



BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO — ALLIED MISTAKE, OR BRUTAL NECESSITY?

By Friedrich Seiltgen

The Battle of Monte Cassino began on January 17, 1944. The area was a stronghold for Germany, which held the Garigliano, Liri, and Rapido valleys, forming the Gustav Line. The rugged terrain created a natural fortress, giving the town the defensive high ground and creating a strategic nightmare for the Allies.



British infantry clearing buildings during the Battle of Monte Cassino in World War II.

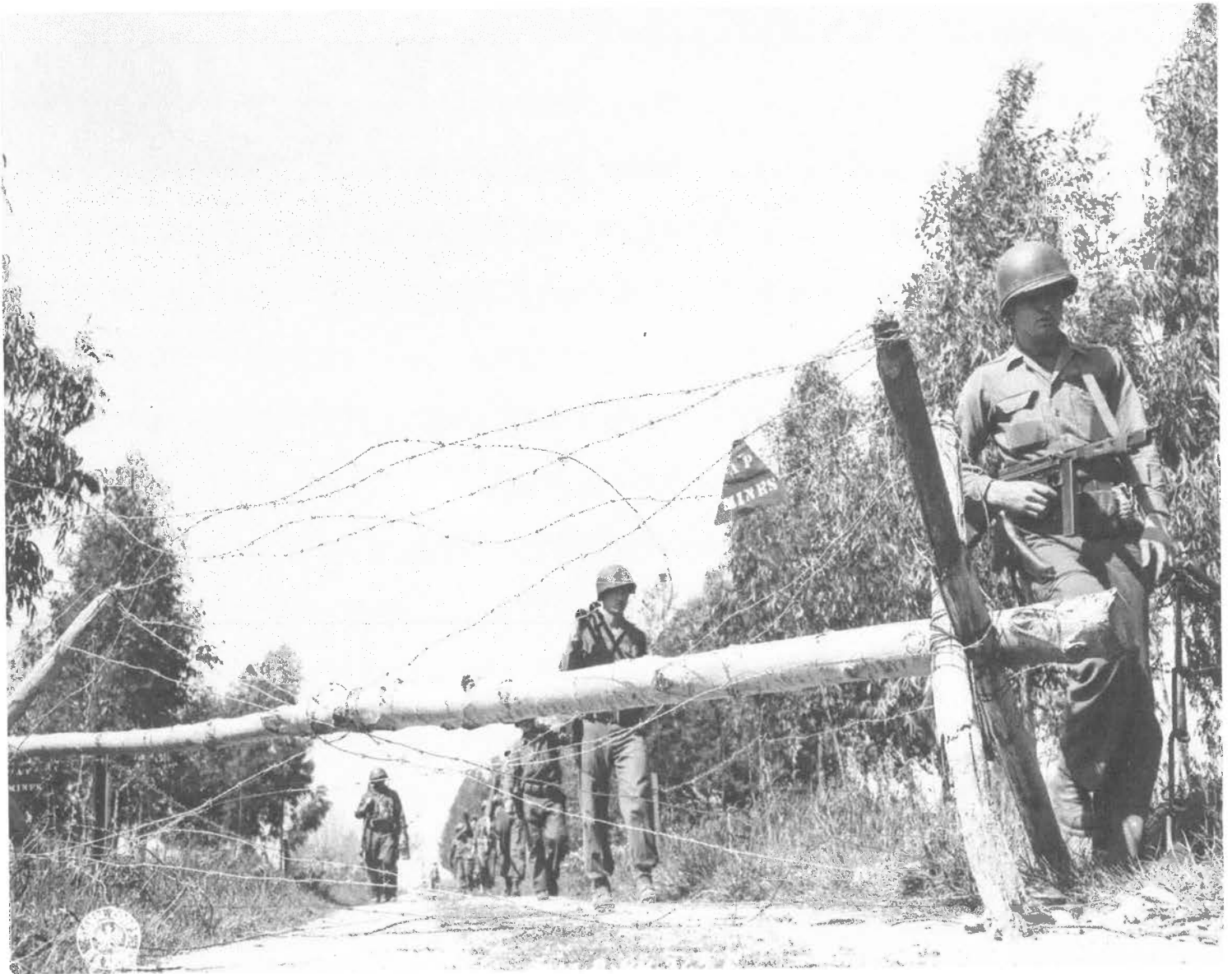
The city had to be captured as it stood in the way of the entrance to the Liri Valley, which was a direct route to their primary target, Rome. This four-month battle became a meat grinder, resulting in 55,000 Allied and 20,000 German casualties.



Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring ordered German forces not to use the abbey as a defensive position. Kesselring was also responsible for the [Ardeatine Massacre](https://www.thearmorylife.com/guns-of-the-via-rasella-attack/) (<https://www.thearmorylife.com/guns-of-the-via-rasella-attack/>). Image: Polish National Digital Archives

Gustav Line

The Gustav Line was 161 kilometers long and fortified when Germany retreated to the area after the invasion of Italy. It was a key component of the larger Winter Line: a series of German defensive fortifications in central Italy designed to slow the Allied advance up the Italian peninsula



A United States Army patrol moves near the Gustav Line in Italy during early 1944. The soldier on the right carries an M1A1 submachine gun. Image: NARA

Fortifications included artillery, minefields, machine gun emplacements, barbed wire and pill boxes, which were manned by 15 German divisions.



A group of German Fallschirmjäger of the 1st Parachute Corps at the Battle of Monte Cassino. Known as the Green Devils, the paratroopers had a reputation as fierce fighters. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

On January 17, 1944, the British Tenth Corps initiated the first ground assault on the Gustav Line and attacked the enemy's left flank, suffering an estimated 4,000 casualties.



An M10 tank destroyer, manned by the French crew of an Algerian division, fires on a German position in the opening days of the Battle of Monte Cassino. Image: NARA

On January 20th, the U.S. Army's 36th Division attacked the center attempting to push across the Gari River. Although the American troops fought hard, they suffered at least 1,600 casualties in just 48 hours. It is believed less than 40 Germans were killed during the same time.



German paratroopers man a machine gun from the ruins of Monte Cassino Abbey. The rubble provided cover and concealment for the defending Fallschirmjäger. Image: IWM

Two more assaults were launched with similar results. The losses were so bad, the attack would later be the subject of a Congressional inquiry.



A German observer uses Scherenfernrohr SF14ZGi scissor binoculars, equipped with sun visors and camouflaged with fabric, during the Battle of Monte Cassino. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

Abbey of Monte Cassino

Situated above the city was the Abbey of Monte Cassino at 520 meters. The abbey was built on the site of Roman fortifications where St. Benedict of Nursia established the first monastery of his Benedictine Order in 529 A.D.



The restored entrance of Monte Cassino Abbey, rebuilt after its destruction during the Battle of Monte Cassino in 1944, stands as a testament to resilience and historical preservation.

There were conflicting reports about whether the Germans were inside the monastery, using it for cover. The British press claimed they were; The New York Times claimed they were; spotters claimed they were, while the German Commander said his men were only outside the Abbey. Even rumors regarding the location of German troops were believed to be accurate.



A historic view of the Benedictine Abbey on Monte Cassino Hill, captured before its destruction during the Allied bombing in 1944. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

However, Martino Matronola, a monk who remained at Monte Cassino, asserted that the *Wehrmacht* was not using the monastery. History shows the Germans were not inside the abbey, but were also counting on the Allies to hesitate in a full-scale assault on the Abbey.



Having constructed a basic shelter among rocks, two German soldiers eat a meal during a pause in the fighting near the abbey. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

The decision to bomb the abbey was made, but is still hotly debated.

Before the bombing, the Allies dropped leaflets with a warning before the attack.

"Italian friends, until this day, we have done everything to avoid bombing the abbey. But the Germans have taken advantage. Now that the battle has come close to your sacred walls, we shall, despite our wish, have to direct our arms against the monastery. Abandon it at once. Put yourselves in a safe place. Our warning is urgent." ~ Fifth Army



A Vickers machine gun (<https://www.thearmorylife.com/the-vickers-gun-britains-world-war-warrior/>) crew of the 2nd New Zealand Division in action during attacks on German positions at Monte Cassino. Image: NARA

