The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 422
"A Stranded Whale"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

"I had hoped we were hurling a wildcat onto the shore, but all we got was a stranded whale."

Winston Churchill.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 422. A Stranded Whale.

In episode 416, I told you how the German Army in southern Italy had fallen back to a prepared defensive line, known as the Gustav Line, or sometimes the Winter Line, which took advantage of the rugged terrain of Italy to create a formidable obstacle.

The advancing Allied armies reached the Gustav Line in December. On the east coast of the peninsula, the British Eighth Army managed to break through the Gustav Line and capture the coastal town of Ortona, just a few kilometers farther north. Though the Eighth Army had crossed the Gustav Line, the German continued to offer stiff resistance and the Eighth Army was exhausted after weeks of fierce combat. And it was winter, with rain and snow making everything twice as hard, and to top it off, the Eighth Army's commander, General Bernard Montgomery, was relieved of this command and summoned back to England to prepare for Operation Overlord.

In such circumstances, it was inevitable that the Eighth Army would have to pause its offensive, to give the troops time to rest and resupply and the weather time to improve. It would also give the Eighth Army's new commander, British General Oliver Leese, time to familiarize himself with his new command.

On the other side of the peninsula, the American Fifth Army, commanded by General Mark Clark, was agonizingly close to Rome, just 70 miles, or 120 kilometers, up the road from their current position, but before them lay the toughest part of the Gustav Line defenses. The

Americans had also paused their offensive to rest, resupply, and wait for the weather to change, but everyone from Clark down to the poor infantry privates knew a tough battle lay ahead.

The fighting in Italy was tough on the infantry, and the American war correspondent Ernie Pyle did more than anyone else to convey that to the folks back home. Pyle was 43 years old at this time, born on a farm in Indiana. He left Indiana University in 1923, with a burning desire to become a newspaper reporter. Just months later, he landed a job with *The Washington Daily News.*

In 1935, Pyle left the *Daily News* to begin writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column, called "Hoosier Vagabond." For the benefit of my foreign listeners, *Hoosier* is an American term that means "a person from Indiana." Pyle traveled across the US, Canada, and Mexico, producing columns that profiled interesting people and places he encountered.

Pyle's newspaper column became very popular. When the United States entered the war, he became a war correspondent, traveling with the United States Army across North Africa and Italy. His columns eschewed stories about commanders and maneuvers and offensives; instead, he continued to write human interest stories, often profiling individual soldiers.

His wartime columns made his work more popular than ever, and especially endeared him to the soldiers themselves, as he was reporting on their personal travails and triumphs like no other reporter. The Army permitted him to live with the soldiers on the front line and interview whomever he pleased.

On December 14, 1943, as the US Fifth Army battled its way up the Italian peninsula, a 25-year-old soldier from Texas, Captain Henry Waskow, was struck by an artillery shell fragment as his unit fought its way up a ridge during an action known as the Battle of San Pietro. He died instantly.

Ernie Pyle was present when Captain Waskow's body was returned to his unit and witnessed the emotional moments as the soldiers under his command said their goodbyes. One particular soldier addressed the captain, saying, "I sure am sorry, sir." The soldier sat by his captain's side, held his hand for a moment, then straightened the captain's uniform before leaving. Pyle described this moment in a column titled "The Death of Captain Waskow," published in the US in January 1944.

Before its publication, Pyle expressed doubts about the quality of his writing. He felt his words weren't strong enough to capture the power of the moment. (I can relate to that feeling.) But this column proved to be the most successful and most popular of his long career. The story was read over the radio and reprinted many times.

And here is where Winston Churchill comes into the picture. Churchill was at this moment in Tunis, convalescing. He'd taken ill on his way home from Teheran and was recovering from

heart problems. In 1943, Churchill had been ill, or traveling, or both, more days than he'd spent working in Britain; clearly the war was taking up all his time and attention. The British public were becoming aware of this and were not entirely happy about it.

