

*I remember the battle for Anzio as the most brutal in which I fought during World War II. I also remember it as the most futile; for fifty years its futility has haunted me.*



# The Battle for Anzio

By WILLIAM WOODRUFF

**T**he story begins in the summer of 1943 when Allied victories in North Africa and Sicily made it necessary to redefine strategy in the Mediterranean. Because Great Britain looked upon the Mediterranean differently than the United States—it was after all a life-line of empire—its influence gradually predominated. America was more concerned with invading Western Europe and sought to limit its adventures in the Mediterranean.

Before long-term Allied strategy could be agreed to, the British Eighth Army invaded

Italy across the Straits of Messina. Regardless of intentions, once started the Italian campaign took on a life of its own. By the fall of 1943 Allied armies had reached the German Gustav Line anchored on Cassino. Beyond that was the Liri valley leading to the prize—Rome. In spite of desperate Allied attacks to break through to Rome, the German line held. Stalemate ensued.

To break the deadlock, a plan was hatched in early December 1943 at Marrakech to make an amphibious landing (code named Shingle) at the port of Anzio-Nettuno, 80 miles north of the Gustav Line and 35 miles south of Rome. The task force



*Itri, Italy* by Tom Craig.

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was expected to secure a beachhead and push twenty miles inland to the Alban Hills. Once in possession of the hills, it could outflank the German Tenth Army, disrupt the road and rail links joining the southern German front and Rome, capture Rome, and thus shorten the war.

The British—including General Sir Harold R.I.G. Alexander, deputy Allied commander in chief, Mediterranean Theater, and General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff—favored the plan while the Americans—including Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, commander of Fifth Army, and Major General John P. Lucas, whom Clark named the task force commander shortly before the battle—were lukewarm. Clark and other Americans felt that Fifth Army was already exhausted from the casualties suffered on the southern front and that adequate transport and forces for such a hazardous operation could only be obtained by weakening Overlord. Arguments against Shingle prevailed and the plan was shelved.

But unconvinced of the wisdom of this action, Prime Minister Winston Churchill promptly revived the plan, devoting himself to it with Herculean energy. Eisenhower thought him “almost exclusively responsible” for the Anzio invasion.<sup>1</sup> With the cooperation of President Roosevelt and a reluctant General George C. Marshall, a Churchill-directed conference in Tunis on December 25, 1943 decided that the invasion would take place after all. Responsibility for Shingle was assigned to the 36,000-strong U.S. VI Corps, chiefly comprised of the British 1<sup>st</sup> and American 3<sup>d</sup> Infantry Divisions under Fifth Army. The U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division would follow immediately after a beachhead was established. Several days prior to the invasion, a new offensive would be launched against the Gustav Line. The two fronts were to be linked within seven days. Frantic preparations for the landing followed.

In the early hours of January 22, 1944, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division under Major General W.R.C. Penney on the left and 3<sup>d</sup> Infantry Division under Major General Lucian

K. Truscott<sup>2</sup> on the right, the task force landed at Anzio-Nettuno against minimal opposition.<sup>3</sup> By nightfall Lucas had managed to establish a lightly-held semi-circular line around the port. With most of his forces ashore, he prepared for the counterattack he was sure would come. It did not, which was just as well, for the bulk of Shingle’s armor—the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division—had been delayed by a shortage of landing craft and rough seas. On the second day of the landing, knowing that the Allied attempt to break through the Gustav Line two days earlier had failed, Lucas cautiously began to move his troops inland.

Almost at once VI Corps ran into trouble. On January 23 units of the 3<sup>d</sup> Infantry Division headed for Cisterna clashed with German units on the Allied right flank. The 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division met with resistance in the center and on the left. Two days after the landing more than 40,000 German troops faced the Allies. By January 31, by which time the invading forces had reached their farthest penetration, the number had doubled.

By the end of January the stage was set for what proved to be one of the bloodiest battles on the western front. In the battles for Aprilia (the factory), Cisterna, and Campoleone, heavy losses were suffered on both sides. To take and hold Aprilia, some Guards units were decimated. The attack by the 3<sup>d</sup> Division on the night of January 30 resulted in the massacre of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>d</sup> Ranger battalions. The battle for Campoleone ended disastrously as the enemy cut off the Allied salient.

