
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the April session of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II

History Roundtable. Tonight's speaker is Flint Whitlock, author of *Rock of Anzio*, and veterans of the Fifth army.

After much debate at the Casablanca Conference, American leaders conceded that the Allies were still unable to land troops in France as General Marshall wished to do and British Prime Minister Churchill had promised Stalin they would do. The British, by organized diplomacy and minimized internal disagreement, were able to carry the disorganized and quarreling Americans along to an invasion of Sicily. (Gen. Albert Wedermeyer said "We lost our shirts ... we came, we listened, and we were conquered.") Having agreed to invade Sicily, Americans were not able to avoid the next logical decision, to land in Italy. Several alternative reasons for expanding to the Italian campaign in late 1943 have been posited by historians, such as the drive up the Italian "boot" would divert German divisions from the Eastern Front and provide air bases for Allied bomber strikes against the Third Reich, or Italy's collapse would weaken Germany politically and militarily.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill believed that Italy was the "soft underbelly" of Europe but nothing could be further from the truth. The difficult terrain and weather of the Italian Campaign made for some the war's hardest fought and costliest battles. During the last few months of 1943 the British and American efforts to move up the Italian boot were frustrated by the stiff German defenses at the Gustav Line. The Battle of Monte Cassino was a series of four battles beginning in January 1944, with the intention of breaking through the Axis Gustav Line. The Germans held the Rapido, Liri and Garigliano valleys and certain surrounding peaks.

The first battle began when the American 36th and 34th IDs, and British and French-

Moroccan troops launched attacks on the Gustav line. This first battle was coordinated with the Allied landings at Anzio and Nettuno. These landings met little initial German defensive action, but the Allies were unable/unwilling to capitalize on the opportunity. The battle lasted until February 11, when the Allies finally broke off the battle.

The second battle began on February 15th with the destruction of the Abbey at Monte Cassino by 1,400 tons of bombs dropped by American bombers, killing those Italians who had taken refuge there. Founded in 524 AD, by Benedict of Nursia, the monastery dominated the hilltops around above the town of Cassino and the entrances of the Liri and Rapido Valleys.

During the fall of 1943, the Germans removed the Abbey's treasures to the Vatican for safe keeping. In December 1943, Field Marshall Albert Kesselring ordered German units not to include the Monastery itself in their defensive positions and informed the Vatican and the Allies. The Germans had not occupied the hill top of the Abbey, had told the Vatican and the Allies that the monastery was neutral, and General Frido von Senger und Etterlin, defender of the Gustav line, ensured that Abbey neutrality was strictly observed by his troops.

The Germans had set up defensive positions on the slopes below the abbey walls. Two days after the bombing of the abbey German paratroopers took up positions in the rubble which made it harder for the Allies to achieve victory. The Gurkha regiments of British Indian 4th Army attempted to take the remains of the monastery while New Zealand Maori battalion attacked across the Rapido and into the town of Cassino but the tough terrain and lack of armored support caused them to retreat.

Beginning on March 15th the third battle was launched behind a heavy bombardment of artillery and armored support, while the New Zealanders attempted once again to take the town of Cassino and the Gurkhas fought up towards the Monastery but were once again repelled by the dug in German paratroopers. The exhausted Indian and

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New Zealanders were withdrawn and re-organized.

The final battle began on May 11th with an artillery and air bombardment of German defensive positions and an attack along the 20 mile Gustav line by 20 Allied divisions, which included American, British, Free French, Polish, New Zealand, and South African units. Bitter vicious fighting continued until the May 18th when Polish forces took the ruins of the monastery and found only wounded Germans who could not be moved. The rest of the German troops had evacuated in the night and retreated to form the Hitler Line (later renamed the Senger Line).

With the Gustav line broken, the 5th army linked up with the 6th Corps on May 25th and marched into Rome on June 4th. Kesselring retreated once again, to the Pisa-Rimini Gothic line the next line he set up across Italy. By mid-August many US and all of the Free French combat forces were re-deployed to participate in the landings in southern France (Operation Anvil / Operation Dragoon). After this the Italian theater stalemated again. Many historians claim that Anvil prevented the Allies from driving through the Po River Valley and the Alps to Austria. Italian operations proved to be an excellent training ground for Anglo-American forces, and the casualties inflicted on German ground and air forces were a significant return on investment.

