

CHAPTER XXIII

The Bombardment of the Abbey of Monte Cassino

Before the invasion of Sicily the Combined Chiefs of Staff had reminded General Eisenhower of a special responsibility: "Consistent with military necessity, the position of the church and of all religious institutions shall be respected and all efforts made to preserve the local archives, historical and classical monuments and objects of art."¹ When AFHQ received permission to bomb military targets in the Rome area, the same warning was repeated.² Soon after the Fifth Army crossed the Volturno River, General Clark reiterated the policy for the benefit of his troop commanders: "It is desired that every precaution will be taken to protect these [church] properties, and international attacks will therefore be carefully avoided. . . . If, however, military necessity should so dictate, there should be no hesitation in taking whatever action the situation warrants."³ As the Fifth Army seemed about to approach within striking distance of Rome in November, General Eisenhower assured the War Department that instructions were being followed: "Consistent with military necessity, all pre-

cautions to safeguard works of art and monuments are being taken. Naval ground, and air commanders have been so instructed and understand fully importance of preventing unnecessary or avoidable damage."⁴

Specifically with respect to the abbey of Monte Cassino, Italian museum authorities in southern Italy had pointed out its historical importance, and Fifth Army headquarters had stressed the urgent necessity of preserving the building from bombardment.⁵ In compliance, the Mediterranean Air Command had so instructed its subordinate units: "All possible precautions to be taken to avoid bombing abbey abbeazia on Monte Cassino due West of Cassino." On the copy of the message arriving at Fifth Army headquarters, General Gruenther had penned a note: "Let me see pictures of this place. Will our ground troops have occasion to demolish it by artillery fire?"⁶

The question was academic until early January. At that time, AFHQ queried

⁴ Eisenhower to War Dept, 5 Nov 43, AFHQ Master Cables.

⁵ Msg, Fifth Army to CinC Mediterranean Air Comd, 25 Oct 43, Fifth Army Rpt of Monte Cassino Bombing.

⁶ Msg, Mediterranean Air Comd Post, 27 Oct 43, Fifth Army Rpt of Monte Cassino Bombing.

¹ CCS to Eisenhower, 10 Jun 43, 345 AFHQ files.

² CCS to Eisenhower, 15, 19 Jun 43, Exec 3, Item 6.

³ Fifth Army Ltr, Protection of Pontifical Villas at Castelgandolfo, 23 Oct 43, Fifth Army G-3 Jnl.



CIVILIAN REFUGEES IN THE CASSINO AREA

Fifth Army on word received through diplomatic channels from the Vatican that the abbey of Monte Cassino "has been seriously damaged by artillery fire."⁷ The Fifth Army artillery officer investigated the report and replied at once. The town of Cassino, he admitted, had been heavily bombed and shelled for some time and would continue to be taken under fire as long as it was occupied by enemy troops.

There are many gun positions and enemy installations in the vicinity of the town, and it is possible that during an adjustment, dispersion or an erratic round hit the Abbey. Any damage caused by our artillery fire would be purely unintentional as our artillery commanders understand that neither

churches nor houses of worship are to be fired on.⁸

Further instructions were nevertheless issued to appropriate commanders to respect the abbey of Monte Cassino. They were informed that damage already inflicted had been unavoidable. They were to make every effort in the future to avoid damaging the abbey even though the building occupied commanding terrain that "might well serve as an excellent observation post for the enemy." Artistic, historical, and ecclesiastical centers in Italy, among them the "ancient Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino in Province of Frosinone near Cassino," were to be immune from attack. Despite the prohibition, General

⁷ Msg, AFHQ to Fifth Army, 1 Jan 44, Fifth Army Rpt of Monte Cassino Bombing.

⁸ Memo, Lt Col Robert Raymond, Fifth Army Asst Artillery Officer, to Fifth Army G-3, 3 Jan 44, Fifth Army Rpt of Monte Cassino Bombing.

Alexander's headquarters specified: "Consideration for the safety of such areas will not be allowed to interfere with military necessity."⁹

In September 1943, when the Germans began to fortify the Bernhard Line as a series of defensive strongpoints in the Cassino area, the Gustav Line was merely one of several switch positions. Soon after work started in earnest on the defenses around Cassino in mid-November, Hitler ordered the hill, Monte Cassino, incorporated into that defensive complex.¹⁰ In early December, when the Gustav Line became the established name of the formidable German main line of resistance, Monte Cassino was included in the positions.

The seventy monks in the abbey had, as early as October, been joined by several hundred civilians who had taken refuge in the monastery and whose numbers would soon increase to a thousand or more. Already the war had had a tangible effect on Monte Cassino, for a German pilot had inadvertently flown his plane into the wires that manipulated a funicular between the abbey and the town, destroying both his aircraft and the cable railway. The winding 6-mile road connecting the abbey and the town became the only link, and communications gradually diminished and then ceased. Water was soon in short supply on top of the hill.

On 10 October the abbey received some minor and unintentional damage when Allied planes bombed the town of Cassino. The monks remained steadfast and calm, confident that both the Allied

and the German forces would respect the monastery and its immediate grounds.

Four days later two German officers arrived at the monastery and asked to see the abbot, Archbishop Don Gregorio Diamare. They said that the Ministry of National Education in Mussolini's government had become concerned over the possible destruction of the works of art in the abbey. The ministry had agreed with the German command that evacuation of these treasures would be desirable. The officers were offering their services in connection with the removal.

The abbot found the idea somewhat ridiculous. Since both adversaries had proclaimed their intention to conserve cultural and religious treasures, what harm could come to this holy place?

The German officers bowed and withdrew.

They returned on 16 October. This time they insisted that the abbey was in danger because of its strategic military location. It was unfortunate that the Germans had to fight there, the officers admitted, but they had no choice. The hilltop had too much military value to be excluded from the fortifications they were constructing. In the battle sure to be fought in that area, the abbey would certainly suffer some damage.

The abbot acquiesced.