By February 4–5, under hammer blows from the German Fourteenth Army led by General Eberhard von Mackensen, VI Corps had been forced into retreat. By mid-February a quarter of a million men were locked in deadly combat on the Anzio plain. On one occasion, the battle had to be halted to bury the dead. Extraordinary courage and heroism were displayed by friend and foe; neither would yield. Several times the Germans almost broke through to the sea. Without Allied artillery on land and at sea, as well as the crushing blows delivered by Allied planes, they might have succeeded. Yet overwhelming Allied superiority in the air did not prove decisive.

The Anzio nightmare continued day after day, night after night, until the troops could no longer stand. They could neither

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William Woodruff is graduate research professor of economic history at the University of Florida. As a captain in the British army he landed at Anzio and fought with the 24<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade.

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go forward nor back. Yet to stay where they were was to invite death from the hills. Nowhere was there safety. Nothing was still; terror was everywhere. By the end of February (by which time the beachhead had shrunk to four miles wide and five miles deep) neither side had the strength or the reinforcements to deliver a knock-out blow.

By early March the battle had been fought to a standstill; it became as static and deadly as the trenches of World War I. It was at this point that Clark relieved Lucas and replaced him with Truscott. Not until the end of May did the renewed offensives in the south and at Anzio force the enemy to retreat from both fronts to positions north of Rome. The pathetic (perhaps unnecessary) struggle for supremacy in Italy went on for eighteen more months. Anzio was forgotten. After the war Churchill never had difficulty in ascribing the debacle to American ineptitude.

It is usual, especially among British historians, to place the responsibility for the failure of the Anzio campaign at General Lucas' door. It is argued that Lucas failed to take advantage of the surprise he had achieved. Instead of racing for the Alban Hills, he frittered away precious time in his bunker by the sea. The unprecedented toll of lives (75,000 killed, wounded, and missing) was the price paid for his initial timidity.

Far from frittering away precious time, my experience was that the task force was committed from the moment it landed, not least in trying to disentangle itself from the confusion that such a landing entails. For me the whole of the first day was taken up in disembarking, consolidating our position around the port, and (having learned en route from Naples that considerable German forces awaited us in the vicinity of the beachhead) feverishly preparing to withstand the expected German counterattack. On D+3, with Lucas having protected his

base, my brigade moved five to six miles inland to the area of the overpass (eventually our last line of resistance) which straddled the Anzio-Albano road. Before us a formidable dark-gray mass of hills covered the horizon. The next day we advanced three miles to Carroceto where we were forced to withdraw. I emerged unscathed from that engagement, though a shell blast tore every button off my battledress. Others were less fortunate. For my brigade the agony of Anzio had begun.

There was no talk in those first three days of "dashing for the hills" or "racing across the plain." Such phrases were only used by armchair warriors with no knowledge of the battlefield. To have dashed for the hills would have been suicidal. On D+2 I sat in a ditch with a captured German tank officer who told me that the invasion had come as no surprise and that we would shortly be wiped out. There were people who thought that Lucas might have been more daring on the first and second day, but I know of no one at the time who suggested a headlong race to the hills, especially since we knew that the Allied offensive in

the south against the Gustav Line—on which everything turned—had stalled.

Regardless of whether Lucas was overcautious or not, I believe that the Anzio campaign was doomed from the outset. The task allotted to him exceeded realistic expectations. He was not given the necessary infantry and armor to accomplish what Shingle intended. His opinion on what was needed was never sought. Had Patton led us, the outcome would have been the same except that the killing ground would have been closer to the hills. Had we had ships to land five divisions instead of two (including an armor division on D-Day) the story might have had a different ending. More than anything else, the lesson of Anzio was too little, too late.

Shingle began with a flawed battle plan: it took too little account of the enemy's options or responses; it assumed—one might say gambled<sup>4</sup>—that the Germans would be



*W.O. John W. Kramer (Italy, February 1944) by Tom Craig.*

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*German Tank and Crew, St. Lo—1944 by Ogden Pleissner.*



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thrown off balance. Everything we knew about the German commander Kesselring disproved such an assumption. He neither panicked on word of the invasion nor hesitated to implement a contingency plan known as Case Richard. The German reinforcement was unusually swift. Everything we had learned about the Germans—especially at Salerno—told us that this was how they would react.