That the war was taking up all his time and attention was also something Allied military commanders were not entirely happy about. Churchill was always coming up with ideas, some good, some not so good; strategies to win the war faster, or with less bloodshed, sometimes proposing the One Weird Trick That Will End the War, as today's internet would put it.

Well, Churchill was still at it, even while convalescing in Tunis, and later in Marrakesh. He was not about to allow a little thing like atrial fibrillation slow him down. He'd grown frustrated with the disappointing situation in Italy and proposed a plan meant to break the stalemate on the peninsula. He envisioned a relatively small amphibious invasion on the west coast of Italy, north of the Gustav Line. This invasion force would be in position to cut German supply lines and force them to withdraw from their carefully prepared defenses without the need for Allied soldiers to mount a bloody frontal assault.

That sound you hear is the collective rolling of eyeballs by every senior American military commander, up to and including George Marshall in Washington. Churchill had already proposed any number of small amphibious landings in Italy, Greece, Rhodes, the Balkans, Norway, you name it. As far as the Americans were concerned, it sure looked as if the British prime minister was working nights and weekends to think up alternatives to Operation Overlord. Not even the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Alan Brooke, was impressed with Churchill's plan. He wrote in his diary, "Winston, sitting in Marrakesh, is now full of beans and trying to win the war from there! I wish to God that he would come home and get under control."

Allied commanders in Italy had already considered and rejected proposals similar to Churchill's. They felt they couldn't spare the forces for such a landing especially since their superiors were withdrawing troops and ships and planes and especially amphibious landing craft from the Mediterranean to Britain to be deployed for Operation Overlord.

Churchill was undeterred and put together a set of figures, with maybe a little fudging, to demonstrate that if the landing in Italy was executed soon enough, say by mid-January, that would leave enough time to bring the landing craft back to Britain without imposing any delay on Overlord. He took his arguments directly to Franklin Roosevelt, persuaded Roosevelt, and here we are.

The plan required the invasion by January 22. Ideally, the invasion forces would spend some time on practice landings, but there was no time. Even by Churchill's "flexible" calculations, the Allies could spare only about 250 landing craft, sufficient to transport two infantry divisions. The chosen divisions were the British 1st Infantry Division and the US 3rd Infantry Division.

Does anyone remember the US 3rd Infantry Division? We've crossed paths with it before, all the way back in episode 168, when I described how in July 1918, the 3rd Infantry Division played a central role in foiling what would be the final German offensive of the last war at the Second Battle of the Marne, which earned the unit the nickname "The Rock of the Marne." During that battle, the commander of the division famously cried out, *"Nous resterons la,"* that is, "We shall remain here."

The 3rd Infantry's unit insignia incorporates those words, along with the image of a blue and white dragon perched on a rock. (Technically, it's a wyvern. Can you tell I've played way too many games of *Dungeons and Dragons* in my time?) This insignia led to the unit's other nickname, "The Blue and White Devils." Here's a fun fact: the 3rd Infantry Division is the only US Army division that fought on every European front over the course of the war, beginning with the invasion of French Morocco during Operation Torch in November 1942. The most famous soldier in the division is surely Sergeant Audie Murphy, who will become the most decorated American combat soldier of the war, although I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Right now, Sergeant Murphy is down with a case of malaria and for this reason, he will miss the upcoming invasion.

The landing site chosen for the invasion was the logical one: a point midway between Rome and the Gustav Line, at a coastal town called Anzio, although Americans call it Anzio. This landing site is adjacent to the Pontine Marshes, which I already described to you. They were salt water marshes infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes until Mussolini's Fascist government undertook a program to drain the marshes and turn them into farmland. As the Allies approached, the Germans destroyed the pumps and gates and turned the region back into a malaria-infested marsh. They went so far as to confiscate supplies of quinine in the region so the malaria would spread faster. We could call this an early example of biological warfare.

