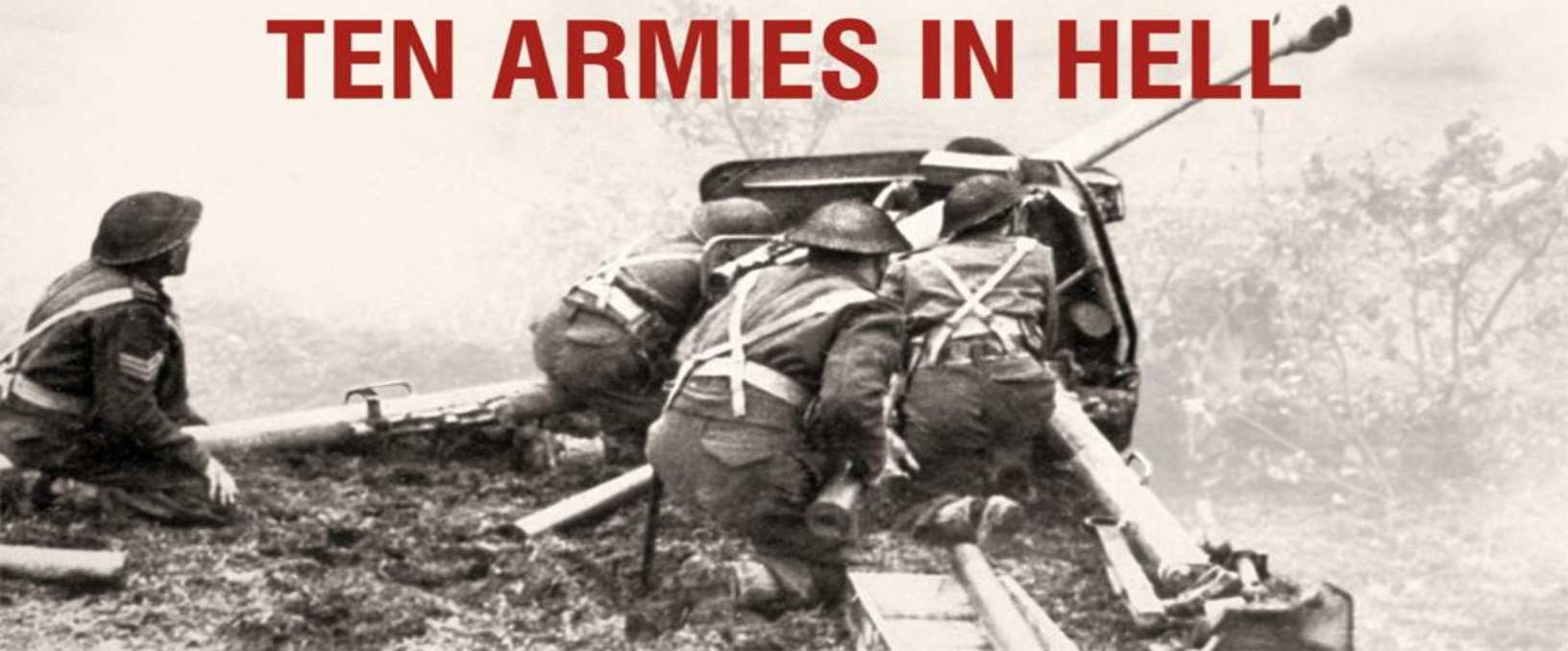
'Peter Caddick-Adams writes with authority and a deep knowledge'
JAMES HOLLAND

PETER CADDICK-ADAMS

MONTE CASSINO

TEN ARMIES IN HELL



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About the Book

By the spring of 1944, Europe had been at war for nearly four and a half years. Fighting had raged through Russia, North Africa, and since the Allies' invasion of Salerno the previous autumn, the heavily-defended European mainland of Italy. At the beginning of the year, the Allied armies approached a network of important river valleys, through which ran key roads. Their destination was Rome, a further eighty miles north, but to get there, the troops had to inch past the town of Cassino.

Overlooking the town is a Monastery, perched on the summit of Monte Cassino, an architectural masterpiece established by St Benedict of Nursia in 529. Over the next 1,400 years the Abbey was built, destroyed several times by nature or man, and reconstructed, until in 1944 it was recognised as one of the architectural wonders of the world.

From January to May, several small units of Germany's best-trained formations stalled the might of nine Allied national armies, assembled to overcome the Gustav Line and seize Rome. In a desperate attempt to remove the Germans from their redoubt, the Allies levelled the monastery with one of the most ferocious and concentrated air raids of the war. A month later their bombers returned and destroyed the town in similar fashion.

Some say that Malta remains to this day the most bombed place on earth, but Cassino vies for that dubious accolade. Worse, the Allies overlooked the fact that the Germans

would occupy the rubble, which provided even better cover for their defence of the whole area. From 17 January to 18 May 1944, the Gustav Line defences were assaulted four times in battles of attrition that seemed more like those of the First World War. For the last the Allies gathered overwhelming force that finally drove the Germans from their positions, but at huge cost.

Cassino remains one of the most iconic battles of the Second World War. The destruction of its Benedictine Monastery was one of its most controversial acts, and turned into a propaganda triumph by the Germans. It was a coalition campaign of nine Allied armies ranged against one – the troops of Italy, France, the United States, Great Britain, India, New Zealand, Poland, Canada and South Africa opposed by Germany. This is their story.