On the following day, a German military truck arrived at the abbey and hauled a load of art treasures to Rome, the first of several such trips. Nearly all the monks left the abbey for Rome, as did the nuns, orphans, and school children normally housed at the abbey, and most of the civilian refugees. Remaining at the abbey were the abbot, five monks, five lay brothers, and about 150 civilians.

⁹ Msg, 15th AGp to Fifth Army, 9 Jan 44, Fifth Army Rpt of Monte Cassino Bombing.

¹⁰ *OKW WFSI Diary*, 29 Nov 43.



CASSINO: THE MONASTERY, THE CASTLE, AND THE TOWN

On 7 December, Vietinghoff, the *Tenth Army* commander, requested clarification on how he might use the hill and the abbey in his defensive works, for "the preservation of the extraterritoriality of the monastery," he warned, "is not possible: of necessity it lies directly in the main line of resistance." Loss of Monte Cassino would definitely impair the usefulness of the Gustav Line. What was particularly troublesome was that "along with renunciation of good observation posts and good positions of concealment on our part, the Anglo-Americans almost certainly would not bother about any sort of agreement at the decisive moment but would without

scruple place themselves in occupation of this point which in certain circumstances might be decisive."¹¹

The reply came on the 11th. Kesselring had assured representatives of the Roman Catholic Church simply that German troops would refrain from entering the abbey. Notified of this development, Vietinghoff informed Senger, the *XIV Panzer Corps* commander, that no German troops were to occupy the monastery. "This means," he added, "only that the building alone is to be spared."¹²

¹¹ Telegram, Vietinghoff to Kesselring, 1230, 7 Dec 43, *Tenth A KTB, Anl.*

¹² Telegram, Vietinghoff to Senger, 1705, 11 Dec 43, *Tenth A KTB, Anl.*

In compliance, the German forces placed the abbey off limits. Tracing a circle around the monastery at a distance of two yards from the walls, the local unit forbade troops to cross the line and stationed military policemen at the gate to prevent soldiers from entering. The abbot was assured that no military installations of any sort would be constructed within the confines of the abbey.¹³

But nothing outside the walls was sacred, and according to plan, since the slopes of the hill were not off limits, German troops soon demolished all the outlying buildings of the abbey to create fields of fire, set up observation posts and crew-served weapons emplacements nearby, and established at least one ammunition supply dump in a cave very close to the monastery wall.

Early in January, German troops evacuated all the refugees still in the monastery except two or three families and several people too infirm or sick to be moved. Promising to continue to respect the abbey and to prevent its use for military purposes, they asked the abbot to leave. He refused.

Several Allied artillery shells accidentally damaged the monastery in January. A stray round falling inside the walls on 5 February killed a civilian. A violent artillery bombardment striking nearby German positions on the same day led about forty women in the neighboring farmhouses to decide to seek sanctuary in the monastery, and they were admitted during the night. Not long afterward, more civilians, men and wom-

en from the surrounding countryside, made their way to the abbey for refuge. By 8 February, about 100 shells had fallen within the walls of the abbey by accident. There had been no systematic bombardment or shelling.

An enormous structure covering the top of Monte Cassino, sometimes called Monastery Hill, the abbey was one of the most venerable in Christendom. Its construction had begun under Saint Benedict around 529 A.D. Destroyed by Lombards later in the sixth century and again by Saracens in the ninth century, the abbey was restored each time but went into a decline after 1071 because the "unsettled condition of Italy and the great strategical value of Montecassino involved the Abbey in the constant political struggles of the period."¹⁴ An earthquake damaged the monastery in the fourteenth century, and again it was rebuilt. It was completed in the eighteenth century, only to be sacked in 1799 by French troops invading the Kingdom of Naples. Once more the building was patiently reconstructed and thus it stood in early February of 1944, complete and beautiful.

The German pressure in February against the Anzio beachhead compelled the Allied forces at the Gustav Line to redouble their efforts to pry open an entrance to the Liri valley. The II Corps was exhausted, and the provisional New Zealand Corps, commanded by General

¹³ Jacques Mordal, *Cassino* (Paris: Amiot-Dumont, 1952), pp. 60-63; Kesselring, *A Soldier's Record*, p. 234. See "Montecassino," *Enciclopedia italiana* (Supplement, 1938-1948), I, 345-46.

¹⁴ Quoted from *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), X, 527, by Howard McG. Smyth, in *German Use of the Abbey Montecassino Prior to Allied Aerial Bombardment of 15 February 1944*, n.d., OCMH. See also Baedeker's *Southern Italy and Sicily* (1930), pp. 18-20; Mordal, *Cassino*, pp. 55-65; Majdalany, *The Battle of Cassino*, pp. 3-13.

Freyberg, with the 2d New Zealand and 4th Indian Divisions under its control, entered the line to take up the task.

The ground operations of the New Zealand Corps would follow much the same pattern laid down by the II Corps. The 4th Indian Division, relieving the 34th Division, was to clear the high ground immediately behind the town of Cassino and debouch into the Liri valley from the north flank several miles behind the Rapido River. The 2d New Zealand Division, larger than the normal Allied division and equipped with many vehicles, took positions on the flats east of Cassino and directly in front of the Liri valley entrance; it was to support the Indian division and be ready to cross the Rapido just north of Sant'Angelo to help take Cassino and open up the Liri valley for a thrust by CCB, 1st Armored Division. General Freyberg scheduled his attack for 13 February, but he needed clear skies to permit effective air support and dry ground to allow effective armored action. To bolster the left flank of the corps in the Sant'Angelo area, General Alexander moved the 78th Division from the Eighth Army to the Fifth. Deep snow in the Adriatic area and in the Apennines slowed the movement of the division, and it did not arrive in the Cassino area until the 17th.¹⁵

General Freyberg asked General Keyes to hold the 36th Division, under II Corps command, on Monte Castellone until the New Zealand Corps broke through the Cassino defenses. He also wanted to keep the 133d Infantry of the 34th Division in the northeastern corner of Cassino until the Indian division took the

high ground. Keyes agreed. In addition, the II Corps Artillery would support the New Zealand Corps attack—surely the number of American pieces bolstering the three light and five medium regiments of New Zealand Corps Artillery and the organic artillery of the New Zealand and Indian divisions would seriously damage the German defenses.