Apparently, the German commanders who ordered this operation didn't mind that defending German soldiers would also be exposed to malaria.

Anzio and towns nearby and the site of the former Pontine Marshes, lie in a low basin that begins at the shore and extends about five miles inland. There the ground begins to rise to a series of hills. Route 7, the former Appian Way, crosses this basin as it runs south from Rome, and is one of two possible approaches the Americans could take to reach the city, and one of two possible supply routes for the Gustav Line. Beyond the mountains that loom over these low-lying coastal lands stretches a river valley, through which runs Route 6, the other possible approach to Rome.

The goal of the invasion force at Anzio would be to advance to the hills and cut off one of the Germans' supply routes, then over the hills and into the valley to cut off the other one. If successful, this would at the very least force the Germans to fall back and abandon the Gustav Line. It might even lead to the encirclement and capture of large numbers of German soldiers.

On the other hand, if the Germans were on the ball and moved quickly to oppose the landing, they might take the hills overlooking the lowlands before the invasion force could. If that happened, the Germans would be perfectly located to rain artillery fire down into the basin, where there would be little cover.

The overall commander of the Anzio force would be US General John Lucas. Lucas had little faith in this plan, called Operation Shingle. To him, it seemed another Gallipoli, and he couldn't help but notice the same "amateur" (Lucas's word) was responsible for both, meaning of course Winston Churchill. Before embarking on the invasion, Mark Clark advised caution, drawing on his own experience during the Salerno landings four months earlier. "Don't stick your neck out, Johnny. I did at Salerno and got into trouble."

General Lucian Truscott, commander of the US 3rd Infantry Division, also expressed doubt. When he looked at a map of the landing site, he declared it a "deathtrap."

[music: Verdi, Overture to *La Forza del Destino*.]

Mark Clark's Fifth Army began an offensive against the Gustav Line on January 17, five days before the Anzio landings were scheduled. The goal here was to distract the Germans from the beaches at Anzio, and hopefully to force Kesselring to send some of his reserves to reinforce the front, which would draw them away from Anzio.

The Fifth Army included a British corps and more recently, the newly arrived French Expeditionary Corps, two French divisions from North Africa, now using American equipment. These soldiers were Moroccans and they were tough, experienced mountain fighters. Clark wisely placed them on his right flank, where the terrain was most rugged.

British troops made two attempts to cross the River Rapido on the 19th and the 20th. Both times, the Germans beat them back after inflicting heavy casualties, but Field Marshal Kesselring, the German commander, was led by these actions to believe that the Allies were launching an all-out attack on the Gustav Line. He ordered his reserves, two panzer grenadier divisions stationed just south of Rome, to advance and reinforce the line. Neither side knew it, but Kesselring had just ordered his reserves to abandon the very site of the coming Anzio landing, leaving it entirely undefended.

On January 20, even as Kesselring was deploying his reserve to the Gustav Line, American and British soldiers were parading through the streets of Naples to the music of marching bands toward the port and the ships that would take them on their mission. Italian civilians lined the sidewalks and cheered the soldiers as they passed. Young women ran into the street to hand them flowers.

It was a remarkable sight, and even more remarkable was that the soldiers' destination was an open secret in Naples. Many of these soldiers had been socializing with these same young

women and had not absorbed the message the US government was trying to send with its posters that declared “Loose lips might sink ships!”

Everyone in Naples knew where the soldiers were going, but it seems no one in the German chain of command did. On January 22, the first day of the operation, 36,000 soldiers landed on the beaches at Anzio. They encountered no resistance, unless you want to count some 200 German soldiers who were in the area foraging for food. They were taken prisoner. When Allied soldiers asked the local people where the Germans were, they would only point vaguely in the direction of Rome.