About the Author

Dr Peter Caddick-Adams has been a professional military historian for over twenty years. He lectures at the UK Defence Academy and staff colleges around the world on military history, war studies and media operations. Specialising in battlefield tours, doctrine and leadership, he worked with the inspirational Richard Holmes for twelve years and has led visits to more than fifty battlefields worldwide. As a regular and reserve soldier he has experience of three major war zones: Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2010 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and is a frequent TV and radio broadcaster on military and security issues.

Also by Peter Caddick-Adams

Monty and Rommel: Parallel Lives

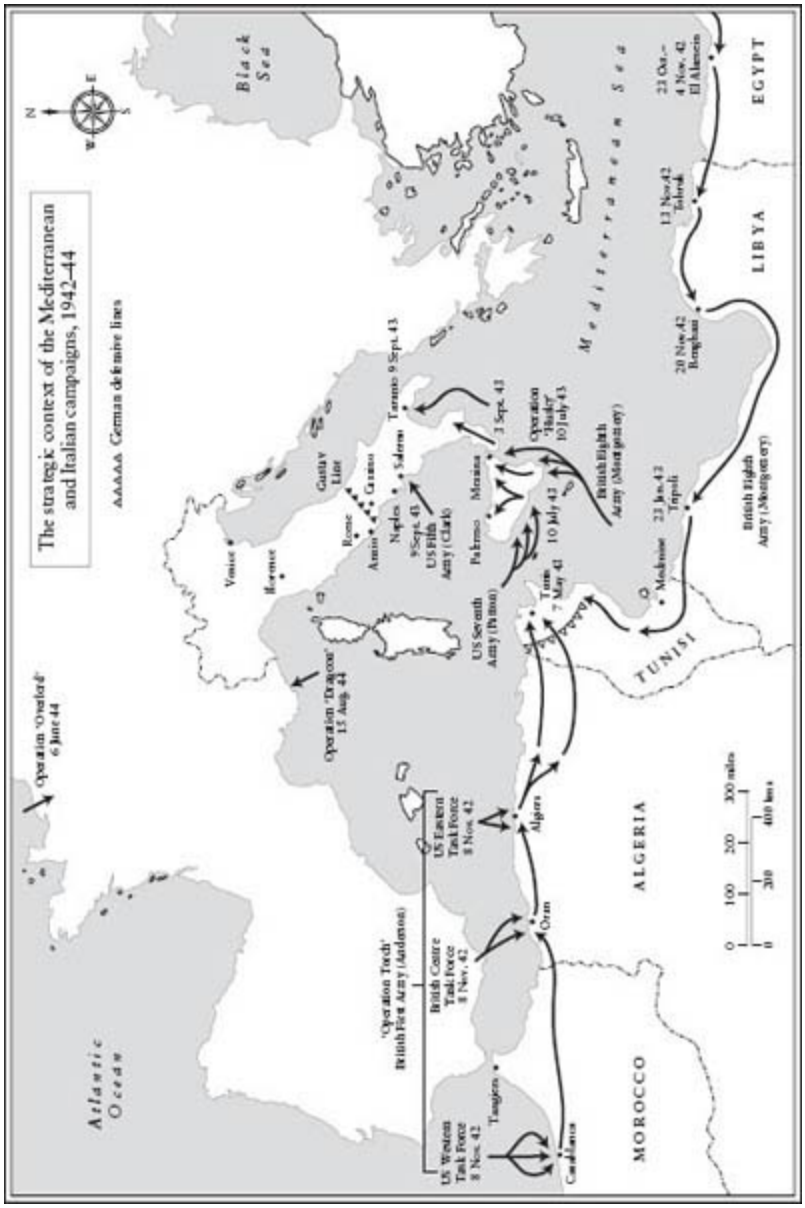
MONTE CASSINO

TEN ARMIES IN HELL

Peter Caddick-Adams

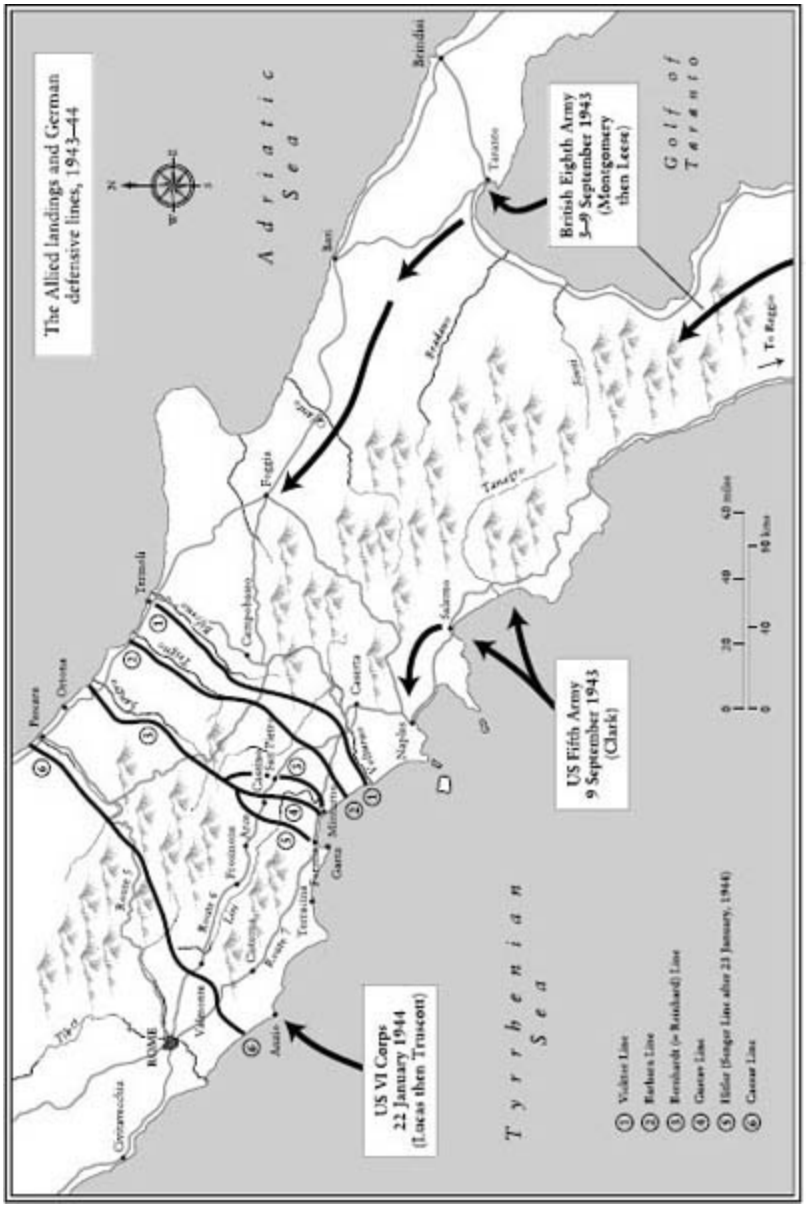
