

Foreword

They are saying, 'The Generals learnt their lesson in the last war. There are going to be no wholesale slaughters.' I ask, how is victory possible except by wholesale slaughters?

Evelyn Waugh, October 1939

War makes sense only in black and white. The Second World War has a unique position in popular memory as a 'good war', particularly when compared with the First World War. Fought by the 'United Nations' (as the Allies referred to themselves) against the tyranny of Nazism and the aggression of the Japanese, the victorious conclusion of the fighting ended many appalling crimes against humanity, and justified all the sacrifices made by the men on the right side. Now, whenever the morality of a war is discussed, it is always measured against the yardstick of the Second World War. It has become the war that justifies war.

To a large extent, the Second World War has been written by its victors as a heroic narrative. For every *Catch-22* or *Slaughter House Five*, there have been hundreds of novels, histories and films celebrating the unshakable moral certainties of the fighting. For my generation, growing up in the 1970s, the war films we were shown and the comics that seemed to be everywhere were all about the Second World War. It is impossible to imagine the popular conception of the First World War making an appropriate backdrop for such straightforward stories, just as war games

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played by young boys never involved the trenches or more recent, even more morally ambiguous conflicts. It was always the British against the Nazis, good versus evil.

The First World War, as well as contributing to the causes of the Second, also shaped people's responses to it. At the beginning of the Second World War, it was hoped that new technologies would prevent the appalling attrition of infantrymen that occurred in the First. Inter-war advances in aircraft, guns, tanks, submarines and bombs led people to believe that, this time, the fighting would be fast moving, mechanised, dominated by air power, somehow 'remote-controlled' or carried out by a few experts. The popular story of the Battle of Britain – with scores of downed planes being chalked up on blackboards as if it were a cricket match – to an extent conforms to this pattern, and this view of the Second War, at least in the West, as somehow 'cleaner' than the First has survived both the subsequent fighting and the post-war period.

The Battle of Monte Cassino throws all of this into question. Instead of fighting a battle of rapid movement, the men found themselves in scenes straight out of the Western Front in 1916–17. The terrain sent the fighting back to a pre-mechanised age. The mountains of central Italy and winter weather conspired to make technology such as armour fairly useless. One hard-working mule was more prized than a dozen tanks, and the Allies' huge numerical advantage in artillery and aircraft was seldom decisive and often a hindrance. For one thing, such firepower had its risks. It has been estimated that a third of Allied casualties in Italy were caused by 'friendly fire'; one American artilleryman at Cassino bemoaned that American bombers killed more of his division than did the Luftwaffe.

Nor was there much nationalistic certainty or unity of purpose driving the forces in Italy. With so many different national and ethnic groups, from such radically different societies, it would have been an impossibility. As well as British and American soldiers, the Allied ranks included New Zealanders, Canadians, Nepalese, Indians, French, Belgians, South Africans, Tunisians, Algerians, Moroccans, Senegalese, Poles, Italians and even Brazilians. Within these groups there were units made up of Native Americans, Japanese Americans and Maoris. They were all there for different reasons. The result was a coalition riddled at the highest level

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with distrust and jealousy, with the inevitable consequences of misunderstandings and mistakes. In the large part badly led and poorly equipped, the Allied soldiers who fought at Cassino could see from the way they were downgraded in the press at home that they were fighting battles of enormous scale and cost that were, at best, of secondary strategic importance, with the scant resources in reserve to match.

The Germans were even worse off. For every shell that Krupps sent over, General Motors sent back five. As well as artillery ammunition, the Germans were desperately short of basic food and clothing for the front-line troops guarding icy mountaintops in mid-winter. Many froze to death for lack of a greatcoat.

Between these opposing groups of men, facing each other in some places over just twenty or thirty yards of open ground, there was a shared suffering of the fighting and the elements, and surprisingly often the war would be stopped in local areas so that teams of stretcher bearers from both sides could work together to rescue the numerous wounded. Many record the bafflement of then resuming efforts to kill one another once the time of the truce was up.