Allied troops advanced 3-5 kilometers inland on that first day, but here is where their commander, General Lucas, made a crucial mistake. The landing force had been lucky enough to catch the Germans completely off their guard, and they should have advanced rapidly to the hills, which would have cut Route 7 and put Route 6 within range of their artillery. All this could have been accomplished in the first 48 hours, but I say this with the benefit of hindsight. General Lucas did not know where the Germans were, but likely expected them to appear and start shooting any minute now. He ordered his units to hold the beachhead they had gained and wait for more soldiers, supplies, and equipment. Perhaps he had taken too close to heart General Clark’s admonition, “Don’t stick your neck out…”

Lucas’s superiors, General Clark and General Alexander, visited the beachhead the next day, unaware of German efforts to bring malaria back to the region. The beachhead was quiet, though there is no indication either of them suggested Lucas to move his troops farther inland. The soldiers themselves were uneasy. They were all keyed up for battle, but there were no Germans to fight. A rumor sprung up among the British soldiers, who held the southern part of the beachhead, that they were being held back so that the Americans to their north would have the honor of marching into Rome first, but this was not true. The Americans weren’t advancing anywhere either.

At Kesselring’s headquarters, news of the Allied landings stirred up something close to panic. His reserve forces were already committed to the Gustav Line and the Allies had just opened up a surprise second front. He ordered some mobile units detached from their divisions and sent to Anzio at once. He contacted OKW to ask for reinforcements, and OKW agreed. They released to Kesselring three additional German divisions stationed in northern Italy, and three more from France.

Kesselring instructed his new units to take the hills overlooking the Anzio landing site as soon as possible and position as many artillery guns as possible up there. On the 24th, 48 hours after the first landings, the Allied forces finally began to advance. The Americans soon found themselves entangled with the Luftwaffe’s Hermann Göring Division. The danger became clear when German artillery began bombarding the beachhead from the hills inland. By January 28th, the Allies had 60,000 soldiers in the Anzio beachhead, but the Germans had 70,000 in the hills.

The Allies had only slightly better luck assaulting the Gustav Line. The two French divisions in the mountains successfully advanced across the river and seized high points on the north side, behind the Gustav Line.

On January 30, the American 34th Infantry Division fought their way across the Rapido River north of the town of Cassino, but behind the river and the town stood a series of peaks that towered some 700 meters, or 2200 feet, over the river valley, and German artillery were taking full advantage of them. It took eight days of exhausting and bloody combat for the Americans to push back the Germans and seize a position at the foot of the mountain, in one of the fiercest Allied attacks of the war.

On that mountain, just behind the town of Cassino and 500 meters above it, stood the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino. Monte Cassino is not just any Benedictine Abbey. It is *the* Benedictine Abbey, as in, it had been established by St. Benedict himself in the year 529, making it the first home of the Benedictine Order.

The Abbey of Monte Cassino has a long and unfortunate history with military conflict. St. Benedict's original abbey was sacked by the Lombards during their invasion of Italy, which began in the year 568, only about forty years after the abbey was established. The abbey was re-established in the year 718, then sacked and destroyed by Arab raiders in 883. The abbey was rebuilt in 949.

The next 250 years are called Monte Cassino's golden age. The abbey controlled large stretches of land in the region and prospered. It went into a decline after the armies of Emperor Friedrich II occupied it during military campaigns in Italy in 1229 and again in 1239.

The abbey was destroyed by an earthquake in 1349 and rebuilt. In 1799, it was sacked by French soldiers during the French Revolutionary Wars. In 1866, the government of the new Kingdom of Italy seized the abbey and held it as a national monument, though Benedictine monks continued to live there.

When Kesselring organized the Gustav Line, he specifically ordered his soldiers not to use the abbey as part of their defenses. The Germans communicated to the Vatican and to the Allied command that they were not occupying or using the abbey as part of their defenses.