preface
publishing

In memory of Richard Holmes CBE, TD, JP
friend, colleague and mentor
1946–2011



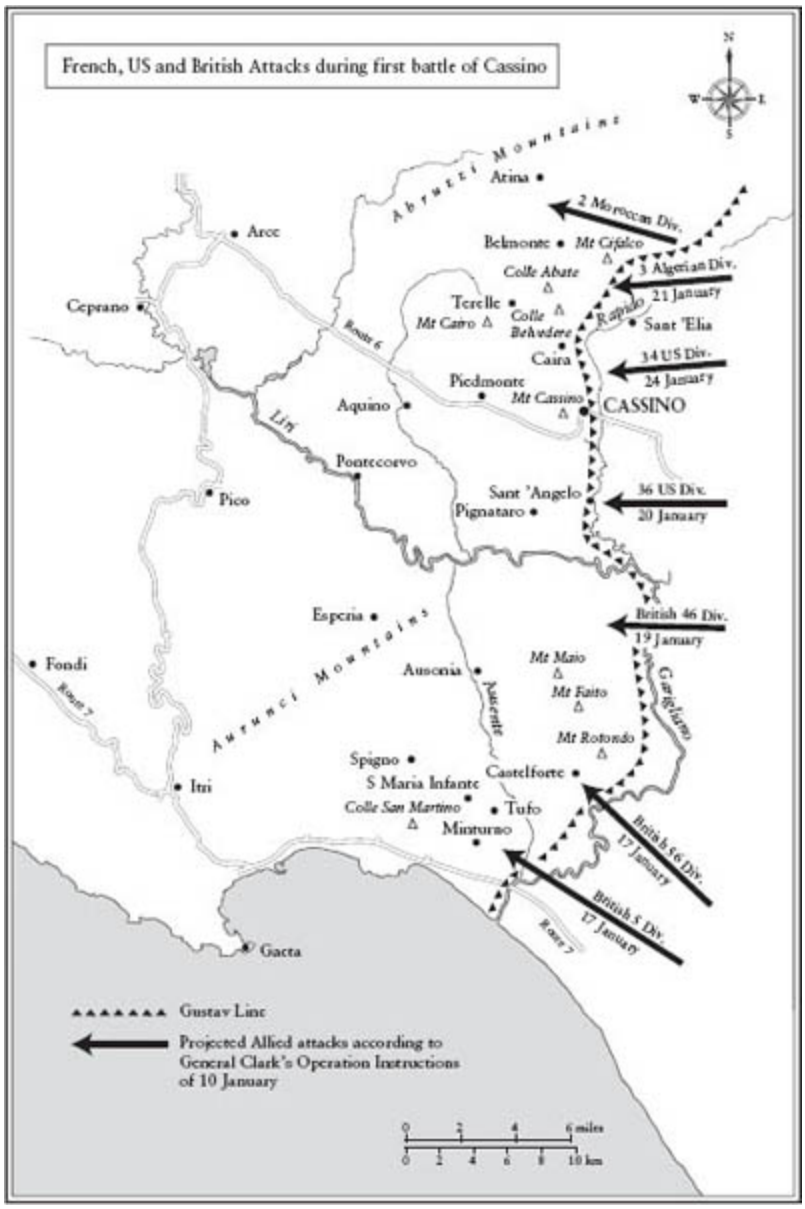
Alexander’s Army Group was the fusion of the Anglo–US forces that landed in Morocco and Algeria (Operation Torch) with Montgomery’s Eighth Army advancing from El Alamein. While the invasion of Sicily (Husky) was a natural progression after the Allied conquest of Tunisia, future options were less clear, for Churchill and Roosevelt anticipated a simultaneous assault on France in 1944 from both the north (Overlord) and south (Dragoon). While Dragoon slipped by two months, all its resources came

from the Italian theatre. The map also illustrates why Rommel’s proposals to defend Italy from the north attracted Hitler initially. From there, he could counter any threatened invasions of southern France or the Balkans.