Freyberg was an imposing figure with the reputation and prestige of a World War I hero who in World War II had commanded the troops on Crete and who had fought magnificently in the desert campaign of North Africa. Meeting with General Clark on 4 February to discuss the forthcoming commitment of his corps, he impressed Clark with his strong-mindedness, energy, aggressiveness, and optimism, which led the army commander to a wry observation—Freyberg was sure he was going to win the war, but Clark wondered whether he was going to clutter up the Liri valley with the 15,000 vehicles of the New Zealand division. In any event, General Clark had intimations of future discomfort—“these are dominion troops who are very jealous of their prerogatives. The British have found them difficult to handle. They have always been given special considerations which we would not give to our own troops.”¹⁶

On 9 February, Clark conferred again with Freyberg. The corps commander “expressed some apprehension that the monastery buildings [the abbey of Monte Cassino] would be used by the Germans and stated that in his opinion, if necessary, they should be blown down by artillery fire or bombardment.” Clark decided to give Freyberg a written direc-

¹⁵ 15th AGP OI 42, 11 Feb 44; New Zealand Corps OI 4, 9 Feb 44; Clark Diary, 8 Feb 44.

¹⁶ Clark Diary, 4 Feb 44.

tive authorizing him to fire against the monastery if in Freyberg's judgment military necessity dictated this action.¹⁷

The commander of the 4th Indian Division, Maj. Gen. F. S. Taker, after studying the problem of how to break the Gustav Line in the Cassino area, had no doubt that the monastery was a real obstacle to progress. The condition of the American troops relieved by his division impressed him with the difficulty of his assignment. American units, in their effort to take the Cassino massif, had been in many cases reduced to 80 percent of combat effectiveness. Handfuls of isolated, frozen, battered, indomitable men were clinging to positions they had torn from the grip of the enemy. The German strength, the hostile terrain, and the winter weather conspired to make the enemy defenses seem impregnable. Symbolizing the superiority of the German line in startlingly bold symmetry was the Benedictine monastery, 1,703 feet above sea level atop Monte Cassino. Since the monastery commanded all the approaches to the Liri valley, Taker decided it had to be destroyed before he could attack. He requested his corps commander, General Freyberg, to arrange for an air bombardment.¹⁸

In compliance with Taker's request, Freyberg telephoned Fifth Army headquarters. Since Clark was visiting the Anzio beachhead, Gruenther, his chief of staff, took the call. Gruenther recorded the events immediately afterward.

General Freyberg's call came at 1900,



GENERAL FREYBERG

12 February. "I desire that I be given air support tomorrow," Freyberg said, "in order to soften the enemy position in the Cassino area. I want three missions of 12 planes each; the planes to be Kitty Bombers carrying 1,000 pound bombs."

This was not much of an air bombardment—thirty-six planes to drop eighteen tons of high explosives. But because Clark had requested a concentrated air force effort on 13 February at the beachhead, Gruenther doubted that Freyberg could get the air support he wanted. Yet he assured Freyberg that Clark would try to obtain aircraft to support the Indian division, which was now to attack one day later than originally scheduled, on 14 February.

Freyberg replied that he would like to have all the air "he could get" on the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9 Feb 44.

¹⁸ *The Tiger Triumphs: the Story of Three Great Divisions in Italy* (His Majesty's Stationery Office for the Government of India, 1946), pp. 48ff.; Majdalany, *The Battle of Cassino*, p. 131.

13th in order to soften the enemy. Three missions, he said, would be his minimum requirement and, in his opinion, not an outrageous request.

Gruenther said he would "go into the matter at once."

He checked with the Fifth Army G-3, General Brann, and with the Fifth Army air officer, Lt. Col. John W. Hansborough, to determine what bombardment targets the New Zealand Corps headquarters had requested through normal air support channels and to see what air units were available for the Cassino front for the following morning. He found it possible to secure a fighter-bomber squadron.

Phoning Freyberg, Gruenther told him he could have a squadron of A-36's carrying 500-pound bombs for one mission. Which target, Gruenther asked, would Freyberg prefer to have attacked?

"I want the Convent attacked," Freyberg replied.

Gruenther said he presumed Freyberg referred to the monastery, the abbey on Monte Cassino. But this was not on the list of targets Freyberg's headquarters had submitted earlier.

"I am quite sure it was on my list of targets," General Freyberg said, "but in any case I want it bombed. The other targets are unimportant, but this one is vital. The division commander who is making the attack feels that it is an essential target and I thoroughly agree with him."

Current restrictions with respect to that target, Gruenther informed Freyberg, made it impossible for Gruenther to come to a firm decision himself. He promised he would take up Freyberg's request with General Clark.

Unable to reach General Clark at once,

Gruenther called General Alexander's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Sir John Harding, and laid the situation before him:

General Freyberg has asked that the Abbey of Montè Cassino be bombed tomorrow. General Clark will not be available for about an hour, so he does not know of this request. General Clark has spoken to General Freyberg on at least two occasions concerning the advisability of bombing the Monastery. He told General Freyberg that after consulting General Keyes, the [II] Corps Commander, and General Ryder, the Commander of the 34th Division, he considered that no military necessity existed for its destruction. General Freyberg expressed to General Clark his considered opinion that the destruction of the Monastery was a military necessity, and that it was unfair to assign to any military commander the mission of taking the hill, and at the same time not grant permission to bomb the Monastery. I am quite sure that General Clark still feels that it is unnecessary to bomb the Monastery. However, in view of the nature of the target, and the international and religious implications involved, I should like to get an expression of opinion from ACMF [Alexander's Allied Central Mediterranean Forces headquarters] as to the advisability of authorizing the bombing.

