

# THE PUSH FOR

By John T. Correll

# ROME

**A****FTER** the Allied invasion of Sicily in July 1943, the Italians arrested dictator Benito Mussolini and removed him from office. Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio, former head of the armed forces, was appointed by King Victor Emmanuel III to head the government and began secret negotiations for an armistice.

Italy surrendered unconditionally on Sept. 8. Two days later, Germany—up to then Italy's partner in the Axis pact—occupied Rome. Badoglio and the king fled south to the Allied lines.

The Germans rescued Mussolini, who had been confined in a remote mountain lodge, Sept. 10 and installed

**Italy had dropped out of the war, but the Germans were still there.**

German Federal Archives photo





USAF photo

him as the figurehead of a puppet regime in German-held northern Italy. Meanwhile, the invasion proceeded. The British Eighth Army crossed the Strait of Messina from Sicily to land at Reggio Calabria and Taranto in the southern end of the Italian boot. The main effort, however, was by the US Fifth Army, which went ashore on Sept. 9 at Salerno, some 145 miles south of Rome.

On Oct. 13, Italy declared war on Germany, after which the Germans treated Italy as an occupied country. The great symbolic prize was Rome,

*Left: German paratroopers fire a mortar at Allied troops. Above: B-25s on the way to bomb German troops near Monte Cassino in March 1944 pass Mount Vesuvius belching huge clouds of ash and smoke. Many USAAF aircraft were damaged by the hot ash and turbulent air near the eruption.*

which figured to be the first Axis capital to fall. “No objective can compete with the capture of Rome,” said British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

On the eve of the Salerno landing, the Allies considered dropping paratroopers from the US 82nd Airborne near Rome to link up with Italian forces and seize the city. The idea was scrubbed when closer examination revealed that the Germans had two panzer divisions in the vicinity and that Italian participation was uncertain.

The Italian campaign itself was a matter of considerable dispute. In 1942, the US had reluctantly accepted Churchill’s “Southern Strategy,” committing forces to North Africa and the Mediterranean and postponing the invasion of Europe across the English Channel. In the summer of 1943, the British wanted to proceed northward through Italy into

the Balkans and, as Churchill put it, the “soft underbelly” of Europe.

The Americans, who now provided an increasingly larger share of the forces for the war, refused to put off the cross-Channel strategy any longer. A target date of May 1944 was set for the invasion of France, which had been designated Operation Overlord. The Italian campaign continued at Churchill’s insistence, but with a reduction in priority and resources.

Italy was a tougher nut to crack than anticipated. The Allies had expected the Germans to fall back steadily to the north but the Germans dug in and made their stand in the rugged terrain between Naples and Rome.

## ALLIES IN TRANSITION

The campaign for the Italian mainland began with the same US and



British leaders who had conducted the war in North Africa and Sicily, but within a few months most of them were gone, reassigned to England for the buildup to Overlord.

US Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander in chief in the Mediterranean theater, went to command the Overlord invasion forces gathering in Britain. Along with him went his senior air commander, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder, and the two top American airmen, Lt. Gen. Carl A. “Tooe” Spaatz and Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle. Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery, who had led the British Eighth Army, was not far behind.

Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker was called in to command the Mediterranean air forces but the Italian front took on more of a British complexion, with the Americans accounting for fewer than a third of the combat forces in the theater.

British Gen. Henry Maitland “Jumbo” Wilson replaced Eisenhower as theater commander with British Gen. Harold Alexander as the senior ground commander. Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark

commanded the US Fifth Army, which was created for operations in Italy. Fifth Army consisted of two American corps and one British corps.

The Allied lineup in Italy included Canadians, Indians, New Zealanders, Poles, South Africans, Italians, and Free French, but overall, it was a smaller force than before. Seven divisions—four US, three British—and several bomber groups were transferred to Britain to prepare for Overlord.