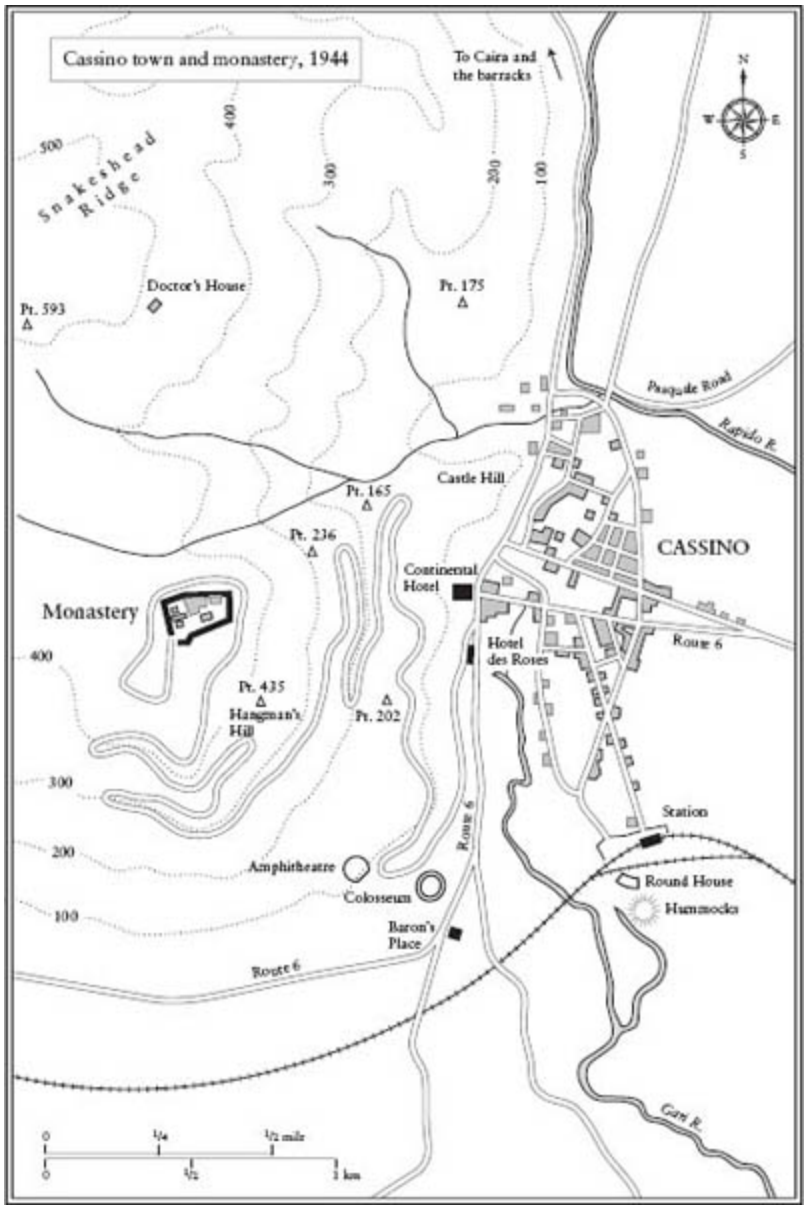
After the unexpected German success in holding Mark Clark's Fifth Army at Salerno for ten days, Hitler opted for Kesselring's plans of a southerly defence, rather than Rommel's based in the north. The result was various linear positions, strung across the waist of Italy, incorporating rivers and mountains wherever possible. The Victor and Barbara lines bought time whilst the most deadly, the Bernhardt, was constructed in depth by military engineers. The Bernhardt was at its strongest in the west, where a

fall-back or switch position, the Gustav, was constructed around the natural bastion of Monte Cassino.

