Failures in Command and Control: The Experience of 4th Indian Division at the Second Battle of Cassino, February 1944

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The 4th Indian Division launched a set piece offensive against German positions around the Abbey of Monte Cassino in mid-February 1944. This attack was the major component of the Second Battle of Cassino.¹ By this time, the 4th Indian Division was a highly experienced formation that had established a formidable reputation in the Western Desert. It entered the battle confident of success and ended it, according to its divisional history, having “lost more than a battle. It lost some of its very substance.”² In the aftermath of the Second and subsequently Third of the Cassino battles, the Division was withdrawn to a quieter area of the line, taking little part in the advance on Rome. It undertook some minor operations during the advance to the Gothic Line, but was moved to Greece in November 1944 to undertake civil support duties where it saw out the rest of the war. This chapter will examine the process that confronted the 4th Indian Division with failure for the first time. The battles for Monte Cassino are subject to a remarkably large literature and a number of the issues covered are reasonably well known.³ However, very few studies address the Second

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¹ Anglo-American accounts record four battles of Monte Cassino, whilst the Gernans view the First and Second Battles as part of the same. See Böhmler, Rudolf (1964), Monte Cassino (London: Cassell), p. 155. I would like to thank my colleagues Lloyd Clark, Dr Paul Latawski, Dr Christopher Pugsley, Dr Klaus Schmider, Dr Simon Trew and Andrew Orgill and the staff of the Central Library of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst for their help in preparing this article. I am grateful to Lieutenant-Commander Justin Boston, RN, Major Kim Tyrell, RM and the staff and Young Officers of Commando Training Centre RM for the opportunity to visit the Cassino battlefield in 2006.


³ The best single volume on Monte Cassino remains Ellis, John (1984), Cassino: The Hollow Victory (London: Aurum). One of the earliest accounts, Majdalany, Fred (1957), Cassino: Portrait of a Battle (London: Cassell), also stands up well. See also Blackwell, Ian (2005), Cassino (Barnsley: Pen and Sword); Connell, Charles (1963), Monte Cassino: The Historic Battle (London: Elek Books); Ford, Ken (2004), Cassino 1944 (Oxford: Osprey); Forty, George (2004), Battle for Monte Cassino (Hersham: Ian Allen); Gooderson, Ian (2003), Cassino 1944 (London:
battle from the perspective of the leadership of the division, which strenuously resisted many of the courses of action imposed upon it; nor do they explain how and why it came to undertake an operation in which its senior officers had little faith.

Italy surrendered to the Allies on 8 September 1943. The following day the U.S. Fifth Army, a mixed U.S.-British force, landed at Salerno on the Italian mainland. The near success of the ferocious German counter-attack against the Salerno beachhead convinced Hitler to follow the advice of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring and resist the Allied advance as far south as possible. Hitler also issued orders for the construction of the Gustav Line, 100 miles south of Rome. The Gustav Line stretched from the Adriatic to the Tyrhenian Sea. The key to the position was the entrance of the Liri Valley which offered the most obvious route to Rome. Monte Cassino dominated that approach, overlooking the rivers which crossed the mouth of the valley. The Germans built pill boxes and dug-outs across the Liri, built positions in the surrounding mountains, fortified the town of Cassino and flooded the rivers. It was probably the most formidable defensive position in Europe.

In an effort to outflank these defenses at Cassino, an amphibious landing at Anzio, behind the Gustav Line, was organized for 22 January 1944. This forced the Fifth Army, advancing up the western side of Italy, to push on to Cassino to draw the German reserves away from the Anzio area. When flanking operations to the east and west of Cassino failed – although they did draw the Germans south as intended – Lieutenant-General Mark Clark, commander of Fifth Army, committed U.S. II Corps against the Cassino position. The 36th Texas Division had two regiments destroyed trying to cross the Gari River between 20 and 22 January, but the pressure exerted by II Corps and a series of offensives further along the line meant that the initial phase of the Anzio Landings took place virtually unopposed. Clark knew the Germans would throw everything available at the beachhead, so he committed his final division, the U.S. 34th, north of Monte Cassino to the town of Cassino itself, in an effort to fix the German forces on the Gustav Line. The division inched its way up, onto and then across the Cassino massif and into the town at a terrible cost before the attack petered out on 12 February. Despite the extraordinary efforts of the U.S. infantry, the town and monastery remained in German hands.