To the Americans' right, and deeper into the mountains, the newly arrived French Expeditionary Corps was also fighting hard. These units were commanded by General Alphonse Juin, whom you may remember from episode 379. He had been commander of the French Army in North Africa when the Allies invaded during Operation Torch. His Moroccan soldiers fought fiercely.

On February 11, after days of unsuccessful assaults on the mountain and the town of Cassino, and days of getting pounded by German artillery fire from the hilltops, the battered and exhausted American 34th Division had to be withdrawn. Their positions were assumed by the 4th

Indian Division, which was part of the newly created New Zealand Corps, commanded by General Bernard Freyberg, whom we've encountered several times already, in Greece, Crete, and North Africa.

The task of the 4th Indian Division, which they'd inherited from the Americans, was to take the hill on which stood the abbey, but it was a tough assignment. The Germans had laid plenty of mines and barbed wire, and then there was the endless artillery shelling. Officers of the division, and soon Freyberg and his staff, became convinced the German artillery was so devastatingly effective because the Germans were using the abbey as an observation post.

British and American war correspondents on the scene were sending stories to their newspapers reporting as fact that the Germans were using the abbey as an artillery position. American commanders, on the other hand, doubted these claims and tended to believe the Germans' assertions that they were respecting the neutrality of the abbey.

The commander of the 4th Indian Division sent Freyberg a memo concerning the abbey, in which he argued that it hardly mattered whether or not the Germans were currently using the abbey; they certainly would occupy it if his soldiers reached the hilltop. His memo also noted that the abbey's stone walls were three meters thick, which meant the only means available to destroy them would be Allied bombers armed with their biggest "blockbuster" bombs, the ones they used to destroy German cities.

Meanwhile, at the Anzio beachhead, two more American divisions had arrived, one of which was an armored division, bringing the total number of Allied soldiers in the beachhead to 69,000, almost as many as the Germans facing them. On January 30, Allied forces began an offensive intended to cut Route 7. A fierce battle followed, but the Allied advance was stopped just a few kilometers short of their goal.

In early February, the Germans, with their forces now built up to more than 100,000, began a counteroffensive. Adolf Hitler spared no resources in the effort. He hoped to force the Allies to withdraw from the Anzio beachhead altogether, which he believed would force them to rethink an amphibious landing in France. The German offensive succeeded in beating back the Allied front line, but was unable to force the Allies out of the beachhead altogether.

Winston Churchill watched all this with increasing impatience. The Anzio landing had been his idea, but it wasn't working out as he'd intended. He articulated his complaint with the pithy "stranded whale" comment I quoted at the top of the episode. Churchill contacted British General Harold Alexander, the overall commander of Allied forces in Italy, and complained to him about the lack of results from the Anzio landing. On February 14, Alexander visited the Anzio beachhead to confer with General Lucas. Lucas expressed doubt that a breakout from the Anzio beachhead was possible.

On February 11, the commander of the 4th Indian Division made a request to his superior, General Freyberg, for a bomber attack on the Monte Cassino abbey. Freyberg passed along the request. American commanders, up to and including General Clark, opposed the idea. So did the French commander, General Juin, while commanders of the Allied bomber forces in Italy, which included some of the so-called Bomber Mafia, those who believed in the power of Allied bombers to win the war, supported it, and set to work preparing a massive bomb attack on the abbey, without consulting with Freyberg or any of the commanders on the scene.

The debate over whether or not to bomb the abbey went all the way up to General Alexander, who supported it. Clark, who still opposed the idea, told Alexander, "You give me a direct order, and we'll do it." Alexander gave him the order.

On February 15, 142 B-17 bombers, plus nearly a hundred smaller bombers, dropped a total of more than a thousand tons of bombs on the abbey, reducing it to a smoldering ruin. Unfortunately, the air force commanders had not thought to coordinate their raid with the 4th Indian Division, whose own commanders were literally in the middle of a meeting to plan the assault on the abbey heights when the bombers began roaring overhead. The unit was thus unprepared to take swift advantage of the raid.