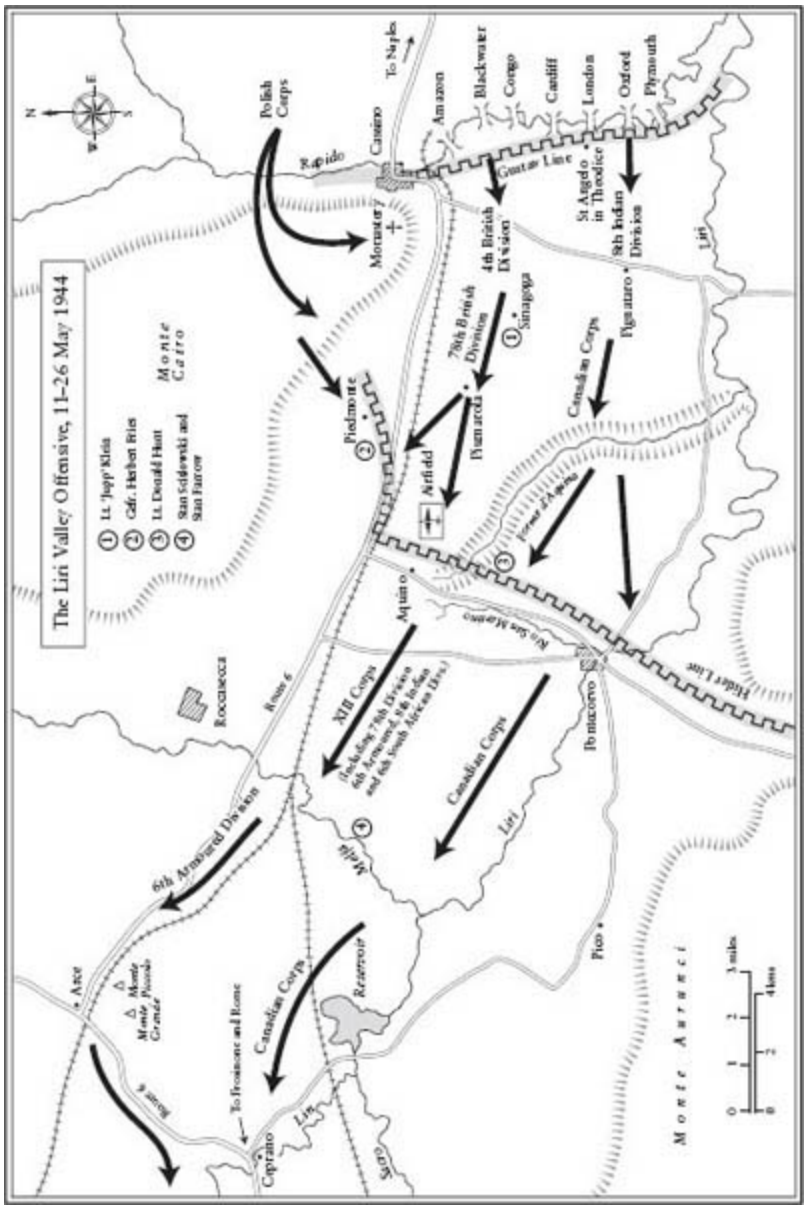


The first battle of Cassino saw a series of Allied attacks between Cassino and the coast, which were sequential, and timed to coincide with the Anzio landings. After the war the local German corps commander, General Senger, criticised this approach, as he was able to switch his reserves to meet each assault. He argued that had the Allied thrusts been simultaneous, they would have broken through. Of the attacks, the French in the north showed most promise, but was halted through lack of reinforcements. Senger, though, was most worried by the British moves in the south, which

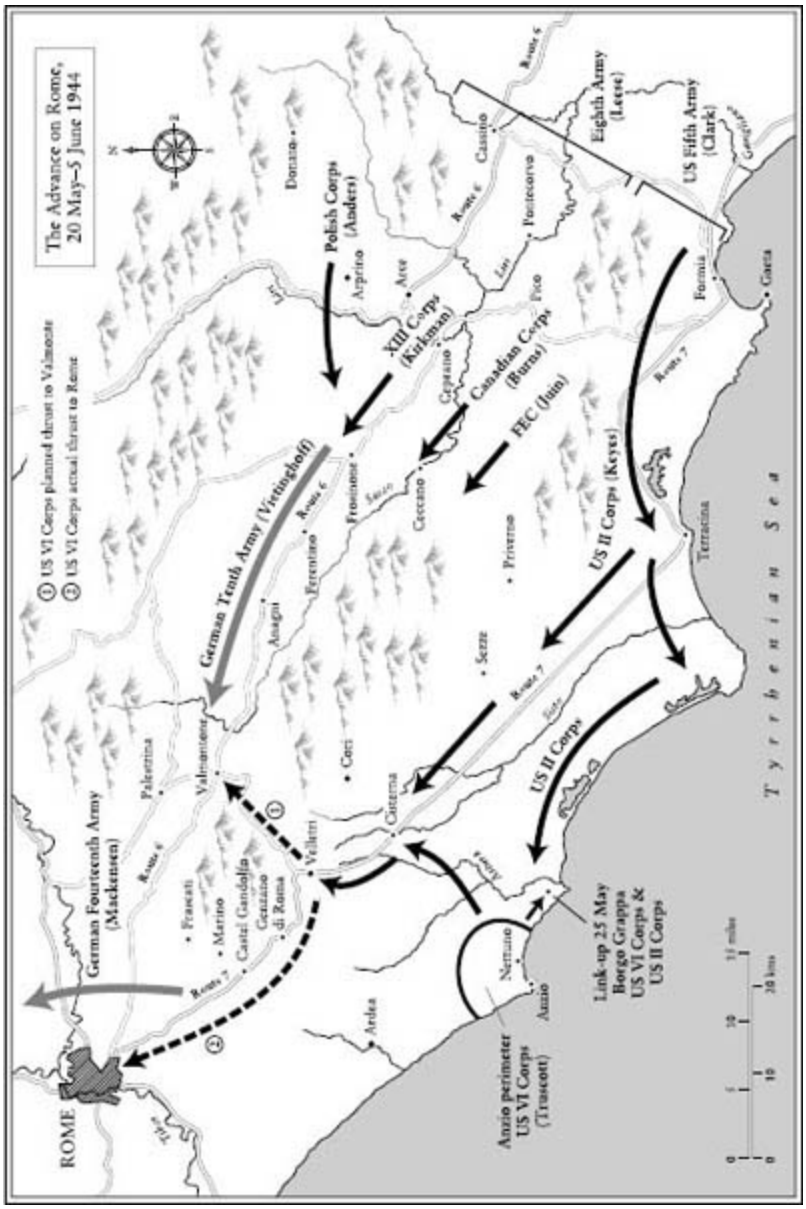
he felt would have broken through had they been properly resourced.



The second and third battles of Cassino were focussed on the town and monastery and overseen by Lieutenant General Sir Bernard Freyberg. For reasons of geography, attacks on the monastery were only possible from the north-west (Snakeshead Ridge) or up the sheer eastern face, leaping up the hairpin bends. The main German centres of resistance were the Continental Hotel, Hotel des Roses, Baron’s Palace and Station area, all extremely well-built of local stone.



Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese, commanding Eighth Army, oversaw the attack and pursuit up the Liri valley. Leese had huge resources available to him – comprising three corps (British XIII Corps, the Canadians and Poles), but made the mistake of cramming six Allied divisions into the valley (rarely more than five miles wide) in the final stages, slowing down the advance, rather than increasing it. This may have influenced Clark to strike for Rome, against Alexander’s orders.