Harding said he would talk with Alexander and let Gruenther know.

Before Harding called him back, Gruenther got in touch with General Clark, who said that he did not consider the destruction of the monastery a military necessity. He asked Gruenther to tell Harding his feeling when Harding called later to give Alexander's view. Recording the conversation, Gruenther added:

General Clark also stated that this was a matter which caused him some embarrassment in view of the extremely strong views of General Freyberg. . . . General Clark felt that unless General Freyberg receded from

this position it would place General Clark in a very difficult position in the event that the attack should fail.

Attempting to marshal support for General Clark's position, General Gruenther phoned General Keyes at 2115. Asked whether he believed the destruction of the monastery to be a military necessity, Keyes said no. He said further that bombing the monastery would "probably enhance its value as a military obstacle, because the Germans would then feel free to use it as a barricade." Keyes volunteered the information that General Ryder, along with Col. Mark M. Boatner, an Engineer officer, also thought that destroying the monastery was unwarranted.

General Keyes then switched the call to his corps G-2, Col. Mercer C. Walter, who told Gruenther that information received from two civilian sources indicated as many as 2,000 civilians had probably taken refuge in the monastery. Although several artillery battalions had reported that the Germans were using the monastery as an observation post, there were no reports of actual fire coming from the building. "The evidence pointed to the fact," Walter added, "that there were [several] enemy strongpoints [located] very close to the walls of the building."

A few minutes later, at 2130, Gruenther heard from Harding. General Alexander had decided, Harding said, that the monastery should be bombed if Freyberg considered its destruction a military necessity. Alexander regretted, Harding continued, "that the building should be destroyed, but he has faith in General Freyberg's judgment. If there is any reasonable probability that the building is being used for military purposes, Gener-



GENERAL GRUENTHER

al Alexander believes that its destruction is warranted."

Gruenther then told Harding he had talked with Clark since his earlier conversation with Harding. Clark's position was clear—he was against bombing the building; if the commander of the New Zealand Corps were American, Clark would refuse his request for the bombardment. However, "in view of General Freyberg's position in the British Empire forces,"—he was commander of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and he was also the representative of the New Zealand Government in the theater—"the situation was a delicate one and General Clark hesitated to give him such an order without first referring the matter to General Alexander." Clark believed that no military necessity existed, that a bombardment would endanger the

lives of civilian refugees in the building, and that bombardment would probably fail to destroy the abbey and would be more than likely to enhance its value as a fortification.

General Harding's reply was cold. "General Alexander," he said, "has made his position quite clear. . . . He regrets very much that the Monastery should be destroyed, but he sees no other choice."

Gruenther then phoned Clark and told him what had taken place. Clark asked him to tell Freyberg "that while he [Clark] did not consider that it was a military necessity to bomb the monastery, he was willing to defer to General Freyberg's judgment if General Freyberg had evidence that indicated that the monastery should be bombed." Clark also asked Gruenther to call Harding and tell him that Clark wanted to talk with Alexander in the morning because Clark still felt it would be an error to bomb the monastery. He believed there was insufficient evidence to warrant its destruction. Meanwhile, Gruenther was to order the bombardment but avoid launching it before 1000, 13 February, so that the order could be canceled if Alexander changed his mind after talking with Clark.

Telephoning Harding, Gruenther told him what Clark had said. "If it were an American commander," Gruenther added, "his [Clark's] decision would be an easy one and he would not bother General Alexander about it, but he will talk to him in the morning."

Gruenther telephoned Freyberg immediately thereafter, at 2200, and informed him that General Clark believed there was no military necessity to destroy the monastery and that he was "reluctant

to authorize its bombing unless you are certain that its destruction is necessary."

General Freyberg said he had gone into the matter thoroughly with the 4th Indian Division commander, who was quite convinced that bombing the monastery was necessary. Freyberg added that he thought it was not "sound to give an order to capture Monastery Hill and at the same time deny the commander the right to remove an important obstacle to the success of this mission." A higher commander who refused to authorize the bombing, Freyberg warned, would have to take the responsibility if the attack failed.

Gruenther said that Clark was ready to authorize the bombing if Freyberg considered it a military necessity.

According to Gruenther's record, General Freyberg then said that "it was his considered opinion that it is a military necessity."

The magic formula having been categorically uttered, Gruenther told Freyberg that the air mission was authorized. Would he arrange directly with General Keyes to have any II Corps troops that might be endangered by the bombing moved to safety?

General Freyberg agreed. He would let General Gruenther know when the area was safe for bombardment.

General Gruenther then phoned General Brann and told him to arrange with the air liaison officer to have the monastery bombed on the following morning, 13 February, no earlier than 1000, the exact time to be determined later.¹⁹

¹⁹ Fifth Army [Memo for Record, signed "Gruenther"], Monte Cassino Abbey Bombing, 12 Feb 44, Fifth Army Rpt of Monte Cassino Bombing. See also Clark, *Calculated Risk*, pp. 315-18; Clark Diary, 13 Feb 44.

Not long afterward, Freyberg called to request that the bombardment be postponed. There was insufficient time to move the II Corps troops who would be endangered by the bombing.

Clark continued to be "greatly concerned over the problem of bombing the Abbey at Cassino. General Freyberg is convinced that the Germans are using the Abbey for military purposes."²⁰

On the morning of 13 February, about 0915, Alexander telephoned Clark. Was it true that Clark looked with disfavor on a bombardment of the monastery?

It was. Clark summed up the reasons for his stand. American commanders attacking in the Cassino area had found it unnecessary to bomb the monastery. There was no positive indication that the Germans were using the monastery. Even if they were, previous efforts to bomb a building or a town to prevent its use by the Germans had always failed. For religious and sentimental reasons, it would be shameful to destroy the abbey and its art treasures. Besides, women and children were taking shelter in the building. Finally, the extent of the air effort that could be brought against the monastery was insufficient to destroy the building but would be enough to give the Germans an excuse to use it. The monastery in ruins would be a better defensive installation.