Further Reading:

Martin Blumenson, *Bloody River; the Real Tragedy of the Rapido* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1970)
 Duane Schultz, *Crossing the Rapido* (Yarkdley, PA: Westholme, 2010)
 Matthew Parker, *Monte Cassino: The Hardest Fought Battle of World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005)
 George Forty, *Battle of Monte Cassino* (Kent Science Park, Sittingbourne, UK: Ian Allan Publishing, 2004)
 David Hapgood and David Richardson, *Monte Cassino: The Story of the Most Controversial Battle of World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002).
 John Ellis, *Cassino: The Hollow Victory: The Battle for Rome, January – June 1944* (London: Aurium Press, 2003)
 Frido von Senger und Etterlin, *Neither Fear Nor Hope: The Wartime Memoirs of the German Defender of Cassino*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1963).

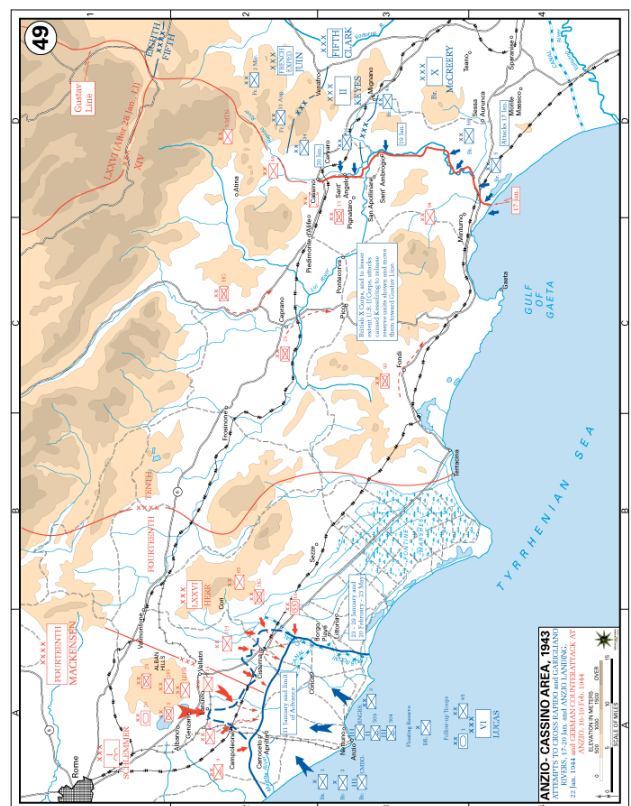
Announcements:

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table** - May 11, 2011 “Ironclads & Industrialization” Dr. Bill Roberts www.tccwrt.com - 612-724-3849
- St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table** - Apr 25, 2011 “Military in the Dakota Uprising” Steve Anderson - 715-386-1268
- Minnesota Civil War Symposium 16 April 2011** at Historic Fort Snelling, Fee charged. <http://www.tccwrt.com/symposium.html>
- Rochester WWII History Round Table** 507-280-9970; May 9, 2011 – “Growing up in Belgium and Germany.” www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org -
- Air Show - Eden Prairie** - www.wotn.org - 952-746-6100 July 16-17, 2011
- World War II Weekend, Historic Fort Snelling**, June, 11-12 2011, Fee charged.
- Honor Flight** - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force** - www.cafmn.org or Bill at 952-201-8400
- Fort Snelling Military (Vehicles) Museum - www.fsmm.org 651-699-7795
- Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-252

Round Table Schedule 2010-2011

- May 12, Bombers Over Germany
- Round Table Schedule 2011-2012

- Sep 8 Naval Battle of Guadalcanal
- Oct 13 Children Caught in the Brutality of War
- Oct 27 Bitter Appeasement — Munich
- Nov 10 The Resistance Against the Nazis
- Dec 8 The GI Offensive in Europe
- 2012**
- Jan 12 The War on the Eastern Front
- Feb 9 The War in the Pacific
- Mar 8 Code breaking and Computers
- Apr 12 Jedburgs-Jumping Behind Enemy Lines
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