From first-hand accounts, contemporary diaries and letters, and through listening to hundreds of veterans, a picture emerges of most people's experience of war that is different from the black-and-white image of popular conception. The men's descriptions of their times in action are dominated by confusion, fear, blunders and accidents; they also talk about the times of boredom, of longing for home, the 'chickenshit' or 'bull' of the army, as well as of the companionship with friends, many lost. They discuss how the experience changed them, and their feelings now about what happened.

While aiming to explain the strategic and tactical compromises and fudges that led to the battles, this book focuses on the human experience of the men there at the time, rather than playing 'what if?' games or 'weighing' the performance of the generals. To this end, I have tried as much as possible to let the eyewitnesses tell the story in their own words.

INTRODUCTION

The Monastery and the Gustav Line

Only the bloodbaths of Verdun and Passchendaele, or the very worst of the Second World War fighting on the Eastern Front, can compare to Monte Cassino. The largest land battle in Europe, Cassino was the bitterest and bloodiest of the Western Allies' struggles with the German Wehrmacht on any front of the Second World War. On the German side, many compared it unfavourably with Stalingrad.

After the conquest of Sicily, the invasion of Italy in 1943 saw Allied troops facing the German Army in a lengthy campaign on the mainland of Europe for the first time for three years. By the beginning of 1944 Italy was still the Western Allies' only active front against Nazi-controlled Europe, and progress had been painfully slow. The campaign was becoming an embarrassment, and tensions between the Allies were rising.

It was not an easy task the Allies had set themselves. Not since Belisarius in AD 536 had anyone successfully taken Rome from the south. Hannibal even traversed the Alps rather than taking the direct route from Carthage. Napoleon is credited with saying, 'Italy is a boot. You have to enter it from the top.' The reason was the geography south of Rome. High mountains are bisected by fast-flowing rivers. The only possible route to the Italian capital from the south is up the old Via Casilina, now known as Route Six. Eighty miles south of Rome, this road passes up the valley of the Liri River. This was where the German commander, Kesselring, chose to make his

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stand. Towering over the entrance to the valley was the monastery of Monte Cassino.

It is one of Christianity's most sacred sites. Reportedly founded by the Roman nobleman Saint Benedict in 529, the abbey became the blueprint for monasteries in Western Europe. From Monte Cassino, Benedictine monks set out to establish monasteries throughout the Christian world. Meanwhile, the monastery's great library saw the preservation and copying of writings from antiquity onwards, the safeguarding of the heritage of early civilisation. The monastery was largely destroyed during an earthquake in 1349, but rebuilding started straight away with the support of Pope Urban V. The new abbey was massive, a vast complex of buildings around five courtyards. It had walls twenty feet thick at their base; from below, the huge building, with its grim rows of cell windows, looked like a fortress. During the Renaissance the abbey became a favourite destination for pilgrims. The Benedictine monks, as was their custom, washed the travellers' feet and served them at table. During one year in the early seventeenth century there were 80,000 visitors. Generations of Italians laboured to beautify the buildings. During the eighteenth century, in the hands of several of Italy's finest artists, the monastery became a baroque masterpiece and a centre for the fine arts. In 1868 the abbey became Italian national property but the library remained one of the most important in the world: by 1943 it contained over 40,000 manuscripts and much of the writings of Tacitus, Cicero, Horace, Virgil, Ovid and many others. Over the gate of the monastery was carved one word: *Pax*.

But Benedict had chosen his site at a time when Christianity, based on Rome, was at its lowest ebb. To protect his new community, he had built his monastery on the top of more than 500 metres of solid rock, at the end of a mountain spur that rises almost vertically above the valleys beneath. From its high windows, one can see for miles around; all the approaches to the mountain are laid out to view like a map.

At the end of 1943, it was already considered one of the finest defensive positions in Europe, and had been studied as such in Italian staff colleges for years. As well as benefiting from its commanding position, it was protected by the Rapido and Garigliano rivers, which form a natural moat in front of it. Its flanks are guarded by jagged, trackless mountains: from

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the Liri valley almost to the coast stretch the Aurunci mountains; behind the monastery the Cassino Massif rises into the forbidding Abruzzi range.