The Bombing Begins

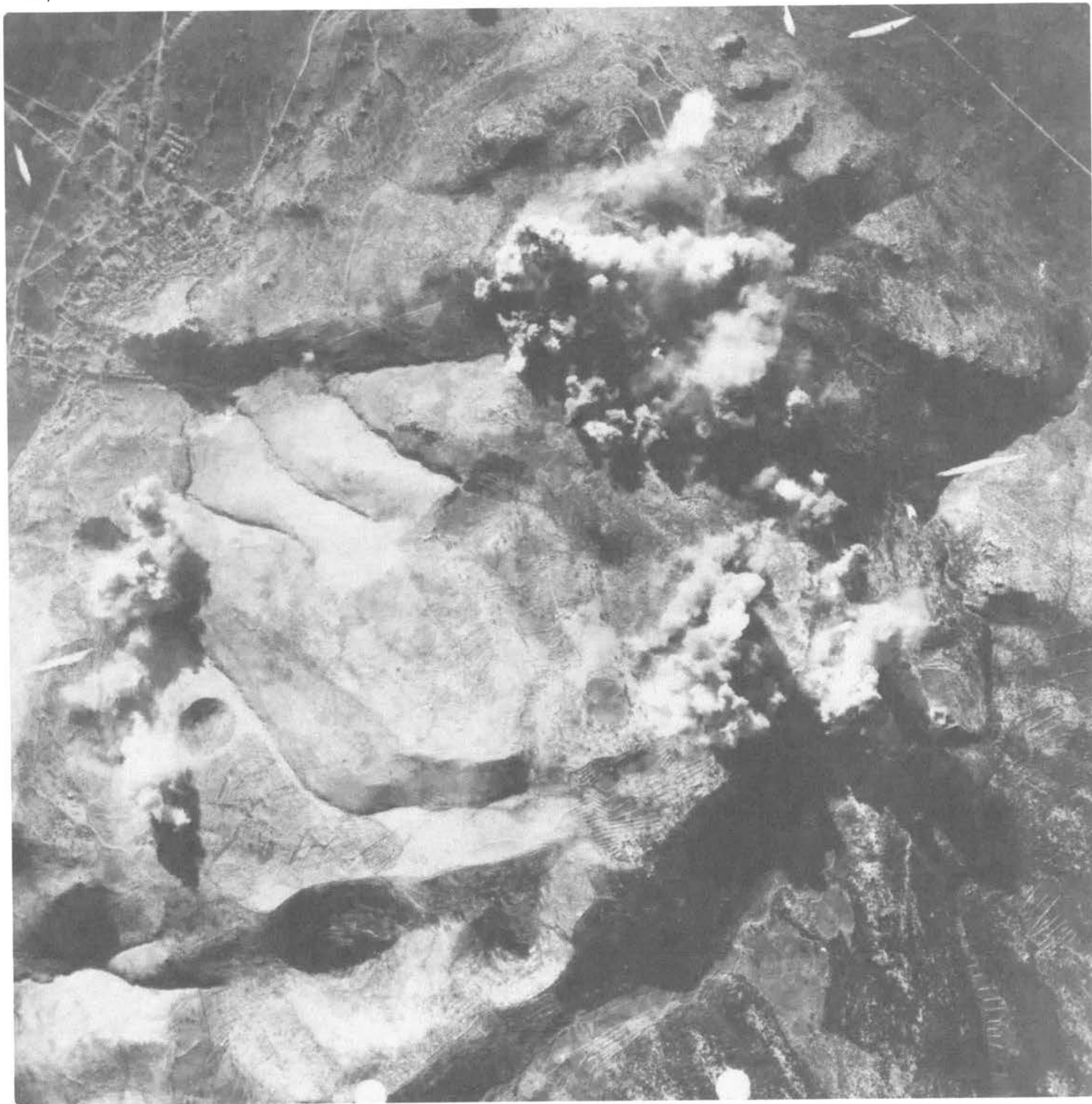
Before the bombing, soldiers and spectators camped out for a view of the destruction. When the initial bombs struck the Abbey, cheers went out from the troops and reporters below, believing the falsehood that the Germans held the abbey and violated the religious site to use it as a safe haven.