All this was so, Alexander admitted. But if Freyberg wanted the monastery bombed, he said, the monastery would have to be bombed.²¹

Despite General Alexander's apparent assurance, the delicate considerations involved prompted him to bring the matter to the attention of his immediate

superior, the theater commander. General Wilson concurred in the decision.

Generals Clark, Keyes, and Ryder felt that bombing the abbey would be unwise for several reasons. They believed that no German troops were actually inside the building. They were sure the Germans would be glad to use Allied air bombing of the abbey for propaganda purposes. Most important, the Germans had no need of the monastery for observation; the hill itself offered excellent observation posts and the Germans held nearby hills that gave them even better ones.²²

Ten years after the war, Senger, the *XIV Panzer Corps* commander, confirmed their belief when he stated categorically that no German troops were inside the abbey before the bombardment. Observation posts outside the abbey, he admitted, were "as close as 200 yards." But there was no reason to use the abbey itself as an observation post because other sites on the mountain offered better positions. Anxious to keep from alienating the Vatican and Catholics all over the world, the German command was scrupulous in respecting the neutrality of the monastery, so scrupulous in fact that when Senger visited the abbey on Christmas Eve of 1943 and dined with the abbot, he refrained from looking out of the windows when he was inside.²³

Although the abbey was actually unoccupied by German troops, a fact verified by the Fifth Army Counter Intelligence Corps on 26 February, the German

²⁰ Clark Diary, 13 Feb 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Interv, Smyth with Keyes, 14 Feb 50, OCMH.

²³ Interv, Crowl with Senger, 22 Sep 55, OCMH. See also Ltr, Maj Gen Orlando Ward, Chief, Historical Division, 21 Feb 50, OCMH.

positions were so close to the walls that it was impossible to fire on one without hitting the other.²⁴ Yet American infantrymen as well as artillerymen were under strict orders not to fire upon the abbey building.

The fact that dug-in tanks and bunkers covered the approaches to the abbey and that gunfire came from carefully placed positions and pillboxes very close to the monastery, when added to some evidence that German troops were indeed inside the walls—this provided the military necessity for justifying the bombardment.²⁵

Some Allied commanders and soldiers were sincerely convinced that the Germans were using the building for military purposes. A regimental commander in the 34th Division thought he saw the flash of field glasses in the monastery. An Italian civilian, who came into the American lines on 9 February and said he had left the abbey two days earlier, declared that he had seen 30 machine guns and about 80 German soldiers in the building. An artillery battalion reported on 12 February that “our observers had noted a great deal of enemy activity in the vicinity of the famous monastery, and it became ever clearer that they were using the Abbey as an observation post and also had gun emplacements installed.” A member of the battalion had been seriously wounded “by a sniper hiding in the monastery.” And on the following day, the same battalion reported “much small arms fire seen and heard coming from the vicinity of the abbey.”²⁶

²⁴ Clark Diary, 26 Feb 44; Fifth Army G-3 Jnl, 26 Feb 44.

²⁵ The Bombing of Monte Cassino Abbey, MS, OCMH File Geog L Italy 373.11 (Cassino).

²⁶ 131st FA Bn AAR, Feb 44.

In order to try to determine whether German troops were actually using the abbey, General Eaker, commander of the Mediterranean Air Command, flew over Monte Cassino with General Devers in a Piper Cub plane, probably on 13 February. Because the Germans ignored small planes to avoid drawing attacks by fighter-bombers, Devers and Eaker were able to fly above the abbey walls at less than 200 feet. Both officers believed they saw at least one military radio aerial inside the monastery and enemy soldiers moving in and out of the building. Since this seemed to confirm the “military necessity” of the bombing, General Wilson approved on that day or the next the order for Eaker to destroy the abbey from the air. In a cable he later sent to explain his action, Wilson said that he had “irrefutable evidence” that the abbey was part of the German main line of defense, that observers were using the building from which to direct artillery fire, that snipers fired from the structure, and that gun emplacements, pillboxes, and ammunition dumps were located within the shadow of the walls. Thus, when General Freyberg insisted that the destruction of the abbey was a necessary preliminary for the ground attack designed to storm the height of Monte Cassino, his argument outweighed “historical and sentimental considerations.”²⁷

²⁷ Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., “The Army Air Forces in World War II,” vol. III, *Europe: ARGUMENT to V-E Day, January 1944 to May 1945* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 362-63; Interv, Smyth with Keyes, 14 Feb 50, OCMH; The Bombing of Monte Cassino Abbey, OCMH File Geog L Italy 373.11 (Cassino); Msg, AFHQ to British Air Ministry for COS and to the British in Washington for U.S. JCS, 9 Mar 44.

Curiously enough, there was a great difference between General Freyberg's original request for thirty-six planes to bomb the monastery and the air strike now planned. No longer was Freyberg talking simply about an air attack on the abbey. By 14 February he was saying that the abbey would have to be flattened before the Indian division could take the hill. General Juin made a special trip on that day to urge General Clark to prevent the destruction of the abbey, but the decision was irrevocable.²⁸

What had caused a pronounced escalation in the bombardment, now scheduled for 15 February, is nowhere alluded to in the official records or in the personal papers of the participants. What seems likely is that air force planners seized upon the opportunity to demonstrate the power of the bomber, which had never before been used in concentrated mass directly in support of ground troops attempting to take a tactical objective. If Freyberg wanted the building flattened, the building would be flattened. Probably General Eaker, and perhaps General Devers, persuaded General Wilson to let the air forces try the experiment.