North of Cassino there is no series of river barriers, as on the Adriatic coast. Beyond the Rapido valley, the rivers run south and north, the Tiber leading up to the Lake Trasimeno area whence the Arno leads to Florence. So Cassino was the last natural defensive position before Rome, and the fall of Rome would mean the fall of central Italy.

The Cassino Massif on which the abbey stood was the key position on the Gustav Line, a system of interlocking German defences that ran all the way across the narrowest part of Italy between Gaeta and Ortona. It was an awesome piece of military engineering, the most formidable defensive system encountered by the British or Americans during the war. Much of it overlooked rivers with steep banks, in particular the Garigliano and the Rapido, or was in either coastal marshland or on high mountaintops. The natural defensive advantages of the mountainous terrain had been accentuated by the Germans by removing buildings and trees to create fields of fire. Elsewhere, the natural caves of the area had been extended and defensive positions reinforced with railway girders and concrete. Dugouts were created, linked by underground passages. Rather than a single line, the defences were multi-layered, with positions planned from which to launch instant counter-attacks on front line areas lost. From November 1943 Hitler took a personal interest in the Gustav Line, ordering that it be upgraded to ‘fortress strength’. A system of anti-personnel minefields, interlocked with barbed-wire entanglements, was set up to cover the flats before the hills to a depth of up to 400 yards beyond the river banks. A dam on the Rapido was blown to divert the river; the entire plain in front of the monastery, already soggy from winter rain, became a quagmire. The Germans had the time to survey every possible route of attack and take countermeasures. Everywhere there were nasty surprises – any seeming cover for attackers was mined or booby-trapped.

On 24 January 1944 British and American bombers dropped leaflets on the defenders of Monte Cassino offering them ‘Stalingrad or Tunis’ – encirclement and destruction or honourable surrender. But in a grim echo of the orders to hold the city on the Volga, Hitler decreed that there would be no more retreat in Italy. In the same month the German leader issued the following order: ‘Within the next few days the “Battle for Rome”

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will begin. It will be decisive for the defence of Central Italy and for the fate of the 10th Army . . . All officers and men . . . must be penetrated by a fanatical will to end this battle victoriously, and never to relax until the last enemy soldier has been destroyed . . . The battle must be fought in a spirit of holy hatred for an enemy who is conducting a pitiless war of extermination against the German people . . . The fight must be hard and merciless, not only against the enemy, but against all officers and units who fail in this decisive hour.'

The Allies by now dominated the sea and the air. They also had superiority in tanks and armoured vehicles. But a combination of the Italian geography and winter weather often nullified such advantages. The line could be broken only by infantry. The battle, then, was man to man, to be fought with grenades, bayonets and at times bare hands, and the outcome would be decided by the calibre and determination of the soldiers involved.

As the Allied troops neared the Gustav Line, they could see what they were up against. A Scots Guards lieutenant, D.H. Deane, remembers arriving on the other side of the Rapido River, and, along with everyone else, taking in the battlefield to come: 'Impregnable mountains, obviously with armies of Boche,' he noted. 'Vast mountains lie in front, bleak and sinister.'

Lieutenant Deane's premonitions were correct. The battles to take Monte Cassino were some of the hardest fought of the war in any theatre. Between Deane's first sight of Monte Cassino and the triumphant moment when Polish soldiers raised their pennant on the shattered walls of the ancient monastery lies an extraordinary story of ordinary soldiers tested to the limits under conditions more typical of the horrors of the First World War. As the battle progressed, it became increasingly political, symbolic and personal. As the stakes were raised, more and more men were asked to throw themselves at the virtually impregnable German defences. Monte Cassino is a story of incompetence, hubris and politics redeemed at dreadful cost by the bravery, sacrifice and humanity of the ordinary soldiers.