

The Battle of Anzio

By the beginning of 1944 the Allies, having landed on the Italian mainland in the south, were fighting their way north towards Rome. However they were facing fierce resistance from the Germans who had set up a series of defensive lines some miles south of the city.

Operation Shingle was originally conceived by Winston Churchill as a way of stopping any German withdrawal north by an Allied thrust east that would cut off and ultimately trap the bulk of the German Army. To do this two divisions of troops needed to be landed at Anzio on the Italian west coast.

The Anzio beachhead was at the northwest end of a tract of reclaimed marshland formerly known as the Pontine Marshes prior to their drainage in the 1930's by Mussolini. Previously the area had swarmed with mosquitos that gave malaria to many who ventured there. It was sparsely populated.

Operation Shingle also required landing craft, but many of these were earmarked for the imminent Normandy landings due to take place in June 1944. The Americans were determined that further seaborne landings in Italy should not compromise Operation Overlord. Only tank landing craft were initially made available by General Eisenhower; but on Churchill's insistence more ships were made available to land two divisions of troops. The success of the operation hinged on an element of surprise as the site was surrounded by hills from which the Germans could launch a counter-attack if they became aware of an imminent landing.

Despite the misgivings of the Americans (notably General Mark W. Clark, Commander of the American Fifth Army) as to the potential success of the operation, Churchill's plan was supported by General Alexander, Commander of the Allied Armies in Italy. Although not all the Allies fully supported the plan, after much debate it went ahead.

The initial landing by the US VI Corps (part of the US Fifth Army) led by Major General John P Lucas took place in the early hours of January 22nd. At first it was successful, unopposed by the Germans who were unaware of the landings. By midnight on January 22nd 36,000 troops

and 3,200 vehicles had been landed on the beaches. The First Division of the US Army penetrated 2 miles inland, capturing Anzio's port. Reinforcements brought the number of soldiers up to 69,000 by January 29th.

By this time Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, the German commander in Italy, was aware of the established Allied beachhead; he managed to muster 100,000 German troops into the area from other parts of Italy. He organised them into two army corps and was able to launch a counter-attack. His artillery units had a clear view of the beachhead from the surrounding hills. The marshes where the Allies had landed were kept drained by pumps; Kesselring ordered these switched off, hoping that rising water levels and increased mosquitos would severely impede any Allied advance and confine them to the beaches.

Kesselring then ordered shelling of the beachhead to dislodge the Allies; the element of surprise had gone. Major General Lucas, who, like his superior General Clark, had very little faith in the success of the operation, failed to capitalise on the initial surprise by delaying his advance from the beachhead inland. Instead he preferred to consolidate his control of the beaches.

The fighting intensified as the Germans tried to dislodge the Allies from the beachhead. The Germans launched an offensive on February 16th under which the Allies suffered heavy casualties. By February 18th the Allies had retreated to their original landing area. By February 20th both sides had suffered nearly 20,000 casualties. The Allied position was made worse by the sinking of light cruiser HMS Penelope by a German torpedo which killed 417 men.

Under the German bombardment the Allies situation was becoming desperate. Major General Lucas was relieved of his command and replaced by Major General Lucian Truscott who had previously commanded the US 3rd Infantry Division. The poor weather and boggy marshes meant no decisive result could be achieved until the spring. Instead both sides dug in, defending their positions by patrols and artillery duels, whilst rebuilding their forces. Kesselring constructed a new defensive line, the Caesar Line, in the hills at the back of the beachhead.

To break the deadlock Operation Diadem was devised; it aimed to fully engage the German army and prevent them making an orderly withdrawal north. It was hoped to trap the bulk of the German 10th Army between Allied forces advancing north through the Gustav Line and the American VI Corps thrusting east from Anzio.

Operation Diadem began on May 23rd 1944, the start of very intense fighting. The Allies broke out from their beachhead taking the town of Cisterna, although prolonged street fighting meant the town was largely destroyed. On May 25th Major General Truscott received new orders from General Clark to change the direction of his attack, towards Rome rather than east towards the advancing British troops on the Gustav Line. The Caesar Line eventually collapsed on the 2nd June, but since the bulk of the American forces had now gone north towards Rome the German army was able to begin an orderly withdrawal from Monte Cassino and retreat north in the hope of joining up with the rest of Kesselring's forces, their flanks no longer in danger of being cut off by any Allied advance.

General Alexander's plan was to block Kesselring's retreat to the north at a point just south of Rome and trap the German 10th and 14th Armies in a pincer movement. But when the American forces led by Truscott were only 6 kilometres from trapping the German forces at Frosinone, just south of the capital, he was ordered by General Clark to make instead for Rome. The Allies therefore failed to encircle the German armies, allowing them to escape to regroup north of Rome on the Gothic defensive line.

The Americans arrived in Rome on June 4th 1944 in a blaze of glory confronting very little resistance on the way. Many commentators viewed it as a publicity stunt, the original strategic aims of Operation Shingle having failed. Some historians have argued that the plan was flawed from the very beginning; that an attempt to cut off Route 6 and so cut off a German withdrawal north would have overstretched Allied supply lines, with insufficient manpower or armoury allocated to the operation from the very start. Even Field Marshall Kesselring after the war argued that the Allies would have overreached themselves, stating "it was a half measure of an offensive".

Alan Whicker, war correspondent with the British Army's Film and Photo Unit and present during the fighting, said that having broken out of Anzio General Alexander's plan, for the American Fifth Army to drive east and cut off Kesselring's escape to the north and trap much of the German Tenth and Fourteenth Armies, could have shortened the war by many months. Instead, General Clark of the American Fifth Army "was more concerned in letting the world see pictures showing him as the liberator of Rome".

Whicker goes on to say that it was "a vain decision which lost the Allies a stunning victory". Whicker ends his report by saying "if General Mark Clark had been in the German Army Hitler would have had him shot".