesselring ordered a halt. Clear weather this day saw 241 B-24's and 100 B-17's carpet bomb behind German lines as medium, light, and fighter bombers hit tanks, gun positions and assembly areas with 3,000 casualties and 30 tanks “in a stunning defeat.” (pp. 429-432)