The air campaign in Italy would rely primarily on Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force, which had medium bombers as well as fighters. The Allied Strategic Air Force component devoted its primary attention to western Europe although the heavy bombers were usually available for longer-range strikes in Italy.

Among the American GIs who landed was Bill Mauldin, a rifleman with the 180th Infantry Division. Mauldin drew cartoons for the 45th Division News, using whatever scrap paper he could find. His characters, Willie and Joe, were enormously popular and before long, Mauldin had his own jeep and was

producing six panel cartoons a week for the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*.

## THE GUSTAV LINE

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commanding the German forces in northern Italy, did not believe the peninsula could be held after the Italian surrender. To better defend the approaches to the German homeland, he proposed a fighting withdrawal to the Gothic Line above Florence.

However, the commander in the south, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, argued for staging the defense as far away from Germany as possible. Fuhrer Adolf Hitler agreed, and Rommel was transferred to France. Kesselring was given command of a new organization, Army Group C, to which all of the German forces in Italy were assigned.

Kesselring’s military weakness was airpower. In September 1943, the Luftwaffe had only 625 combat airplanes left in the entire Mediterranean theater, vastly outnumbered by the Allied air forces, even after the drawdown for Overlord.

*Tanks are unloaded at Anzio harbor, to join US Fifth Army forces on the beachhead. The end run around the Gustav Line completely surprised the Germans, and the landing was accomplished virtually unopposed. The Allies failed to break out, however, and were soon besieged.*