During the night of 14 February, to lessen the danger of short or stray bombs, Indian troops withdrew from positions close to the slopes of Monte Cassino. After the air bombardment, the Indian division was to return to its positions, a process that was expected to be completed by morning, 16 February. The main effort would then jump off, the

objective the abbey. Some time later, on corps order, the New Zealand division was to attack along the railroad to the Cassino railway station in the southern part of the town, there to be ready to force its way into the Liri valley.²⁹

Shortly before the Indian troops withdrew to safety, Allied planes dropped leaflets on Monte Cassino to warn the civilians of the imminent destruction. The leaflets read:

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.³⁰

No leaflet fell within the walls of the abbey, but a civilian refugee, at some danger to himself, picked one up from the hill and brought it to the abbot. The abbot sent his secretary to meet with a German officer in order to arrange for the occupants to leave. The battle raging around the environs prevented immediate plans for departure. Agreement was reached for everyone to quit the abbey by a mule path at 0500, 16 February.

At 0945, 15 February—nineteen hours before the abbey was to be evacuated, according to the agreement between the abbot and the Germans—the first of about 250 bombers attacked the monastery. The planes went over in waves, and

²⁹ An excellent short account may be found in Commandant P. D. Hogan, "On the Way to Rome," *An Cosantoir*, the Irish Defence Journal, XVII, No. 12 (December, 1957), 551-68.

³⁰ Quoted in Mordal, *Cassino*, p. 64.

²⁸ Clark Diary, 14 Feb 44.



MONASTERY UNDER ATTACK



"soon reduced the entire top of Monte Cassino to a smoking mass of rubble." The major part of the bombing occurred during the morning, but aircraft reappeared throughout the day. Almost 600 tons of high explosive virtually demolished the monastery. The men of a field artillery battalion who watched the bombardment from the slopes of Monte Cairo "stood rooted" at the sight of the largest concentrated high explosive destruction that anyone had ever seen.³¹

Between the waves of bombers, artillery added to the destruction. One of the largest concentrations occurred at 1030, when the II Corps Artillery fired a time-on-target volley of 266 rounds from 240-mm. and 8-inch howitzers, and from 4.5-inch and 155-mm. guns.

The bombardment and shelling seemed to bear out those who believed that the Germans had used the abbey. "Over 150 enemy were seen wildly trying to get away from the Abbey as the first planes dropped their loads," one regiment reported. "Artillery and small arms fire took a heavy toll of these men as they exposed themselves across the open terrain."³² Other witnesses report-

ed that as the bombing temporarily lifted and artillery fire came in on the target, German troops made repeated attempts to run from the abbey to safer positions—"conclusive proof that the Germans had used the monastery for military purposes."³³ During the bombing the enemy, "some carrying weapons and equipment, were reported by our observers to be leaving the ruined buildings and running south." The bombs blasted and burned off most of the vegetation on Monte Cassino and revealed many dugouts and trenches, "confirming the extensive organization of the [hill] feature by the enemy."³⁴ News reports of that date indicated that about 200 persons, some of them wearing German uniforms, had fled from the monastery during the air attack.³⁵ The 15th Army Group headquarters declared that approximately 200 Germans left the building after the bombing.³⁶

One observer of the bombing, General Allen, commander of CCB of the 1st Armored Division, found the sight inspiring. "Our air," he wrote, "which has been conspicuous by its absence for several weeks, came back into being yesterday and thoroughly demolished the monastery above Cassino. Reports indicate that a great number of Germans were driven out of the building and surrounding area. It was a tremendous spectacle to see all the Flying Fortresses come over and drop their bombs."³⁷

³¹ 131st FA Bn AAR, Feb 44. The figures of the planes involved and the tonnages dropped vary. See Craven and Cate, eds., *Europe: ARGUMENT to V-E Day*, page 363, which notes 229 heavy and medium bombers attacking during the morning, 27 medium bombers attacking in the afternoon. A detailed breakdown of the morning bombardment shows the Twelfth Air Force contributing 87 medium bombers (40 B-26's of the 319th Bomber Group, 35 B-25's of the 340th Bomber Group, and 12 B-25's of the 321st Bomber Group), and the Fifteenth Air Force contributing 142 heavy bombers (37 B-17's of the 2d Bomber Group, 35 B-17's of the 97th Bomber Group, 38 B-17's of the 99th Bomber Group, and 32 B-17's of the 301st Bomber Group). OCMH File Geog L Italy 373.11 (Cassino). See also *Fifth Army History*, Part IV, pp. 98-99; *The Tiger Triumphs*, p. 45.

³² 141st Inf AAR, Feb 44.

³³ 151st FA Bn AAR, Feb 44.

³⁴ 34th Div G-2 Rpt, Feb 44.

³⁵ The Bombing of Monte Cassino Abbey, OCMH File Geog L Italy 373.11 (Cassino).

³⁶ 15th AGp Narrative, 15 Feb 44.

³⁷ Ltr, Allen to Harmon, Comdr 1st Armd Div, 16 Feb 44, CG File (CCB 1st Armd Div), 14 Aug 43-1 Jun 44.



ARTILLERY AIMED AT THE MONASTERY, *above*. Monastery in ruins, *below*.



Another observer, General Walker, the 36th Division commander, watched the bombardment from his command post in Cervaro and had another reaction. He described the air attack, how bombers struck the hilltop four times, some bombs of the first wave falling on the monastery, other bombs tumbling on positions of the Indian division about 1,500 yards from the target and inflicting, he later learned, about forty casualties; how great clouds of smoke completely concealed the monastery for about ten minutes; how a bomb group approached in the afternoon and made an almost perfect hit on the monastery. About 2,500 civilians, Walker was told, had been in the monastery, though no German soldiers were there. No weapons had been placed within the monastery, he was informed, but some were as close as 200 yards away.