Even if Lucas had been given adequate forces to reach the hills and had accurately assessed Kesselring's reactions, the plain before the Alban Hills was definitely the wrong place to fight such a battle, especially in winter. In the planning stages too little attention was given to the terrain.

Yet I know from bitter experience that it was terrain that repeatedly defeated both sides. With flooded deep ditches, gullies, canals, tank traps, bottomless mud, and bogs, it is hardly possible to imagine worse terrain in which to fight, especially in mist

and pouring rain. With only a sparse network of narrow roads, it proved to be the worst possible place for armor. On one occasion the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division lost 24 tanks in trying to pull each other out of the mud.

The more I study Shingle the more I am convinced that it failed not due to a lack of courage on the part of any GI or Tommy, who were beyond praise, but because of weakness at the top of the command structure. The instructions regarding Shingle that Alexander gave to Clark were very different from the instructions Clark gave Lucas. Alexander had required Clark to secure the Alban Hills and to be ready to advance on Rome. Clark required neither of Lucas, probably realizing that Alexander was expecting more than he and Lucas could deliver. The differences were not argued out: they were ignored.

Clark's tendency to go his own way, regardless of what his British chief ordered, reflected the unfortunate divisiveness between

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*Polish Officer's Tent*  
(Cassino, Italy, 1944)  
by Frank Duncan.



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American and British commanders in theater (but not among the men). Clark was undoubtedly an Anglophobe, while Penney was critical of Lucas. Truscott and Major General Ernest N. Harmon of 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division had little time for Penney. At the top, Shingle was the work of a divided, ineffective command. Clark's description of Alexander as a "peanut" and a "feather-duster"<sup>5</sup> was well known but wide off the mark. Alexander may have failed to ensure that his orders were carried out, but his courage as a soldier was never in doubt. On one occasion, his head covered only by a cloth cap, he left our forward trench which was under fire, walked slowly across the exposed rubble-strewn ground, surveyed the enemy, and sauntered back. We were impressed. If he'd done that every day, we'd have won the battle.

More damaging than Alexander's inability to control his team was the encouragement he gave Churchill when he should have been restraining him. There was no basis for Churchill to be optimistic. Of the risks of Shingle he was largely ignorant.

Alexander was not. Except for Allied superiority in the air, Churchill's predictions proved to be wrong on every count. Alexander should have joined others who alerted Churchill to the hazardous nature of the operation, including Brigadier Kenneth Strong, G-2, Allied Forces Headquarters;<sup>6</sup> Admiral Sir John D. Cunningham, Allied naval commander in chief, Mediterranean;<sup>7</sup> and Rear Admiral Frank J. Lowry, Allied naval commander of Shingle. Anzio was not a failure because senior commanders did not know better, but because commanders like Alexander did not speak up or their advice was rejected.

I believe that Lucas has been much maligned. General Marshall thought so too. Lucas did what he was supposed to: conquer, consolidate, and advance. Warned by Clark not to stick out his neck, he

fought the Germans to a standstill. His so-called caution may well have saved the Allies from annihilation. The task given him was as impossible as the one given us.

While I think there is much to be said in Lucas' favor, I also think that he was the wrong man for the job. I was young then, but I'd seen enough battle to realize that he was not the man to lead a wildcat mission. He didn't put fire into anybody's belly. I spoke to him once when we were preparing for the invasion and twice on the beachhead, but I never saw him at the front. The British troops called him "Father Christmas." Critics have argued that he did not know what he was doing. The vital weakness that I observed was not that he did not know what he was doing, but that he did not believe in what he was doing.

Anzio was Valley Forge without Washington. We had no single commander with whom to identify, no mystique for which to fight. The absence of an inspiring leader, coupled with the lack of a definite plan, could only have one outcome—demoralization. To fight and to achieve nothing was deadening.