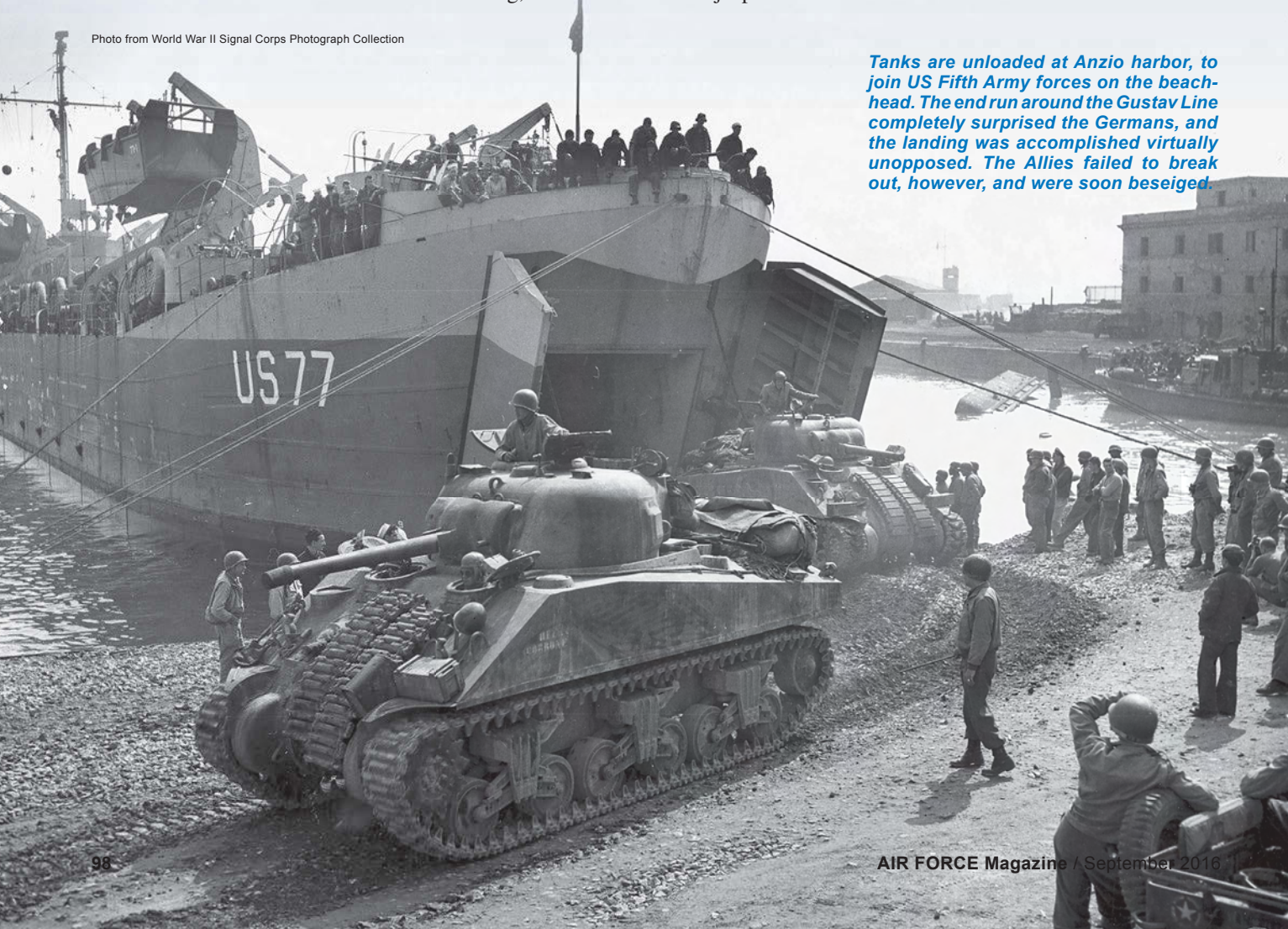


Photo from World War II Signal Corps Photograph Collection



The Germans made effective use of geography, especially the Apennine Mountains, a chain that ran down the spine of Italy. Easy movement was possible only along the narrow coastal plains. Above Salerno, Kesselring pulled together several fortified echelons, known collectively as the Winter Line, stretching from coast to coast across Italy at the most narrow point. The most formidable of these interlocking defenses was the Gustav Line, which ran through the craggy stronghold of Monte Cassino.

High atop Monte Cassino was an ancient monastery where the Benedictine order was founded in the sixth century. The Germans maintained—truthfully, as it turned out—that they had not occupied the monastery itself, but the slopes of the mountain were strewn with mines and the heights all around bristled with artillery pre-sighted on the approaches below.



*"You'll get over it, Joe. Oncet I wuz gonna write a book exposin' the army after th' war myself."*

The Allied plan was for the British Eighth Army to push north and link up with the US Fifth Army forces

**Cartoonist Bill Mauldin's GI characters Willie and Joe on the ground in Italy. Mauldin provided six panel cartoons a week for Stars and Stripes. They were enormously popular with the troops.**

from Salerno. Together they would drive toward Rome. The Salerno beachhead was secured in nine days of hard fighting and the Allies took Naples Oct. 1. Progress beyond that was slow and difficult. Repeated attempts failed to break the Gustav Line.

By the end of September, the Allies were in firm control of southern Italy but were unable to advance further. The main battle lines remained static for the rest of 1943.

### ANZIO

If the Allies could not break through the Gustav Line, perhaps they could go around it with an

"amphibious end run" to land at Anzio, behind the German right flank and about 35 miles south of Rome. This would put pressure on Kesselring to pull back and defend his supply lines and the approaches to Rome.

The greatest advocate of the Anzio offensive—dubbed Operation Shingle—was Churchill, whose enthusiasm prevailed over military concerns about the risk. The landing was made Jan. 22 by the Fifth Army's VI Corps, commanded by Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas, with a British division assigned to satisfy Churchill's requirement for British participation.

The Germans were completely surprised and the Allies went ashore at



Photo by Radomil Blinek

**Here: The ancient abbey at Monte Cassino was destroyed Feb. 15, 1944, but the Germans weren't there. They had instead dug in on the grounds outside the walls. Above: View of the rebuilt abbey in 2004.**



German Federal Archives photo

Anzio essentially unopposed. However, Lucas wasted the advantage, dug into a defensive position, and advanced only a few miles inland. He made no serious effort to go further for nine days, and by then it was too late. Kesselring had Anzio surrounded with eight divisions.

