Welcome to the February meeting of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speakers are Tim Brady, author of *A Death in San Pietro* and veterans of the Italian campaign, who will discuss the brutal fighting of US operations moving from Salerno toward Rome.

At the Casablanca Conference, the British pushed for to invade the “soft underbelly” of Europe, working on the periphery of Nazi Europe. Marshall and Roosevelt favored a landing in northern France, but we were not ready for that; and they did not like Churchill’s periphery approach. Reluctantly, the US agreed to first the Sicily landings (10 July 1943) and then the landings on the Italian mainland. On 3 September, as the British 8th army landed on the toe, the Italian government asked for an armistice, announced on 8 September, one day before the US Fifth Army landed at Salerno. German forces, distracted by the need to disarm their former allies, still launched highly effective counterattacks.

Geography and logistics always influence great human struggles. The Italian “boot” was a horrible place to invade if you wished to take the entire country. The Apennines mountain range runs the entire length of the boot. Ridges ran east-west from the mountain spine to the coast, each separating one E-W valley from another. Deforestation for over two millennia meant the rain ran into the streams that flooded, and into the “roads” that became seas of mud. As trucks and jeeps (and tanks) bogged down in the gunk, the most mechanized army in the world shifted back to using donkeys and mules and manpower.

The Italian mountains were a throwback to World War I, each side dug into the rocky edges, in make shift foxholes and trenches spying on each other and reporting back coordinates to the artillery. Clawing their way through the mountains in winter fighting, the snow in the higher elevations was offset by the rain and mud in the valleys. One more resemblance to World War I: trench foot.

Putting geography to use, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (Luftwaffe) fought a brilliant delaying action up the boot. He built a number of defensive lines that effectively blocked Allied advances for months. Perhaps the most difficult “line” was the Winter Line which, in its western Gustav Line portion ran across the Liri Valley and anchored on the edge of Monte Cassino. The Germans did not use the famed Abbey as an observation post, and had promised not to, yet in a decision based primarily in vicious anti-Catholicism and lacking any hard evidence of German use, British authorities got Gen. Harold Alexander to authorize bombing the abbey. As it turned out after the fact, the Germans had not and were not using the abbey; once it was bombed on 25 May 1944, they did use some of the rubble.

As the fighting raged along the Liri River and the town of San Pietro Infine in December of 1943, the 36th Infantry Division (Texas NG) was focused on seizing the Mignano Gap - through which Route 6, the “Road to Rome,” passed. Here, a strange confluence of the literary world, motion pictures, and war’s reality happened. The assault did not break through the Gustav line, but the Battle of San Pietro produced two masterpieces of art. One was Ernie Pyle’s column about Captain Henry Waskow of Belton, Texas. Pyle never met Waskow but he was awed by the visitations of the young officer’s men to their slain commander, and inspired, wrote a column of the scene. The other was film director John Huston’s movie, “The Battle of San Pietro.” A documentary using veterans of the recent battle, and although staged, it was remarkably accurate and realistic. Huston showed war’s carnage in mud and death and dead soldiers brought down the mountain sides on donkeys, wrapped in white linen body bags, and hoisted and stacked like cord wood onto waiting trucks.

In May, the Allied assault in the region west from Monte Cassino to the Tyrrhenian Sea broke through and the Fifth Army entered Rome on 4 June 1944. To Gen. Mark Clark’s...
disgust, his capture of Rome, the first Axis
capitol taken by Allied forces, was
overshadowed by the Allied landings in
Normandy on 6 June 1944. The Italian
campaign, strategically, became a side-show,
soaking as much German manpower and
resources as possible from the Eastern and
Normandy fronts. Our own 34th Infantry
Division, one of the divisions that fought and
bled in the Liri Valley and the rest of Italy is
credited with having the most consecutive days
in combat in World War II; its modern 1st BCT
has the record for the “War on Terror.”

Further Readings:
Ernie Pyle, “The Death of Captain Waskow,” 10
January 1944 –
http://www.therepublic.com/view/local_story/Columns-The-Death-of-
Captain-Wq_1352247265
John Huston, The Battle of San Pietro, –
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xssaWNoWq3E
Rick Atkinson, The Day of Battle: The War in
Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944 (New York: Henry,
Robert L. Wagner, The Texas Army: A History of the 36th Division in the Italian Campaign
Carlo D’Este, Fatal Decision: Anzio and the
Battle for Rome. 1991
Fifth Army at the Winter Line (15 November
1943-15 January 1944). United States Army
Dwight Zimmerman, “Tragedy and Glory in
Media Network, 16 December 2013

Announcements:
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table -
Feb. 17, 2015 – Lincoln - www.tccwrt.com -
info@tccwrt.com
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Feb. 23, 2015 – Fort Snelling in CW - 715-386-1268 –
rossandhaines@comcast.net
Rochester WWII History Round Table –507-280-9970; www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050,
http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser -
crazyjerry45@hotmail - 651-338-2717
CAF - Commemorative Air Force -
www.cafmin.org 651-455-6942
Minnesota Air Guard Museum -
www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523
Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org
Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN,

See our programs on YouTube at http://youtube.com/ww2hrt