

## Part 5: MARCH 1944: MTO – Mediterranean Theater abcd

### Chapters 24 & 25 The Test at Anzio and Bombing of Cassino. March 1944: MTO.

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

**The Bombing of Cassino and Beyond (14 March to 23 March).** Few WWII events created more controversy than bombing the historical center of the Roman Catholic Church at Cassino on 15 February. After the failed ground attack, Gen Alexander had the New Zealand Corps launch one more attempt. Eighth Army moved to Cassino with two British, 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish and 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps while 5 Corps stayed on the Adriatic. Freyberg's New Zealand Corps hit Monte Cassino mid-March. Gen Freyberg saw the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division February attack on the high ground (mountain) approach impractical requiring attacks on the town of Cassino and up the Liri valley with 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand from east and 4<sup>th</sup> Indian from the north. The 78<sup>th</sup> ID and 1<sup>st</sup> AD, CCB take the Liri valley to Valmontone. Gen Clark was "shocked" at a valley action without first destroying Monte Cassino. Wilson would take the high ground first.

On 21 February, Gen Freyberg had a four phased attack: (1) the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division would take the Hill north of the Cassino abbey for west Cassino town and east slopes of Monte Cassino; (2) the town would be heavily bombed; (3) the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand ID with the 1<sup>st</sup> AD CCB had town of Cassino and bridgehead over the Rapido River; (4) the Indian division would capture Monte Cassino; and (5) New Zealand tanks would Sant'Angelo from the north, with (6) CCB exploiting west on the Liri Valley Highway 6; (7) the 78<sup>th</sup> ID crossing the Rapido near Sant'Angelo; and the (8) 36<sup>th</sup> ID ready to exploit. "Complicated" was an understatement. Freyberg required three clear days for planes and dry ground for tanks. The large-scale bombing would hit in the morning with a noon ground attack. But (9) it required a massive air attack of 75 tons of bombs on the town to permit infantry and tanks to "walk through". AAF Col Mack advised troops had to wait three hours after bombing for dust to settle; tanks could not move through the rubble. "Freyberg impatiently 'brushed aside' Mack's cautions" planning to have tanks through Cassino in 6-12 hours!

Gen Arnold sought a great air power victory by employing "every pilot, student pilot and plane in the MTO be used in one massive bombing of the town to 'break up every stone ... behind which a German soldier might be hiding. Gen Eaker was dubious." He wrote Gen Arnold: "... the (prior) bombing of the Abbey (proved) that little useful purpose is served ... I do not feel it will throw the German out of his present position completely ... (but hope the line at Cassino) and [Anzio forces) will to join up ..."

Gen Eaker hoped sustained bombing of German shipping, roads and rails under Operation STRANGLE would cut German supply routes south of the Pisa-Rimini line. He needed 6 to 8 weeks with good weather. His contemporary STRANGLE waited upon the Cassino breakthrough attack. To overcome faults: "we need to press very hard to improve accuracy, formation flying and leadership."

Three sunny days at Cassino and at Allied airfields finally came 14 March. New Zealand and Indian troops withdrew 1,500 yards for safety. Quick 75-ton bombing meant mega 1,000-pound bombs in waves every 15 minutes, 0830 to noon with artillery fire in between, that fighter-bombers would cover. It would "be the greatest use of a tactical air force to support a land invasion in history," meaning many dignitaries wished to witness this event from 3 miles distant.

They heard a "locust-like drone [that] came from afar." The "uncertain murmur swelled gradually; a steady, pulsing throb." Then "the specks began to appear, high and small against the sky." First were the mediums in flights of 12 with fighters above turning left over the target, "bellies of the planes opened, and the bombs tumbled out. Then the planes wheeled again, this time to fly home."

Next, at 0845, came ... Flying Fortresses, along with the dive bombers ... over the town, already obliterated from view by smoke and dust ... Bright orange bursts appeared over Cassino, Monte Cassino, and the Rapido valley. Only ... first bombs was visible ... (then) a billowing ocean of gray and white dust and smoke.

The ground for at least five miles around Cassino shook violently as though in an earthquake. How could any human being in the town "survive such punishment and retain his sanity"?



... the bombs fell until noon ... (and in between) artillery pounded the target.

Finally came the 40-minute cannonade ... (of) every field piece ... An artilleryman's dream, the target was in plain sight, the range was virtually point-blank, the calibration was exact, the registration perfect. The artillery thundered, the gunners perspiring in the chill winter air.

Monte Cassino seemed to jump and writhe ... Great holes appeared in the few walls of the abbey still standing. Huge chunks of masonry flew through the air.

Surely, there were no defenders left with any fight in them ... (just) bodies and prisoners ...

The artillery firing went as planned. A total of 746 guns and howitzers delivered 2,500 tons of nearly 200,000 rounds. It was impossible for any Germans to be alive.

Contrary to all hopes, "plenty of defenders remained; plenty of fight, plenty of guns, ammunition, observation points, and plenty of perseverance." The stone houses gave excellent protection. The *1st Parachute Division* was trained and did not panic. The debris gave effective bulwarks for defense. More aircraft (120 B-17's and 140 B-24's) bombed on 15 March. New Zealanders fought bitter house-to-house battles in Cassino as rain cancelled tanks. The next day saw no progress in Cassino even after another 266 tons of bombs. "Allied strength massed at Cassino failed to overwhelm the Gustav Line."

The pattern was much the same on 17 March even after 200 more bomb tons were left noticeable effect. General Clark noted the battle of Cassino as slow as Freyberg's enthusiastic plans were not keeping up to his time schedule. Recriminations began as commanders now said they were never

enthused. Cassino total confusion without artillery or tanks to support troops. Yet, there was "this grim and desperate battle in the weird ghost town of Cassino and on the slopes of the Cassino massif ... decorated by ravaged trees and the debris of combat continued."

March 21, seventh day, as Gen Freyberg refused to halt. Gen Clark was discouraged. Freyberg's men were determined to fight. "Although no one wanted to admit defeat ... (by) 23 March ... the New Zealand and Indian divisions were exhausted." The attack halted. After the bombardment, 600,000 artillery shells, 2,000 troops in nine days--300 killed. The attack failed. "The failure positively shocked the air forces commanders. Gen Eaker's report is telling:

Despite the rain, low clouds, poor visibility, and the cancellation of some missions, the air bombardment ... provided the destruction desired. Prisoners ... (said it was) a great shock and surprise ... Yet about 300 troops ... in a long tunnel ... and other Germans ... survived ... and had resisted ... (without any) reinforcements ..."

(If I were) in Washington ... I would have wondered "what this Cassino battle was all about" ... why had ... (they) not bypassed Cassino ... But ... the first three months of 1944 had been a morass of mud ... (and) Cassino was a roadblock ... Furthermore, the ground commanders felt that they had to have the high ground north ...

Gen Eaker had watched the tanks and infantry move into ... Cassino and come to a stop. The bombs had created tremendous craters ... "You will remember ... I warned you ...



Air officers in Washington ... felt that the ground follow-up of the bombing was "puny" in comparison to the greatest concentration of air power in the world ...

(Yet) something, somewhere, had gone wrong. And someone was going to be blamed ...

Three times the Allied forces had tried to break the Gustav Line ... and three times ... failed--in January the frontal attack across the Rapido, in February the attempt to outflank the Cassino spur, and in March the effort to drive between the abbey and the town. They would try again, but only after ... ground was firm ... (Only) in May, would they again take up the struggle. (pp. 443-448)