Two large railway guns—dubbed “Anzio Annie” and “Anzio Express”—firing from caves in the hills, pounded the beachhead day and night. Lucas was relieved from command and replaced but the failure was not his alone. As Kesselring himself noted, the landing force had not been large enough or strong enough to succeed.

Anzio turned into a 125-day siege with the Allied force isolated on the beach. On German radio, Axis Sally called it “the largest self-supporting prisoner of war camp in the world.”

The Fifth Army’s II Corps moved up the coast from Salerno to join the British Eighth Army in a renewed effort to breach the Gustav Line. The attack centered on Cassino, beyond which lay the valley of the Liri River and Route 6 toward Rome and points north.

## MONTE CASINO

Kesselring had plugged that gap with his strongest defenses. Allied ground forces and aerial observers were convinced that the Germans were using the 1,400-year-old Benedictine abbey on Monte Cassino for military purposes. They were mistaken about that, but in any case, German machine guns and mortars were thick on the ground outside the walls of the monastery.

The commander of the New Zealand Corps assigned to storm Monte Cassino did not want to attack until the monastery was destroyed. Wilson, the theater commander, deciding that military necessity and danger to Allied forces outweighed other considerations, ordered the bombing of the abbey.

The monastery was reduced to rubble on Feb. 15 by waves of B-17s, B-26s, and B-25s with additional bombardment by heavy artillery. It was not enough. When the bombing subsided, the Germans came out of their bunkers and tunnels, brought up reinforcements, and held the Gustav Line through five more days of fighting. The stalemate continued into March.



*Lt. Gen. George Patton, Gen. Henry “Hap” Arnold, and Lt. Gen. Mark Clark (l-r) in Sicily.*

The next shot at weakening the Gustav Line was Operation Strangle, launched by the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces March 9 to disrupt Kesselring’s supply lines. It was the biggest aerial interdiction effort of the war to date.

Military target planners were required to follow the theories and priorities of professor Solly Zuckerman, an academician who had influence with Churchill’s science advisor, Lord Cherwell. According to Zuckerman’s studies, the interdiction strikes should concentrate on large rail centers and marshaling yards: Roads, railways, and bridges were deemed “uneconomical and difficult targets,” seldom worth attacking.

Combat experience soon proved otherwise. “Trains were made up north of the Alps and run straight through to railheads near the front,” said historian Eduard Mark. “Marshaling yards were little more than switching stations” and “the Germans were reopening bombed yards in one to three days.”

The best targets were those scorned by Zuckerman. In the mountains and valleys of central Italy, the railroads had an enormous number of bridges and viaducts, most of them vulnerable to air attack. Within the month, the medium bombers had cut the rail lines supplying the German front and kept them cut. Rail traffic was blocked 50 miles north of Rome. When the Germans shifted to motor transport, the Allied fighters and fighter-bombers strafed and

bombed the roads so effectively that trucks seldom moved in the daytime.

What saved the Gustav Line was the static nature of the battlefield. The Germans remained in their entrenched positions, expending ammunition and fuel in limited amounts. Some deliveries got through at night, and they conserved the supplies in their stockpiles. They had enough to get by until they were forced to fight and maneuver more actively.

When Operation Strangle ended May 11, Mediterranean air forces had flown some 65,000 sorties, mostly against German road and rail lines, with US airmen accounting for more than half of the attacks. The medium bombers did the brunt of the work, but P-47 fighter-bombers proved especially adept at destroying bridges as well as in the armed reconnaissance role.

Thus far, Strangle looked like a failure. What it had accomplished would not become apparent until the Germans were flushed out of their defensive positions.

## ON TO ROME

In May, the Allies finally hit on a strategy that would oust the Germans from the Gustav Line as Operation Strangle merged directly into a complex offensive by ground and air forces called Operation Diadem.