General Walker wrote in his diary:

This was a valuable historical monument, which should have been preserved. The Germans were not using it and I can see no advantage in destroying it. No tactical advantage will result since the Germans can make as much use of the rubble for observation posts and gun positions as of the building itself. Whether the Germans used the building for an observation post or for emplacements makes little difference since the mountain top on which the building stands can serve the same purpose. If I had had the decision to make I would have prevented its destruction. I have directed my artillery not to fire on it to date.³⁸

To many men in the 34th Division, the immediate reaction to the bombardment was one of resentment and bitterness. Why had the Allied commanders waited until after *their* battle for Cas-

sino, after their relief by the New Zealanders and the Indians, to bomb the abbey? Why had *they* been denied this assistance?³⁹

Around noon, 15 February, Senger sent the following telegram to Vietinghoff:

The 90th Panzer Grenadier Division reports that the Abbey Montecassino was bombed on 15 February at 0930 by 31, at 0940 by 34, and at 1000 by 18 four-motor bombers. Damage still to be determined.

There are numerous civilian refugees in the monastery.

Notice of the attack was given by dropping leaflets with the justification that German machine guns were in the Abbey.

Commander Cassino, Colonel Schulz, Commanding Officer 1st Parachute Regiment, reports in this regard that the troops had not installed arms in the monastery. The divisional order, that in case of extreme danger the severely wounded were to be brought into the monastery, has not been used up to now. Field police have maintained steady watch that no German soldier entered the building. The enemy measures therefore lack any legal basis.⁴⁰

A civilian who had been in the abbey during the bombardment came into the American lines and gave a report of what had happened. About six monks and approximately 2,500 civilians, no Germans, he said, had been in the monastery. The Germans had never had weapons inside the abbey, had never used the abbey as an observation post. The nearest German position was about fifty yards from the outside wall, though most positions were at least 200 yards away.⁴¹

³⁹ Luttrell, *Ops of 168th Inf (34th Div) in Rapido River Crossing*; Gray, *Crossing of the Rapido*.

⁴⁰ Telegram, *XIV Pz C to 10 A*, 1215, 15 Feb 44, *XIV Pz C KTB, Anl.*

⁴¹ Phone Msg from Lt Roberts, 36th Div, 0300, 16 Feb 44, Cassino Study.

³⁸ Walker Diary, 16 Feb 44.

Even the guards placed at the entrance to enforce the abbey's neutrality had been withdrawn about three weeks before the bombardment.⁴²

On the day after the bombardment, German military photographers took moving pictures of the monastery. That evening, an officer, accompanied by the abbot's secretary, flew the film to Berlin for use as propaganda. OKW directed Kesselring to have the *90th Panzer Grenadier Division* search the abbey for survivors and take the abbot to the *XIV Panzer Corps* headquarters for an interview.⁴³

The abbot, who was seventy-eight years old, left the ruined monastery at dawn of 17 February, along with those who could leave. They wended their way along a mule path down the mountain. Senger, the *XIV Panzer Corps* commander, sent a car to pick up the abbot and bring him to the corps command post.

On the morning of 18 February, Senger interviewed the abbot in front of movie cameras that recorded the event. A lieutenant read the introduction:

The Abbey Montecassino is completely destroyed. A senseless act of force of the Anglo-American Air Force has robbed civilized mankind of one of its most valued cultural monuments. Abbot Bishop Gregorio Diamare has been brought out of the ruins of his abbey under the protection of the German Armed Forces. He voluntarily placed himself in their protection and by them was brought through a ring of fire of Allied artillery which has been laid around the monastery without interruption since the aerial bombardment, and into the Command Post of the Commanding Gen-

eral. The old Abbot, who today is 80 years old, found here a place of refuge and recovery after the days of horror which he, his monks, and numerous refugees, women, children, old men, crippled, sick, and wounded civilians had to undergo because of the order of the Allied Supreme Commander. We find the General . . . and the Abbot . . . in a voluntary discussion in which we now cut in:

Commanding General [Senger]: . . . everything was done on the part of the German Armed Forces, definitely everything, in order to give the opponent no military ground for attacking the monastery.

Abbot: General, I . . . can only confirm this. You declared the Abbey Montecassino a protected zone, you forbade German soldiers to step within the area of the abbey, you ordered that within a specified perimeter around the abbey there be neither weapons, no observation post nor billeting of troops. You have tirelessly taken care that these orders were most strictly observed. . . . Until the moment of the destruction of the Montecassino Abbey there was within the area of the abbey neither a German soldier, nor any German weapon, nor any German military installation.

Commanding General: It came to my attention much too late that leaflets which gave notice of the bombing were dropped over the area of the monastery. I first learned this after the bombing. No leaflets were dropped over our German positions.

Abbot: I have the feeling that the leaflets were intentionally dropped so late in order to give us no possibility to notify the German commanders, or, on the other hand to bring the some 800 guests of the monastery out of the danger zone. . . . We simply did not believe that the English and Americans would attack the abbey. And when they came with their bombs, we laid out white cloths in order to say to them, do nothing to us, we are certainly without arms, we are no military objective, here is a holy place. It did not help, they have destroyed the monastery and killed hundreds of innocent people.

Commanding General: Can I do anything more?

⁴² Modral, *Cassino*, p. 123.

⁴³ *XIV Pz C Gen Kdo, Ic Tatigkeitsbericht*, 17 Feb 44, File 58200/I, GMDS.



ARCHBISHOP DIAMARE WITH GENERAL VON SENGER *after the abbot left the monastery.*

Abbot: No, General, you have done everything—even today the German Armed Forces provides for us and for the refugees in model fashion. But I have something still to do, namely to thank you and the German Armed Forces for all the consideration given to the original abode of the Benedictine Order both before and after the bombardment. I thank you.⁴⁴

Ten years after the war, Senger had forgotten the interview. He remembered having received a short, signed statement from the abbot, who declared that no Germans had been stationed in the abbey at any time before the bombardment. According to his recollection, Senger then sent the abbot under escort to Rome. En route, Senger learned later, some SS troops kidnapped the abbot and

extorted from him a more elaborate statement, which though true was couched in propagandistic and inflammatory language. Still later, Senger was informed, envoys from Goebbel's office tried to pressure the abbot into making a still stronger statement. Exhausted and by this time angry, the abbot refused to comply. When the Vatican learned of the treatment the abbot had received, the papal authorities turned against the Germans.⁴⁵

The bombing of the abbey provoked a protest from the Vatican. In response, President Roosevelt stated that he had issued instructions to prevent the destruction of historic monuments except in cases of military necessity. The bom-

⁴⁴ XIV Pz C Gen Kdo, 1c Anlageheft 2 zum Tatisbeitsbericht, File 58200/3, GMDS.