Operation Diadem, devised by Alexander's talented chief of staff, John Harding, involved both the penetration of the Gustav and Hitler Lines and a breakout from Anzio. It is notable here that each corps in the fourth battle was attacking what had been a divisional objective in the first battle. The broad idea was for Truscott's Anzio force to prevent the escape of Vietinghoff's Tenth Army, but Mark Clark's switch of emphasis towards Rome allowed the Germans to escape. However, the Germans proved very disciplined in their withdrawal and there is no guarantee

that Truscott’s VI Corps (who suffered heavy losses at Cisterna) would have been able to stop them at Valmonte.

We are the D-Day Dodgers,[1] out in Italy,
Always on the vino, always on the spree.
Eighth Army skivers and their tanks,
We go to war in ties like swanks.
For we're the D-Day Dodgers, in sunny Italy.

We landed at Salerno, a holiday with pay.
Jerry brought his bands out to cheer us on our way,
Showed us the sights and gave us tea,
We all sang songs, the beer was free.
For we're the D-Day Dodgers, the lads that D-Day dodged.

Palermo and Cassino were taken in our stride,
We did not go to fight there, we just went for the ride.
Anzio and Sangro are just names,
We only went to look for dames,
For we're the D-Day Dodgers, in sunny Italy.

On our way to Florence, we had a lovely time,
We drove a bus from Rimini, right through the Gothic Line,
Then to Bologna we did go,
And went bathing in the River Po,
For we're the D-Day Dodgers, the lads that D-Day dodged.

We hear the boys in France are going home on leave,
After six months' service such a shame they're not relieved.
And we're told to carry on a few more years,
Because our wives don't shed no tears.
For we're the D-Day Dodgers, out in sunny Italy.

Once we had a 'blue light' that we were going home,
Back to dear old Blighty, never more to roam.
Then someone whispered: 'In France we'll fight,'

We said: ‘Not that, we’ll just sit tight,’
For we’re the D-Day Dodgers, the lads that D-Day dodged.

Dear Lady Astor, you think you know a lot,
Standing on a platform and talking Tommy-rot.
Dear England’s sweetheart and her pride,
We think your mouth is much too wide –
From the D-Day Dodgers, out in sunny Italy.

Look around the hillsides, through the mist and rain,
See the scattered crosses, some that bear no name.
Heartbreak and toil and suffering gone,
The lads beneath, they slumber on.
They are the D-Day Dodgers, who’ll stay in Italy.

Preface

THE MAN CURSED his tight-fitting clothing. Familiar friends, his woollen trousers and jacket nevertheless were scratchy and uncomfortable. Under his hat, the heat of the day was causing him to sweat, matting the golden locks of his hair and gluing his linen shirt to his chest. He dabbed at his forehead and neck with a handkerchief and swatted at the pulsing clouds of flies. Looking considerably younger than his thirty-two years, he wondered at the train of events which had caused him to leave London and come to central Italy. This was not the noble land of the caesars he had anticipated, but a landscape festooned with ruins and sullen, subdued people who possessed none of the sparkle he supposed the Mediterranean might have encouraged.

The only way up the hill was by a battered track, which zigzagged tortuously up the face of the rocky massif. Dominating all around him, unrelenting high ground: hard limestone with 6,000-foot jagged peaks and fifty-degree slopes. Too steep for any wheeled transport, the man made his way perched astride a donkey, slipping and swaying uncomfortably with its every stride. To one side loomed the rising massif: scree and dislodged stones of the broken hillside, razor-edged boulders and crags jutting out of the alpine grass like fangs. Every now and then a black smudge indicated a cave; those nearer the pilgrims' track held shrines, festooned with gaudily painted statues, rosary

beads and freshly picked mountain flowers. To the man's other side, through the heat haze, a fantastic panorama: the River Gari gushing from the high hills to the north before merging with the wider Liri from the north-west and the great Garigliano, then feeding into the Tyrrhenian Sea some twenty miles distant. The silvery rivers snaked their way along the valley floors, past the tattered villages the traveller had explored hours before, and roads, no more than muddied, rutted tracks. All seemed billiard-table flat from his lofty vantage point, though, as he knew to his discomfort, the terrain was anything but level. As he gazed at the plain, he paused to take in the significance of the mountain he was ascending, and the huge building on top of it, named after the feature on which it perched, and why it had been so frequently and violently fought over.

His local guide, hidden under a vast straw hat, trudged on foot behind, humming a peasant song and urging the burro on lethargically. They moved slowly, at the pace of a funeral procession, the Englishman thought. Clouds of dust kicked up from the path. Apart from the rhythmic creaking of the animal's leather halter, all was incredibly quiet: there with none of the bustle of Rome or London that he was used to. Instead, a gentle background accompaniment of crickets, the scent of the bright mountain blooms and herbs – the tangled smells of fresh thyme, mint, juniper, eucalyptus and heather. Petals displaying lilac, pale yellow, cornflower blue, orange-red and endless shades of white dotted the hillside, around which multi-coloured bugs, bees and wasps competed for space. High above, the bells of the abbey boomed out periodically, echoing through the prehistoric landscape, as if to herald their arrival, as they had greeted countless others through the centuries.

Looking up, he hadn't been prepared for the abbey's vastness; it dominated the massif, the town of Cassino below and the entrances to the Rapido and Liri valleys; he thought it the largest building he had ever seen. His eyes

took in the towering walls, made from massive cubes of light grey limestone, hewn many hundreds of years before from the surrounding mountains, and fitted together without a hint of mortar. The human effort of hauling them to this place was beyond his comprehension. The walls, in places over twenty feet thick, studded with rows of tiny windows, like gunports facing outwards, and silhouetted against a cloudless azure sky. Which is it, he thought; monastery or fortress?