Taking care to conceal his movements from the Germans, Alexander concen-





*A German Tiger I tank in front of the Altare della Patria, a monument built in honor of King Victor Emmanuel, the first king of a unified Italy. The Allies finally captured Rome just two days before the D-Day invasion of Normandy.*

## WITHIN SIGHT OF THE ALPS

Churchill's determination to pursue the war in Italy was undiminished. "At least let us have a chance to launch a decisive strategic stroke with what is entirely British and under British command," he said in a note to his chief of staff in July. "I am not going to give way about this for anybody. Alexander is going to have his campaign."

He was unable to persuade the Americans on his southern strategy, but Clark agreed. In his memoirs, published in 1951, Clark said that weakening of the campaign in Italy "was one of the outstanding political mistakes of the war" and that the Allies could have and should have pushed on to capture the Balkans.

The Allies reached the Gothic Line, 15 miles north of Florence, Sept. 15 and by October, the Fifth Army had pushed far enough beyond that to see the Alps but could not go further. Alexander was promoted to field marshal in December. Clark replaced him as commander of ground forces in Italy and got his fourth star in March 1945.

Kesselring was injured when his staff car collided with a mobile gun. After hospitalization, he was appointed commander in chief of the Western front in Germany in March 1945. Mussolini was killed by partisans in April 1945 as he was fleeing from the Allied advance.

Between September 1943 and April 1945, Allied casualties in Italy were 320,000, of which about 70,000 were killed in action. Total German casualties were more than 600,000, including 150,000 killed.

The Italian campaign ended May 2, a week before the general German surrender, when Army Group C surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. After the war, the abbey at Monte Cassino was rebuilt as an operating monastery. ✪

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trated his forces on a much shorter front that stretched only about 25 miles from Cassino to the sea. Except for a small screening force, he abandoned his positions along the Adriatic and transferred the rest of the British Eighth Army to the area around Cassino. The US Fifth Army's II Corps held the coastal flank of the new Allied line.

Kesselring never saw it coming. He thought he was facing six Allied divisions on the main Gustav front. In fact, there were more than 15 of them.

Furthermore, the German defending force was not nearly as strong as it had been when it threw back the Eighth Army assault in February. The Germans were short of fuel, ammunition, food, and motor transport. They could bring in reinforcements only with great difficulty and were constrained in their ability to shift their forces to strengthen weak or threatened positions. This was largely the result of the Strangle interdiction strikes.

On May 16, Allied air and ground forces hit the Gustav Line with devastating intensity and within days had punched through to the Liri Valley. By May 23, the Germans were in retreat all along the battlefield. The seven divisions at the Anzio beachhead finally broke out to join the offensive.

Alexander's plan was to destroy or capture the retreating German army. That did not happen because of a serious failure in Allied coordination.

The entire Italian campaign had been marred by Anglo-American dissension

and disunity. There was high-level disagreement about how resources should be allocated between Overlord and the Mediterranean. In Sicily, the rivalry between Montgomery and US Lt. Gen. George S. Patton had taken on a hard edge.

Clark, noted for both his ambition and his fondness of publicity, had never gotten along well with Alexander. When Alexander ordered the Fifth Army to block Route 6 and intercept the escaping Germans, Clark's resentment boiled over. He suspected—not entirely without cause—that this was part of a plan to leave the honor of liberating Rome to the British while the Fifth Army carried out a blocking maneuver.

Clark decided to defy Alexander's instructions. On the thinly disguised pretext of emerging operational conditions, he changed the order and sent most of his force racing for Rome with less than a third of the Fifth Army allocated to the Route 6 operation. He waited almost 24 hours to inform Alexander of what he had done.

On June 3, Kesselring declared Rome an open city and retreated northward. Route 6 remained open and most of the German forces from the Gustav Line escaped as well.

Rome fell to Clark and the Fifth Army June 4. The glory of it did not last long, though. Two days later, the Overlord invasion landed in Normandy and drew the newspaper headlines and the attention of the world away from Clark's triumph.