⁴⁵ Interv. Crowl with Senger, 22 Sep 55, OCMH.



GERMAN TROOPS INSIDE THE RUINED ABBEY, from a sketch made by Agricola, a German artist. (OCMH, captured German war art.)

bardment, he said, had been unfortunate but necessary.⁴⁶

When the planes that had attacked Monte Cassino on the morning of 15 February had gone, German troops emerged from their shelters and occupied the ground abandoned by the Indian units when they sought safety before the bombardment. Two days later, on 17 February, shortly after the abbot had left, other German troops installed themselves and their weapons in the ruins, which provided excellent defensive positions. Five days later, the German paratroopers who occupied the

abbey ruins held a virtually impregnable strongpoint.⁴⁷

Despite the withdrawal of Indian troops from positions close to the abbey, the bombardment inflicted twenty-four casualties among Indian units. More important, their pulling back permitted the Germans to regain without effort key positions that American troops had fought bitterly to win.

The 4th Indian Division, commanded temporarily by Brigadier Harry K. Dimoline, who replaced an ailing General Tucker, attacked after nightfall, 15 February. A single company tried to recap-

⁴⁶ The Bombing of Monte Cassino Abbey, OCMH File Geog I. Italy 373.11 (Cassino).

⁴⁷ Interv. Smyth with Keyes, 14 Feb 50, OCMH.

ture the ground that had been given up and made no progress. Two battalions attacked on the following day after more than 100 P-40's and P-51's had dropped more bombs on Monte Cassino and nearby hills, but they made no progress either. In the afternoon, 48 fighter-bombers dropped 24 tons of bombs on positions around the abbey, and that night five Indian battalions attacked and this time regained the ground. Counterattacks forced the battalions to withdraw at daybreak, 17 February. On that day, 59 fighter-bombers dropped 23 tons in the Monte Cassino area. Again Indian units attacked. The troops reached their objective, but the Germans forced them to withdraw in the early hours of 18 February. Another attack that morning finally succeeded. After repelling four counterattacks, the troops at last attacked directly toward Monte Cassino, no more than 1,000 yards distant. But the two battalions committed hardly moved ahead.⁴⁸

As General Clark had foreseen, the bombardment of the abbey had failed to break the Gustav Line at its critical point. Not only the major bombing on 15 February, but the relatively heavy bombings on successive days, which had further reduced the monastery, failed to dislodge the stubborn and skillful troops in well-nigh perfect defensive positions. The ground and air commands in the theater were profoundly disappointed. Had the ground forces been unable to take advantage of the bombardment? Or were bombers incapable of eradicating tactical positions and therefore useless for direct support of ground attack? No one seemed to know.

⁴⁸ *The Tiger Triumphs*, pp. 45-49. See also Majdalany, *The Battle of Cassino*, pp. 164ff.

General Eaker's report to General Henry H. Arnold, Commanding General, U.S. Army Air Forces, skirted the basic questions. According to Eaker, General Clark

did not want a single bomb on Cassino Abbey, but . . . General Freyberg . . . went over his head or around him and asked the Army Group commander to have it bombed. We bomb it and it causes an uproar from the churchmen. You ask us then why we bombed; we make an investigation and discover a difference of view between the Ground Commanders . . .⁴⁹

In the final analysis, no one had been altogether certain what the bombardment was supposed to accomplish except to flatten the abbey. The escalation of the air effort from a relatively modest attack to an overwhelming strike had achieved nothing beyond destruction, indignation, sorrow, and regret.

The 2d New Zealand Division, commanded by Brigadier Howard Kippenberger, attacked at 2130, 17 February, to capture the Cassino railroad station just short of Highway 6 at the base of Monte Cassino. New Zealand troops drove the Germans from the station, but could not withstand a counterattack. By midafternoon of the following day, the Germans had regained the station.⁵⁰

The positions in the Cassino area thus remained unchanged. The Allied forces had been defeated. The German troops had scored an impressive victory.

As the weather deteriorated, continued offensive operations became impos-

⁴⁹ Eaker to Arnold, 21 Mar 44, Mathews File, OCMH.

⁵⁰ See Maj. Gen. Sir Howard Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 348ff.

sible. A new attack planned for 24 February was postponed because of freezing rain, snow, and high winds. The lines became static, the remainder of the month was spent in consolidating positions, exchanging artillery fire, and patrolling. In the paralyzing grip of winter, the battle subsided all along the Gustav Line on both Fifth and Eighth Army fronts.

New Zealanders on 22 February relieved the last units of the 34th Division still holding the northeastern corner of the town of Cassino. Two days later the British 78th Division took over the part of the 2d New Zealand Division sector that was in the Sant'Angelo area. On 26 February, French troops and a battalion of the newly arrived 88th U.S. Division relieved the 36th Division on Monte Castellone. An Italian combat team, consisting of a battalion of *Bersaglieri*, a battalion of paratroopers, two

antitank companies, and a regiment of artillery, was attached to the 2d Moroccan Division and placed in the line in the difficult terrain along the northern boundary of the Fifth Army. A third division, the 4th Moroccan Mountain Division, joined the French Expeditionary Corps.

The arrival of the new troops in southern Italy, to be followed soon by the 85th U.S. Division, gave the Allied command hope that increased strength would finally crack the Gustav Line and get troops into the Liri valley. For this renewed effort, the command awaited better weather.

The disappointment that the bombardment of Monte Cassino had failed to open the Liri valley was deepened by events at the Anzio beachhead. As it became evident that no swift linkup could be managed, the situation at Anzio took a turn for the worse.