The structure was gargantuan and undeniably impressive, but perhaps out of place in such a hidden setting. The peak it sat on had been terraced into submission: many tiers of earth and stones, some now crumbling, led down from the walls; some sprouted stunted olive trees, others vines, mostly now abandoned and overgrown. This was garden engineering on an impressive scale that had kept battalions of monks busy through the ages. As the traveller drew closer he noticed black-robed figures flitting about the grounds. A raven, perched high on the entrance gateway, watched his sorry approach and announced his arrival. He drank in the many floors and balconies, and the letters chiselled deep into the stone that spelt out the letters ‘P A X’ above the entrance – Peace.

There was, indeed, a sense of peace and quiet learning about the place, though torn apart by earthquakes and twice destroyed by invading armies. The traveller could see why a pre-Roman tribe, the Volsci, had established a fortified village up here, and why the Romans had moved the settlement to the foot of the hill, calling it Casinum. They left their shrine to Apollo on the hilltop, by a mountain spring, far away from the ordinary world of the valleys. Saint Benedict of Subiaco, seeking a refuge for contemplation, had decided to build his small retreat on the shrine’s ruins in AD 529, craftily reusing the Volscian stone and Roman brick he found lying around. The visitor had read how Benedict – perched almost in the clouds – devised

his *regula monachorum*, the rules for daily monastery life, here.

Once inside the cool, tall-ceilinged rooms, the man looked at a selection of leaves of illuminated vellum that had survived the upheavals of time and war, ornate robes of past abbots and other monastic treasures. He paused at the basilica, a baroque masterpiece, and admired the marble floors, delicate frescoes and ornate carved woodwork, and was lulled almost into a trance by the fresh incense and gentle rhythm of chanting monks. The library, one of the most important in the world, had grown steadily to contain tens of thousands of texts, including many works of Rome's earliest historians and philosophers. In the courtyard he saw the emblem of St Peter – the crossed keys – carved in stone and symbolising the gates of heaven, a reminder of the abbey's close associations with the papacy. In the eighth century, Abbot Desiderius, later Pope Victor III, had presided over more than two hundred monks here, and manuscripts produced in his *scriptorium* and by the whole Cassino school of illuminators became famous throughout Christendom. In 1066, Desiderius commissioned bronze doors, decorated with thirty-six panels detailing in silver damask lettering the possessions of the monastery and its surrounding territories. A later pope, Urban V, had underwritten the cost of rebuilding the monastery after the devastating earthquake of 1349.

But the wealth and lofty atmosphere of the abbey sat uncomfortably with the shockingly impoverished villages below, including Cassino itself, where, the traveller noted, 'there was not a single pane of glass to be seen, nor food to be had in any of the wretched hovels that passed for houses'. This was a journey of contrasts he would never forget. Shortly afterwards he devoted a few pages to the tour of Monte Cassino in his diary, and signed it: 'Mr Charles Dickens,[1] January 1845'.

At 8.30 on the morning of Wednesday 15 March 1944, the town of Cassino was wiped from the map as Allied forces began Operation Dickens, named in honour of the writer's visit almost a century before. During that morning, almost five hundred US aircraft delivered a thousand tons of high explosive onto the little town, pulverising the centuries-old landscape familiar to Dickens, and countless other distinguished visitors, for ever. The Allied powers' crude assault heralded their third attack in as many months on the strongest point of the Gustav Line, Germany's defensive belt across the waist of Italy, constructed with elaborate care over the preceding months. But borrowing the writer's name brought the Allies no greater luck than their earlier assaults on the mountain bastion in January and February. By the end of the month, Operation Dickens, an attempt to seize both Cassino and the monastery above, fought in impossible terrain, hostile weather and against some of the best units of the German army, had ground to a halt, leaving the 2nd New Zealand and 4th Indian Divisions eroded and exhausted.

The New Zealanders and Indians were some of well over half a million Allied and Axis troops who poured into central and southern Italy during 1943–44. They comprised a mixture of men hardened by combat in Stalingrad, Leningrad, Tobruk and Tunis. Many of their number had battled across the wastes of Russia and deserts of North Africa, in Abyssinia and Sicily. Others, like the Poles, had escaped from captivity to fight their foes, while the Italians and some of the French had switched sides and were eager to prove their loyalty. The majority came from far distant lands, had no connection with Italy or even the Mediterranean, and would find the climate as much an enemy as the Germans. Many more were new to combat – green and anxious not to fail; a very few were reluctant conscripts looking for the moment to vanish altogether. This applied to Hitler's Wehrmacht also – though mostly

German-Austrian, it also included a significant minority of waifs and strays from Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Russia, initially caught up in the euphoria of the Thousand-Year Reich. By 1944, most non-Germans wearing field grey, finding themselves stranded in Italy on the defensive against superior opponents, were eager to melt away. All of these men – and a few women – assembled to operate and enable the machinery of war, guided by a mixture of emotions, in the battleground of central Italy.

All had anticipated a land of sun, cherry blossom and grapes, but found something very different. If ever battlespace was dominated by geology and combat directed by climate and terrain, then Monte Cassino provided an extreme example. Here battle slid back to a medieval pace; hand-to-hand fighting was common; mules and horses were used in place of modern engines of war, as combatants on both sides quickly discovered that the ground around Cassino was unforgiving. An ankle-twisting loose scree, caused by the fracturing of limestone outcrops over the millennia, covered all gradients. The hard and brittle hills shattered like glass when hit by any projectile – shells, mortar rounds, hand grenades and even bullets sent splinters of rock in all directions, and causing a horrifically high number of head, face and eye injuries.