A B-26 Marauder (serial number 42-107536) of the 17th Bomb Group, 12th Air Force in flight past the ruins of Monte Cassino Abbey, 1944. Image: NARA

On February 15, 1944, a mix of American Boeing B-17s, North American B-25s (<https://www.thearmorylife.com/b-25-mitchell/>) and Martin B26s from the 96th Bomb Group attacked the abbey, dropping 1,150 tons of ordinance on the monastery and reducing it to rubble. Maj. Bradford Evans, the lead pilot in the first formation, piloted a B-17 Flying Fortress numbered 666, an ominous signal for the first aircraft to take part in the destruction of the religious site.

Between bombing runs, artillery from II Corps continued the assault and pounded the summit. The bombing resulted in the deaths of approximately 230 Italians who fled to the abbey for safety, while no German positions near the abbey were hit.



This view of the bombing of the Monte Cassino Abbey shows a large explosion in the east wing. At the time, it was believed to have been German ammunition storage that had been hit. Image: NARA

Now that the bombers had finished their mission, infantry troops would follow up with an assault, or would they? It seems the Army Air Corps failed to include infantry units in the planning as the bombers had to be flexible and plan their attack according to weather conditions and other missions in the theater.



The ruins of the monastery after the fighting ended. While questions remain about the necessity of the abbey's bombing, there is little doubt about the damage done. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

Brigade commanders of the 4th Division were surprised to see the bombers go overhead during their morning planning meeting, and many infantry troops had been rotated into the valley only two days before the mission and had not been supplied with equipment for an assault due to heavy rains and flooding.



The Independent 2nd Armored Brigade of the 2nd Polish Corps advances during the Battle of Monte Cassino. Sappers catch a ride on this M4 Sherman tank. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

In the aftermath of the bombing, the abbey's destruction proved to be detrimental to the U.S. Quickly, German Airborne Fallschirmjäger troops occupying the rubble began fortifying the site, and Allied assaults up the mountain achieved little, at the cost of heavy casualties.



Polish soldiers of the 2nd Polish Corps assault German positions during the Battle of Monte Cassino, using grenades and rifle fire to advance under heavy resistance. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

The German propaganda machine also used the bombing of Monte Cassino to smear the United States as enemies of ancient and religious traditions.



The M4 Sherman tanks of the 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade enters the ruins of Monte Cassino monastery. The Allied breakthrough of the Gustav Line was key in the Italian Campaign. Image: NARA

Pope Pious XII did not comment on the destruction of the abbey, but his secretary of state told the U.S. diplomats that the bombing was “*a colossal blunder...a piece of gross stupidity.*”



An officer of the Polish 6th Armored Regiment takes a German sniper prisoner during the Battle of Monte Cassino.
Image: Polish National Digital Archives

Operation Diadem

The final plan for Monte Cassino was to force the Germans to commit a large number of troops in Italy at the same time as the Normandy invasion and to circle Monte Cassino with an attack by the U.S. II Corps on the left towards Rome.



A 3" mortar crew of No. 2771 Field Squadron RAF Regiment bombard German positions from a ravine. Image: IWM

The French would attack from the right side into the Aurunci mountains, the British XIII Corps up the center right into the Liri Valley, together with the Polish II Corps on the right to isolate the abbey and push the retreating Germans into the direction of the U.S. VI Corps from the Anzio beachhead.



German prisoners of war, captured by Polish soldiers during the Battle of Monte Cassino, stand in a group under Allied supervision. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

On May 17, The Polish II Corps launched another attack on the abbey. German artillery and mortar fire battered the Polish troops, and a fierce battle with hand-to-hand combat raged on. The Germans, concerned that their supply line would be cut by the Allies' advance into the Liri Valley, pulled back from Monte Cassino to the Hitler line.



A group of German prisoners walks along a narrow mountain path on their way to captivity. The soldier on the right has a map case and a visible parachutist's badge. Image: Polish National Digital Archives

On May 18, 1944, Polish troops linked up with British soldiers in the Liri valley, while troops from the 12th Podolian Cavalry, exhausted from the battle on the summit, made it to the abbey to raise the Polish flag over the ruins. Four months into the campaign and three months after the abbey was leveled, The Battle of Monte Cassino was over. But at what cost?



Captured German parachute troops file past an M4 Sherman tank of the New Zealand 4th Armoured Brigade. The Fallschirmjäger were part of the German forces defending the Gustav Line. Image: NARA

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