Alexander and Clark were no better than Lucas in providing leadership. They were *chateau* generals, appearing rarely and always dressed as if on parade. To my knowledge,

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neither of them slept at the front one night. They arrived, made a quick tour, and were off. I think it embarrassed them to witness a tragedy of their own making. I once visited their headquarters at Casserta Palace and was dumbfounded by the luxury. There were not only beds, movies, and messes, but sheets. If I lived in a palace, I too would have taken a very different view of sleeping in a freezing, water-filled foxhole. On the beachhead we didn't need Churchill to tell us we were a "stranded whale."

Wherever blame is placed, the battle for Anzio was a tragedy from beginning to end. At the last, in spite of Alexander's intentions set out at a conference at Headquarters AAI on April 2, 1944 that Fifth Army would "break out of the Anzio beachhead and advance on Valmontone," when the breakout came Clark took the fastest route to Rome. He achieved what he had always wanted, to be the first one there. The price was the survival of the German Tenth Army and prolonging the war in Italy. He earned the wrath of every senior commander (American and British) of VI Corps.

I have pondered the battle for Anzio for half a century. It should never have been fought.<sup>8</sup> Relative to what it achieved, its cost was atrocious. Like Gallipoli, Anzio was tinged with a fatal futility. Because of this it will find a lasting place in the annals of war.

In *Vessel of Sadness* I tried to recapture the essence of Anzio's tragic moment of time; of General Lucas I wrote:

An old General going back  
God knows he'd tried,  
A German lance broken,  
Massacre averted, the line held.  
But not victory.  
Guns on the Alban hills  
Looking down on men in the mud.  
The thrower thrown.

An old General going back,  
To hear them say:  
Why didn't you get on the hills?  
They'd show him with colored pencils and flags  
What he should have done.  
But it wasn't like that.  
A band of steel, constant crisis, ditches full of  
corpses, first tanks burned to a cinder.

An old General going back, not bitter, sad,  
Convinced that he'd been sent on a damn-fool  
mission,  
Ill-prepared, frantically launched, too many cooks  
brewing a broth of overwhelming disaster.  
Divided counsel, risks uncalculated, advice  
rejected.  
Hellespont, dice in a can.  
In the German, not terror roused, panic caused,  
But anger, heroism, and resistance.  
Bluff called, the long chance lost.

An old General going back,  
To strike his flag,  
And watch clever men refight his battle  
With their slippers on, writing under the warm  
glow of a desk lamp,  
Their bottoms warm, roasted by the fire,  
Detached, removed, cozy.  
They would tell him  
And he would weep, for man.<sup>9</sup>

I believed that then; I still do. JFQ

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Harry C. Butcher, *My Three Years with Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), p. 494.

<sup>2</sup> See Lucian K. Truscott, *Command Missions* (New York: Dutton, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> Unknown to Lucas, while embarkation was taking place in Naples, Generalfeldmarshall Albert Kesselring, German commander in Italy, had shifted the 29<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Divisions from the Rome area to Cassino to bolster the southern front. He had been encouraged to do so by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of German intelligence, who assured him that there was "not the slightest sign" of an invasion within the next four to six weeks.

<sup>4</sup> See Martin Blumenson, *Anzio: The Gamble that Failed* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Carlo D'Este, *Fatal Decision: Anzio and the Battle for Rome* (New York, HarperCollins, 1991), p. 62. The original source was Clark's diary.

<sup>6</sup> According to Brigadier Strong, Shingle "could not achieve a decisive success in the face of the opposition that could be expected." He indicated that its success relied on a breakthrough at Cassino which he thought would not be obtained. See Sir Kenneth Strong, *Intelligence at the Top: The Recollections of an Intelligence Officer* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral Sir John D. Cunningham, Allied Naval Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, stated, "You know, Prime Minister [Churchill], this operation is fraught with great risks." Quoted by Carlo D'Este, *Fatal Decision*, p. 98, from oral history interview of Lord Harding (Department of Sound Records, Imperial War Museum).

<sup>8</sup> The most recent assessments of the battle for Anzio are Carlo D'Este, *Fatal Decision*, and Dominic J. Caraccilo, "Assault on Anzio," *VFW*, vol. 72, no. 5 (January 1994), pp. 14 and following.

<sup>9</sup> William Woodruff, *Vessel of Sadness*, with a foreword by Martin Blumenson (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978; Washington: Brassey's, forthcoming).