Confronted with bedrock everywhere, most troops found it totally impossible to dig foxholes and gun positions to protect themselves from enemy shelling or the elements. The infantry on all sides were issued with ridiculously small entrenching tools, or picks, which might have been useful for sandcastles on Salerno beach but made little impression on the rugged mountainsides encountered inland. The only shelter to be found was in the natural caves or fissures in the hillsides, enlarged by explosion, or by creating nests of rock rubble – termed *sangars* by British and Indian troops. Burying the human dead was all but impossible – a problem made worse in the summer months, when the attendant

flies, rats and wild dogs provided a health threat of their own.

The terrain also magnified artillery fire acoustically, which was nerve-wracking in the extreme and left speech impossible. One German commander in the hills wrote that ‘the demoralising effect[2] of the intense bombardment was increased tenfold by the echoes from the valleys’. There was a terrible sense of feeling trapped when caught on a narrow mountain track by shellfire, with nowhere to shelter. Additionally, much of the Italian landscape in the winter months was shrouded in an eerie freezing fog, crippling the ability of all armies to fight, disorientating individual soldiers, playing on their fears. ‘Fog in front of the outposts,[3] fog in front of the enemy, fog in front of the hotels, fog for taking away the wounded, fog for bringing up ammunition, fog, fog, fog,’ remembered another soldier; ‘there was no longer any day; there were only two species of night, one yellowish and full of clouds, that did not allow you to see and took you by the throat, the other full of flashes, of glimmers of light, of bursts of machine-gun fire, of fearful noises.’

Throughout history, from the Romans to modern times, armies of the northern hemisphere have tried to fight in the ‘campaigning season’, the period that extends from March to October. Outside those months, in Europe at least, poor weather degrades the wellbeing of soldiers and their ability to manoeuvre and sustain themselves. Wintry rain and snow turns gentle, fordable rivers into fierce torrents; unpaved roads become channels of thick, gooey mud. In such conditions, food, fodder and fuel for warmth become scarce; weapons malfunction and low temperatures sap the will to fight. Poor weather impedes land forces reliant on using motorised vehicles and even horses towing wheeled wagons laden with supplies and guns. As three Russian and two Italian winters during the Second World War would

prove, such conditions could be complete show-stoppers, even to modern armies.

Apart from stunted olives, the area around Monte Cassino in 1944 was a grey, treeless landscape, with little vegetation for camouflage, and no wood for overhead cover or warmth-giving camp fires. Though rich and verdant today, this relentless lack of shelter proved corrosive to armies in winter, where temperatures in the high winds and blizzards remained well below freezing; healthy troops frequently died of exposure in such unforgiving conditions.

The battles of Monte Cassino would be fought over five months, through winter to the beginning of summer. Even at the height of the campaigning season, the beginning of a Mediterranean May would create other problems at Cassino, compounding the misery of already thirsty troops subsisting in a parched landscape. Life in the valleys varied dramatically between the rush of water from the mountains in mid-winter to the barren moonscapes of midsummer. Rivers subsided to a trickle; unless irrigated, the valley floors retained little water and soil baked in the sun turned to a fine dust – a powdered earth that hurt the eyes and nose, filled the mouth and clogged, jammed and eroded all the machinery of war – from engines and gun barrels to wristwatches.

Much of Cassino was fought along highways composed of crushed earth or stone, which deteriorated rapidly in the winter months. Even the surface of the few paved highways soon gave way under the incessant movement of vehicles. As many Italians still moved about the countryside by ox cart, none of these avenues had been designed to withstand the weight of a modern, mechanised, wheeled and caterpillar-tracked army on the move. Main routes were few; fewer still were paved. Hairpin bends, snaking up and down the mountains, had a lethality of their own in poor weather. ‘We passed a burned-out American tank,[4] rounded a curve and saw two trucks which had plunged down a

ravine and were hanging almost perpendicularly against the side of the mountain,' wrote one observer.

The net effect of terrain, weather and shelling ground down some human beings with frightening results. Serving with the 5th Medium Regiment, RA, Captain Bill McLaren – later the famous rugby commentator – was investigating a farmhouse which had just had its roof blown off. Inside he discovered 'this guy sitting, or rather lying,[5] in the corner, his knees tucked right up under his chin in an almost foetal position … He was shaking violently and had a disturbing, wild-eyed look about him. Talking to him had no effect whatsoever: he just carried on staring at the wall. Clearly he was shell-shocked. I felt so sorry for him – he'd obviously had a terrible experience of some kind – and made a point of arranging for him to be taken back to the "wagon lines".'

No other campaign in Europe pulled in the same range of nationalities and cultures as that in Italy. The brutality and nature of the fighting at times reached the worst extremes of the Russian front, while the attrition rates often exceeded those of the Western Front. Failure to achieve a decisive result at Cassino for the first five months of 1944 condemned those in Italy to a further year of war. From the first landings of 3 September 1943 to the German surrender which took effect on 2 May 1945, the casualties in Italy were excessive, though balanced. The Allies suffered 312,000 killed,[6] wounded and missing; over the same period, the Germans lost 435,000, an average loss to both sides of 1,233 personnel *every day*, almost one for every minute of the 606-day-long campaign. This attrition was most pronounced at Monte Cassino, where some 200,000 casualties were inflicted on Germans, Italians, French, Americans, British, Indians, New Zealanders, Poles, Canadians and South Africans during 129 days of hell. This is their story.