The Germans had not in fact been using the abbey. The only casualties of the attack were among the monks who resided there and the more than 200 Italian civilians who had sought sanctuary in the abbey to escape the combat going on all around them. After the attack, survivors fled the ruins, seeking help at a German first-aid station. It was only after the abbey was destroyed that German paratroopers took control of the ruins and used them as a defensive position.

In Rome, the Vatican Secretary of State told the US representative at the Vatican that the attack was "a piece of gross stupidity."

Soon afterward, the Germans began another offensive at Anzio, this time supported by German Tiger tanks and urged on by Adolf Hitler, who still wanted to see the Allies driven into the sea. Some German units got within sight of the ocean, but Allied forces them off. Both sides suffered heavy casualties.

One of the British casualties of this battle was the 30-year-old Lieutenant Eric Waters of Surrey. Lieutenant Waters had been a teacher in civilian life, a devout Christian, and a member of the Communist Party who regularly voted Labour. Waters left behind a wife, Mary, and two sons, the younger of whom was only five months old at the time of his father's death. His name was Roger.

In 1965, Roger Waters, now 21 years old, formed a rock band with three of his friends. They named their band "Pink Floyd." In 1982, Pink Floyd released a song written by Waters titled "When the Tigers Broke Free," mourning the death of his father.

On February 22, General Lucas was relieved of his command of the forces at Anzio. General Truscott, commander of the American 3rd Division, assumed his command. With both sides exhausted, the fighting would wind down and the two armies would retain their positions, including the Allied beachhead at Anzio and the German lines surrounding it, until spring, when the Allies would make another attempt to breach the Gustav Line.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop here for today. We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Luke, Roger, and Paul for their kind donations, and thank you to Laura for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Luke, Roger, Paul, and Laura help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I've gotten a lot of response to my call for questions, and it looks like there will be a question-and-answer episode, sometime before the end of the year. I'll keep you posted.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as examine the preparations underway in England for the long-awaited invasion. Bodyguard of Lies, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. One of the American aircrew from the Fifteenth Air Force who participated in the bombing of Monte Cassino abbey was a young radio operator from New Smyrna Beach, Florida named Walter Miller. He had just turned 21 a month before the bombing.

The incident left a profound impression upon him, and it appears that Walter's wartime experiences haunted him the rest of his life. After the war, he married and converted to Catholicism. He and his wife, Anna Louise Becker, had four children.

During the 1950s, writing under the name Walter M. Miller, Jr., he published about forty stories, many of them quite lengthy, in science fiction magazines. His 1955 novelette "The Darfsteller" won the first Hugo Award for Best Novelette. The story describes a future world in which human stage actors are obsolete and plays are performed by lifelike androids controlled by a computer. Huh.

In 1959, Miller published his first novel, his only novel published during his lifetime. It was titled *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. The novel takes place centuries after nuclear war destroyed our civilization and is centered on a Catholic monastery somewhere in desert of what used to be the southwestern United States.

The monastery is said to have been founded by a Jewish-American electrical engineer named Isaac Leibowitz. After the nuclear devastation, Leibowitz converted to Catholicism and established this monastery for the purpose of copying and storing a collection of old texts from before the war, in order to preserve knowledge otherwise lost. The monastery, which is ultimately destroyed, is clearly based on the abbey at Monte Cassino.

The novel won Miller his second Hugo Award. It was coldly received by critics outside the field at first, but ultimately became one of the first science fiction novels to win mainstream acceptance. It has inspired dozens of reviews and essays analyzing its themes of religion and its conflicts with science and secular society, and its cyclical view of history. National Public Radio in the US and the BBC in the UK both produced radio adaptations, and the novel has been cited as an inspiration for the *Fallout* videogame series.

Walter M. Miller, Jr. died in 1996 at the age of 72. His only other novel, *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*, set in the same world, was published posthumously.

[music: Closing War Theme]